Cosmic and Terrestrial Personifications in Nonnus’ *Dionysiaca*

Laura Miguélez-Cavero

In his *Dionysiaca*, Nonnus created a fantastic mythological universe for Bacchus, in the construction of which personifications play an important role.¹ Some of these carry a cosmic meaning (Night, Day, Dawn, Aion, the Seasons, and the Moirai, but together with other elements which influence events on earth, such as Victory and Sleep), while others are topographical representations (rivers, cities, regions), and yet another group serve as courtiers of the divinities.² There are three obvious reasons for this abundance of personifications: 1) The long tradition of personification, both literary³ and


2) Giving shape and visual entity to incorporeal elements makes abstract processes easier to describe, visualise, and understand. As such, personification can be considered yet another strategy in the typically Nonnian search for *enargeia*.

3) The visualisation of abstract elements, normally hidden from the human eye, enhances the divine and cosmic backdrop of the poem and presents both the poet and the readers as privileged onlookers beholding this world. Nonnus thus enhances Bacchus’ aspirations to being recognised as a god on Olympus (he sees the world as the gods see it), and dignifies his own métier and the readers’ intervention.

These three factors, however, do not fully acknowledge the

---

4 For archaic and classical times see H. A. Shapiro, *Personifications in Greek Art* (Zurich 1993); for Late Antiquity, R. Leader-Newby, “Personifications and *paideia* in Late Antique Mosaics,” in E. Stafford and J. Herrin (eds.), *Personification in the Greek World* (Aldershot 2005) 231–246.

5 Cf. Feeney, *The Gods in Epic* 380 (on Statius): “for the poem’s purposes … personifications … are conceived of as being existing realities, abstracts which occupy their own conceptual sphere, and which must become embodied in the time, space, and conventions of the narrative’s mundane reality in order to become accessible to our senses.”


7 However, no emphasis is placed on this opening of the eyes. Contrast the opening of Aeneas’ eyes, when Venus allows him to see the gods at work in the destruction of Troy: Verg. *Aen.* 2.604–623 (referring to *Il.* 5.127–132, Athena removing from Diomedes’ eyes the mist that prevents distinguishing between man and god in combat). See also Statius, on whom see Coleman, in *Im Spiegel* 67 (“One of his [Statius’] techniques is to merge the real world with the imaginative world of myth, so that the mundane is elevated to the glamorous realm of fancy. One result of the fusing of myth and reality is that mythological figures appear in the poems alongside the human protagonists”), 79 (“The world of Statius’ patrons is a world of enhanced reality, and it is precisely the infiltration of real, contemporary concerns by figures from mythology that makes the speeches in the *Silvae* distinctive and different from those of the ‘literary’ world of epic”).
impact of personifications in the poem, which merits a detailed reading. This paper seeks to analyse and interpret their deployment in three areas: 1) the contribution of cosmic personifications to the cosmic and 2) the literary décor of the poem; 3) topographical personifications as a means to create a visual geography of the poem.

1. Cosmic décor: Personifications and Dionysus’ cosmic role

Dionysus’ cosmos is sustained by the personified abstract markers of passing time (Aion, Harmonia, Chronos) and the visible, physical principles of eternal recurrence (the stars, Night, Dawn, Day, the Seasons). Their function is to emphasise Dionysus’ cosmic significance by linking their survival to his, thus boosting his divine credentials.

Nonnus allows the readers to see Physis, ‘Nature’, at work

---

8 This analysis leaves out the personifications of winds and stars (and constellations) because of their added geographic and cosmologic complexities. Also not included are the references to the gods as personified elements—Hephaestus as fire, Aphrodite as love, Ares as war. More generally on the cosmic elements of the Dionysiaca see F. Vian, “Préludes cosmiques dans les Dionysiaca de Nonnos de Panopolis,” Prometheus 19 (1993) 39–52, and Nonnos de Panopolis, Les Dionysiaca V (Paris 1995) 53–89.

9 The line of reasoning is similar to that of the connection of the prosperity of the empire beyond human means to the figure of the emperor in Men. Rhet. 377.10–24.


Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies 53 (2013) 350–378
both after a catastrophe (2.650–653, 6.387, 7.4) and at the very origin of life (41.51–58, 97–105), but the ultimate guarantors of life on earth are Harmonia and Aion. Harmonia is presented as a cosmic figure whose house replicates the shape of the cosmos (41.275–287), and as the guardian of the seven πίνακες, where all the steps of evolution are carefully engraved (41.360–398). These pinakes are inaccessible to simple mortals, but available for consultation by Aphrodite when she needs reassurance about the future of her daughter Beroe (41.318–337).¹¹

Aion (Αἰών ‘eternal, cyclical Time’),¹² carries the immense responsibility of maintaining the structural framework of the universe through the ages.¹³ He resents the disturbances in the universal balance (24.265–267) and requests from Zeus the introduction of a new principle to provide humanity with a better life, so that Time rolls by without difficulty (7.9–70).¹⁴

---


¹⁴ Aion makes Time roll: 36.422–423, καί τότε, τετραπόροι χρόνου στροφάλγια κυλίνθων. / ἱππεύων ἐξου ἐκτόν ἔλλιπεν καμπύλως Αἰών. In the early empire Aion was often juxtaposed with the ruling power, though by Late Antiquity mystical connotations were more relevant: see G. W. Bowersock, Hellenism in Late Antiquity (Ann Arbor 1990) 23–28.
principle granted by Zeus (7.71–109) is none other than Dionysus, with his vegetal and liquid alter egos, the vine and the wine.

Aion is different from Chronos, ‘measurable Time’, father of Lycabas, ‘the Year’ (40.372), and grandfather of the Seasons (7.16; 11.486; 12.19, 65), the twelve Hours of the day, and the twelve Months (12.15–17). Chronos has a more discreet presence in the Dionysiaca, as an attribute of the power of Zeus, and refers to the rolling of time and the temporal allocation of events. Nonnus seems to prefer Aion because he offers more complex cosmic evocations.

In the Dionysiaca, as Vian concludes, Nonnus promotes cosmic divinities such as Aion and Harmonia to take the place occupied in the Homeric tradition by the divinities of destiny, Helios, explaining his role in the creation of time measurement: 38.236–238, 248–252.


2.420–423, ἐπαιγίζων δὲ θυέλλαις / ἠερόθεν πεφόρητο µετάρσιος αἰγίοχος Ζεύς, / ἐζό µενος πτερόεντι Χρόνου τετράζυγι δίφρῳ · / ἵπποι δὲ Κρονίωνος ὁ µόζυγες ἦσαν ἀῆται; 3.195–204, birth of Dardanos, the Seasons bear the sceptre of Zeus, the robe of Time (197, πέπλα Χρόνου), and the staff of Olympus to prophesy the dominion of the Romans.


Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies 53 (2013) 350–378
References to the Moirai are limited, and mostly brief. Ate appears only once (11.113–154), and Ἀνάγκη and Τύχη twice each. Compared with the Moirai, Aion and Harmonia are less active (they are passive repositories of the established order, whereas the Moirai were forever busy interweaving human lives) and less negative (it is the disturbance of the established order by embodiments of chaos such as Typhon and Phaethon that is negative; on the contrary, the very existence of the Moirai, deciding how long and how well humans will live, is pessimistic). This change in the epic Weltanschauung seems to be Nonnus’ choice, since the divinities of destiny retain their impact e.g. in the Posthomerica of Quintus of Smyrna.\(^\text{23}\)

The trend of de-Homerisation and abstraction seems to operate behind yet another Nonnian choice: whereas the plots of the Iliad and the Odyssey advanced with the succession of nights and days,\(^\text{24}\) in the Dionysiaca only some episodes still


\(^{21}\) 2.677–678; 10.90, Ἀναγκαίη μεγάλη θεός (after Callim. Hymn to Delos 4.122).

\(^{22}\) 2.669–671; 16.220–221. The Τύχη and εὐτυχία of the laudandus are important elements in an encomium (L. Pernot, “Chance et destin dans la rhétorique épideictique grecque à l’époque impériale,” in F. Jouan (ed.), Visages du destin dans les mythologies [Paris 1983] 121–129), which makes their absence from the Dionysiaca more relevant, given that it is an encomium of Dionysus (see Miguélez-Cavero, Poems in Context 355 ff.).


begin and finish with references to them and the life of the main character is directly linked to the primeval figures sustaining the universe. Not only Aion needs Dionysus, but also the Seasons request his existence, thus inscribing his life on earth in the machinery of the cosmic order.

In the *Iliad* (8.393) the Seasons are the guardians of the gates of heaven, a role they maintain in the *Dionysiaca* (2.176, 13.22–24, 38.329–332), where they are also the daughters of Lycabas, ‘the Year’ (7.15–17, 11.485–486). They are related to the passage of time (25.363–364, 38.15–17) and to the stars (1.224; 2.175; 38.233b–238, 267–290), especially to Helios, on whom they attend (2.177a, 269–271; 38.297–300, 412–415). Their significance is emphasised by references to their closeness to Zeus (3.195–200, 8.3–5, 28.329–330) and to their prophetic powers (3.195–200, 7.178–179, 8.31–33, 9.11–15, 38.131–132). Thus, when they pay homage to Dionysus even before his birth (7.178–179; 8.3–5, 31–33; 9.11–15; 10.171–173), their status enhances his.

Beyond these general references, the key episode regarding the Seasons is inserted in Books 11 and 12. It begins with a long description of the four of them in their anthropomorphic shapes (11.485–521): they all carry a vegetal adornment,
there is reference to a specific event, and their dress is mentioned. Once described, the Seasons visit Helios to learn about the prophecy of the apparition of the vine (12.1–217): just as Aion had pointed out to Zeus the need to have Dionysus on earth, so the Seasons (especially Autumn) confirm that the cosmic balance embodied in their continuous succession will only be complete when Ampelos is metamorphosed into a vine, and wine discovered. Dionysus’ cosmic role becomes more physical because of the anthropomorphic description of the Seasons: one of the four women lacks her characteristic iconographic element (Autumn needs her vine leaves).

The human race needs Dionysus for the gift of wine, but the fact that cosmic divinities are aware that the universe is incomplete and unbalanced without him lends his appearance on earth a cosmic significance. The terrible consequences of the disruption of the natural order as described in the Typhonomachy (Books 1–2) and the episode of Phaethon (Book 38) highlight that humans and gods need Bacchus if they want the cosmos to survive unchanged.

However, the staging of these cosmic personifications is not as abstract as one might have expected. Aion is pictured as an old man yearning for retirement because age is making his duties too burdensome for him (7.22–28), and Harmonia is a lady of the home who leaves her loom and smartens herself up to welcome an unexpected visitor (41.288–310). In the mosaics of the houses of the rich in Late Antiquity portraits of the four Seasons featured frequently as images of a prosperous life.

---

28 Winter, snow and rain; Spring, arrival of swallows and Zephyrus, dance of Adonis and Aphrodite; Summer, wheat harvest represented by the sickle; Autumn, ploughing, trees losing their leaves, fruit harvest without the grape.

29 Winter, a snowy, rain-producing veil, with snow covering her breast and shoes of hailstones: Spring, a fragrance of roses pervading her robe; Summer, white linen, sweating; Autumn, olive twigs.

30 Though usually represented by busts, with vegetal adornments on the head (see Ch. Kondoleon, Domestic and Divine [Ithaca/London 1995] 85–86).
and their descriptions were common in rhetorical treatises and literary works alike. This réalisme bourgeois makes abstract principles more credible: Nonnus’ Dionysiac world functions credibly because the reader is given an insight into the hidden forces that make it work. The world inhabited by Dionysus is not made of atoms but of tangible realities, a fictional credibility. At the same time, these human-like presentations 1) block possible transcendental readings of the poem, 2) are coherent with a humanised image of Dionysus, who falls in love with a satyr who is not particularly attractive (Ampelos: 10.175 ff.) and flees from a martial enemy (Lycurgus: 20.346–353).

Whereas in his Silvae Statius incorporates mythological figures to enhance the glamour of the human world, here Nonnus takes the opposite direction, demoting the mythological world to a quasi-human status, for which we can find a parallel in the contemporary secularisation of mythology. Mythology is approached as a fundamental part of paideia, and not as a generator of religious beliefs or truths.


31 Men. Rhet. 408.8–26, 410.30–411.2; Lib. VIII 479.15–482.17 Förster. Topic for description in the Progymnasmata: Theon 118.20–21 Patillon; Hermog. Prog. 10.2 Patillon; Aphth. 12.1.8–9 Patillon; Nicolaus Prog. 68.15 Felten.

32 Philostr. Imag. 2.34; Longus Daphnis and Chloe 1.9, 1.23, 2.1, 3.3, 3.12, 3.24; Opp. Hal. 1.446–508 (Springtime); Quint. Smyrn. 10.335 ff. (the Seasons); Description of a Spring or Autumn Day, attributed to Pamprepius (E. Livrea, Pamprepii Panopolitani Carmina (P.Gr. Vindob. 29788 A–C) [Leipzig 1979]); Anth.Gr. 9.363; Joh. Gaz. Ekph. Pinak. 2.259–312.

33 See R. Leader-Newby, Silver and Society in Late Antiquity (Aldershot 2004) 141–158.

34 Compare the use of personifications in Neoplatonic environments, as studied in L. Siorvanes, “Neo-Platonic Personification,” in Personification in the Greek World 77–96.
visible also testifies to the need to endow mythological fictions with a veneer of (fictional) verisimilitude.

The cosmic dimension of the *Dionysiaca*, built up through the constant use of personifications of elements with cosmic resonances, makes up for the lack of other references to Dionysus as a god, such as descriptions of his cult. This is a tale of immanence and established order, more abstract and complex than the Homeric cosmos, and yet at the same time not more transcendent. The Nonnian breach of the (faked) continuity with Homer plays upon a readership which goes beyond basic Homeric constructions, has a taste for slightly philosophical allegory, and conceives the cosmos as a place full of contradicting forces (see section 2), held together by the principles of eternal recurrence, no longer in the hands of the gods. These personifications or allegories are better suited to attract the interest of the cultivated few than the frequently repeated narratives of Zeus’ love affairs, and have the added benefit of appealing to both a pagan and a Christian audience.

2. *Literary décor: Personifications of abstract concepts (allegories) and their literary referents*

We have seen that Nonnus prefers Aion and Harmonia to the more Homeric Moirai. This is part of a more general Nonnian trend of suggesting a Homeric reference as the beginning of a generally un-Homeric construction, of which we can quote two more cases, those of Enyo and Sleep. Just as in the *Iliad*, in the *Dionysiaca* Enyo is the synonym for battle, the signal for its beginning and the primary power which fills combatants with rage at each other, but she does not play a major

---


37 2.475–476a, 605; 4.455–459; 7.29–31; 17.315–321a; 20.110–112; 30.186b–187; 39.361–363. Along with other personified forces, such as Erīs (5.41—also on her own in 20.35–98; see N. Hopkinson and F. Vian, *Nonnos de Panopolis, Les Dionysiaques VIII* [Paris 1994] 5–6, on the minor role she
role. Hera’s seduction of Zeus, whose vigilance is annihilated by Sleep, follows a similar pattern in the Iliad and in the Dionysiaca. In the Dionysiaca, however, the role of Sleep is expanded, for he is a regular companion and ally of Dionysus, as a natural consequence of wine. Wine and Sleep defeat the Indians (15.87–91, 113b–119) and two women, Nicaea and Aura. It is Sleep, too, who leads to the abandonment of Ariadne.

Nonnus also recruits a group of personifications who do not feature in the Homeric poems, but are included in Hesiod’s Theogony. For instance, to exact her revenge on Semele, Hera resorts to Ἀπάτη, ‘Deceit’ (8.110–175), an un-Homeric figure, which occurs in Theog. 224. Πόθος, ‘Desire’ (Dion. 1.68b, 34.34–35, 35.134–136), also refers back to Hesiod (Theog. 64, 201). The case of Δίκη, ‘Justice’, is slightly different: in the _plays in the Dion._ and Philopis/Tumult (5.42).

---

40 First the admonitory dream in 48.258–291, followed by the one which defeats her, 564–569, 621–627, 635–639a, 652–653, 752.
Dionysiaca, Dike functions both as a companion of Zeus and a guarantee of cosmic order.\textsuperscript{45} Ultimately Nonnus goes back to Hesiod (\textit{Op.} 220–221, 256–257; \textit{Theog.} 901–902), but Dike also occurs in authors who are chronologically closer to him, such as Aratus (1.105, 113, 133–134), Oppian (\textit{Hal.} 2.654–655, 664–665, 680–681), and Quintus of Smyrna (5.46, 13.378), which suggests that Nonnus was listening to contemporary tastes in this case.

Similarly, the messenger of Zeus in the Homeric poems is Ὄσσα (\textit{Il.} 2.93, \textit{Od.} 24.413), but the personification that bears the news in the \textit{Dionysiaca} is Φήμη.\textsuperscript{46} Though first attested in Hesiod (\textit{Op.} 760–764), her principal development in the Greek epic (and related genres) seems to be in the Late Antique period,\textsuperscript{47} if we are to judge by her presence in \textit{P.Ross.Georg.} I 11 (hymn to Dionysus, third century A.D.: lines 31 and 34),\textsuperscript{48} Triph. 235–237,\textsuperscript{49} and \textit{Arg Orph.} 594–595.

In some other cases, Nonnus’ inspiration is at least partially Callimachean. Φθόνος, ‘Envy’, inspires in Hera the desire for revenge on Semele (8.34–108), just as in Callimachus Φθόνος tries to persuade Apollo to punish the poet for writing a short hymn.\textsuperscript{50} However, a figure in the fourth-century ‘voile d’An-


\textsuperscript{47} Also in the novel, for which see G. Schmeling, “Callirhoe: God–like Beauty and the Making of a Celebrity,” in S. Harrison et al. (eds.), \textit{Metaphor and the Ancient Novel} (Groningen 2005) 36–49, citing earlier bibliography.

\textsuperscript{48} Though the latest editor does not consider the possibility of a personification here: W. D. Furley, “A Lesson to All: Lykurgos’ Fate in the Tbilisi Hymn (P.Ross.Georg. I.11),” \textit{ZPE} 162 (2007) 63–84.

\textsuperscript{49} B. Gerlaud, \textit{Triphiodore, La Prise d’Ilion} (Paris 1982), prints Φήμη; E. Livrea, \textit{Triphiodorus, Ilii excidium} (Leipzig 1982), has φήμη.

tinoe’ may well represent Envy, in the shape of Ares, stirring up the hatred of Hera, thus adding some evidence from the visual arts. Nεμεσις could be related to Hes. Theog. 223–224 and Op. 197–201, but in the Dionysiaca she often acts under the name of Adrasteia, ostensibly because the two were often identified with each other, from Hellenistic times onwards. Adrasteia punishes Typhoeus, Nicaea (15.392–395a, 416b–419; 16.263–264), Achates (37.422–423), and especially Aura (48.375–388, 451–469).

As illustrated by this brief overview, these personifications create a varied literary backdrop for the poem, ensuring that it is not suffocated by Homer’s authority. Nonnus is Homeric but not excessively so, and Hesiodic when in need of cosmic resonances. He pays tribute to Callimachus, and responds to tastes that are chronologically closer to himself. Divinities who played an important role in the lives of the Homeric heroes and were no longer popular in Nonnus’ time lost ground in the face of the advance of divinities to whom Hesiod had given some consideration and whose role had expanded in later literature. After all, Homeric personifications offered a simplistic view of the cosmos when compared with later reflections on conflicting human emotions and inclinations.

Personifications help Nonnus to bridge the gap between the world of the Homeric poems and his own. The constrictions of

51 Veil from Antinoopolis (Paris, Louvre, Egyptian Antiquities inv. 11102). The lower part depicts a Bacchic procession, while the upper band traces the birth and childhood of Dionysus: 1) Semele lying on her couch, struck by a thunderbolt in the presence of a winged Zeus; 2) birth and first bath of Dionysus; 3) Hera attacking Silenus, who sits holding Dionysus on a rock covered with an animal skin, while a figure dressed as Ares may represent Envy inciting Hera’s hatred; 4) Hermes delivering Dionysus to Rhea or the nymphs(?). Drawing and analysis in M.-H. Rutschowscaya, Coptic Fabrics (Paris 1990) 28–29, 82.


Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies 53 (2013) 350–378
the genre force the poet to maintain at least an appearance of archaism, but the late antique *pepaideumenos* would not accept the definition of a cosmic frame of reference into which human action is inserted as based on a simple succession of nights and days. The thread cut by the Moirai could only be a metaphor, as it could not compete with the combined action of the personified forces that populated late antique visual arts and literature. This use of personifications is yet another of Nonnus’ strategies to supersede Homer, adapting him to the aesthetics of his time.

3. Geographical décor: Personifications of waters, mountains, towns, and regions

In this tension between archaism and modernity there is yet another element to take into account: Dionysus’ life on earth is set at a time when the world has not reached its classical shape. For the duration of the poem we see civilisation evolving as heroes with a direct connection with the gods found important cities (e.g. Thebes is founded by Dionysus’ maternal grandfather, Cadmus). Nonnus is not simply describing a mythologised version of the contemporary world. His geography is inextricably linked with mythography, but it is also reliant on different types of topographical personifications and embodiments.

The mythic paradigms for personifications are two deities with topographical implications, Gea and Oceanus, whose physical appearance Nonnus describes with a combination of human limbs and geographical features. Gea has an earth-like bosom (2.239–243, 21.24–32), and begs the natural ele-

---

54 As illustrated in Chuvin, *Mythologie et géographie*.
55 On Nonnus’ anthropomorphic metaphors to describe nature see Gigli Piccardi, *Metafora* 187–190, 195–202. The same correspondence between a human body and a natural element occurs in the *Dionysiaca* in descriptions of metamorphoses of mythological characters into rivers (Seilenos and Aura, on which see below) and plants (Ampelos becomes a vine, 12.173–187, 226–228). See also Lucian, *On the Hall* 7–8, 16–17, where the hall is compared to a beautiful woman.
ments to help her son Typhoeus (2.540–552) as a human mother would beg for her son to be spared. She expresses her mourning by tearing at her tunic of rocks and her veil of forests (2.554–556a, 637–643) and by uttering sorrowful speeches (22.273–275).  

Oceanus possesses a multi-fountain throat (2.276b–277, 38.140b–141, 43.287), a loud murmuring voice (38.108, 42.480, 43.288), and an ever-flowing belt (1.495–497, 41.175–177). From him pour rivers of tears (6.224–225), and he plays with his grandchild Phaethon in his own waters (38.155–166). As we shall see, topographical features rarely achieve this degree of anthropomorphism.

For geographical purposes, references to waters are more frequent than those to cities and regions, because in the internal chronology of the poem cities are still being created, whereas river gods are the ancestors of heroes in Dionysus’ army (e.g. the river Asopos is Aeacus’ grandfather). Equally, personified rivers and the Ocean featured frequently in ancient mythology, while personified cities, regions, and mountains did not, and were perceived differently from a rhetorical point of view. In general, the attribution of speeches to personifications of abstract ideas (prosopopeia) was common in judiciary and deliberative eloquence from classical times onwards, in both the Greek- and Latin-speaking worlds (e.g. Demosthenes and Cicero). In Imperial times they became more frequent, and

56 Gea’s sons, the Giants, are described in a similar fashion: Typhoeus (2.291–295, 370–379); Damasen (25.515, σκοπέλουσιν ἕοικότα γυῖα τινάσσων), Alpo (45.196–197), brief gigantomachy (48.31–42, 71–80).

57 Oceanus is represented in the outer rim of Achilles’ shield in the Iliad (18.607–608) and Heracles’ pseudo-Hesiodic Shield (314–319), which Nonnus transfers not to Dionysus’ shield (Oceanus is only briefly mentioned among the stars: 25.398–399) but to Harmonia’s tapestry: 41.301–302, καὶ πυμάτην παρὰ πέξαν ἐνεκλώστοι χιτῶνος / ὀκεανὸν κύκλωσε περίδρομον ἄντιγι κόσμου.


59 Personifications became common in consolations (Dio Chrys. 30.8–44; Luc. Luctu 16–19), epibatresis logos (Men. Rhet. 381.13–23), epithalamia and

Greek, Roman, and Byzantine Studies 53 (2013) 350–378
were employed as a means of attributing an exhortation or congratulation to a figure more persuasive than the speaker himself. Menander Rhetor (374.6–19) advises introducing speeches by towns and rivers as a means of relaxing the oration, but he mentions only one poetic model, for the personified intervention of rivers, the Homeric confrontation between Achilles and the Scamander (Il. 20.379–21.382). Thus, personification of rivers could be traced back to their poetic origins, whereas personifications of towns and regions were mostly linked to prose genres, the different types of encomia, in which they were used to pay homage to the emperor and his officials.

a) Waters

Personifications of rivers occur in the Dionysiaca in different degrees. The most basic is the presentation of rivers as conscious of the course which their waters take, and rivers reflecting their emotions in their currents. Nonnus alludes

bedroom speeches (400.31–401.26, 404.29–405.13, 406.18–25, 407.7–8, 410.21–25), prosphometikoi logoi (417.24–26), kletikoi logoi (427.27–30), and different types of hymns (333.21–24, 340.31–343.20, 438.10–24). This expansion was boosted by school practice: Quintilian 9.2.32; Hermog. Prog. 9.1; Aphth. 11.1.

Cf. Coleman, in Im Spiegel 73: “By definition it is the lot of the humble encomiast to lack authority. He cannot assert himself … The poet’s lack of authority is replaced by the ‘authority’ of a mythical alibi. The mythological mouthpiece is the ‘focalizer’ for the discourse.” For instance, personifications of towns and regions are common in the Panegyrici Latini: 10.2.2, 14.1–3; 11.4.2, 5.3, 12.1; 8.10.3; 7.8.8, 10.1–11.2; 6.9.1–2; 5.1.1–2; 4.3.3, 13.1, 26.5, 31.1–2, 32.8, 35.2, 36.2; 2.22.4, 39.1 Mynors.


several times to the well-known topic of the love affairs of waters and rivers as an image of the power of love. Clearly he operates with a catalogue that includes the Nile and Egypt (extended to the Hydaspes in 26.352–365), Alpheios and Arethusa, and Pyramos and Thisbe, which he presents completely or in part, aware that the topic cannot be applied to every river or water source. Nonnus does not endow these rivers with human form, but the literary tradition presupposes it, thus making the reference unnecessary.

Waterways can also reflect the physical shape of the individuals who were metamorphosed into them. Thus, when Seilenos becomes a river his body corresponds to the features of the river, and Aura’s body becomes a fountain, which fully reflects her status at the time of her death, formerly a maiden hunter, now unwillingly turned into a mother. This does not

---

64 Men. Rhet. 401.28–402.2 recommends in epithalamia narratives about the loves of rivers as images of the power of love.


66 On which see Vian, Nonnos V 189, n. to 84–85; Chuvin, Mythologie et géographie 176.


68 See 6.348, ὀλβίος Εὐφρήτης, ὅτι μὴ λάχε κέντρον Ἐρώτων.


70 See Chuvin, Mythologie et géographie 193–196, on sources called Marsyas or Silenus.
need to be so, however: Orontes gives his name to the river by throwing himself into it (17.287–289, 40.115–122, 44.250–252), but he does not become part of the river and his body comes up on a bank and is buried at Daphne, the suburb of Antioch (17.306–314).71

Moving up the scale towards a complete human body, we find references to watery equivalents of human limbs.72 The Hydaspes is credited with a human form and the horns with which Greek iconography usually endows rivers,73 not a frequent image in the Dionysiaca.74 Finally, in two cases rivers are said to be represented in human form in works of art, following the usual types seen in contemporary pieces.75


27.184, ἀνδροφυὴς ἄρκεσαν ἔχων ποταμίδα μορφήν; 29.66, ταυροφυὴς ἠχέτω κεραθκέα ταύρον Ὑδάσπης; 30.88–89, ἣτο γάρ ὑπεράνυθι διδυμόνως ὑποκλίνει Υδάσπης; Αλφείος 40.562, ὑδρηλαῖς παλάμασις.

Other rivers: Πακτωλὸς κροκόεις ἀνεσείρασε πένθιμον ὕδωρ / ἀνδρός ἔχον μιμήμα κατηφέος (12.127–128); Achelooς (17.238, 43.14–15).


shield (13.214–221) displays the figure of his grandfather, the river Asopos, with only one physical note (220a, Ἀσωπὸν βαρύγουνον, “stiff-kneed Asopos”)76 which implies a human form and a reference to Callim. Del. 78 Ἀσωπὸς βαρύγουνος. Harmonia portrays in her tapestry rivers with human faces and bull’s horns.77

In the opposite direction, rivers can embody or represent their territory. First, catalogues of rivers occasionally represent the whole earth (esp. 43.286–299, 408–418), and chaos is imaged by the rivers being out of place, i.e. the deluge (6.326–370). It is frequent that rivers embody the region in which they are situated.78


76 Also 23.232, 27.274b–275, 47.531–532.
77 41.299–300, καὶ ποταμοίς ποικίλλεν, ἐπ’ ἀνδρομέῳ δὲ μετώπῳ / ταυροφυῆς μορφοῦτο κερασφόρος ἐγχλοος ἐικών.
78 A variation of this motif is that drinking the water of a river implies becoming part of the place: Dardanos leaves Samothrace to his brother Emathion and founds Dardania, where he drinks the water of Sevenstreams and the flood of Rhesos (3.188–194; with variation about the Simoeis and Thymbrios, 3.343–347); Byzas has drunk the water of the Nile and then moves to the Bosphoros (3.365–369); Indian Palthanor, transferred to Thebes after the war, drinks the water of the Ismene, having left his native Hydaspes (26.70–72); Deriades expects the enemy troops to forget their native rivers and drink the water of the Indian ones (27.34–39).
80 Chuvin, Mythologie et géographie 112–125.
81 Chuvin, Mythologie et géographie 158–159.
Thermodon, river of the Amazons (36.260–263, 37.116–120)
Cydnos of Cilicia (1.259–260; 2.632–636; 23.83–84; 34.184–192; 40.141–145; 48.375–377, 470–471)\(^\text{82}\)
Cephisos and Ilissos of Attica (47.13–15, 78–82)
Persian Euphrates (6.348, 23.82, 40.392, 43.409)\(^\text{83}\)

Western Europe is represented by the Rhine (testing if newborns are bastards by exposing them to the frozen waters of the river: 23.94–97, 46.54–62) and the Eridanos (with references to the legend of Phaethon and the transformation of his sisters, the Heliades, into amber-weeping trees: 11.32–34, 307–309; 23.89–93; 38.90–95, 99–102, 432–434)\(^\text{84}\)

The absence of Egypt from the Dionysiaca is somehow compensated for by the references to the Nile: under the menace of Typhoeus the gods flee to the Nile and take different animal shapes (1.142–143, 2.167–168), Io came to Egypt (3.275–278, 32.67–70), Byzas went to Egypt (3.366–368), parallels and common sources of the Hydaspes and the Nile (22.1–3, 26.229–246), and simple references to the river, sometimes in longer catalogues (6.339–340, 11.509–511, 31.37–39, 41.269–270).

This is magnified in the case of India and the Hydaspes.\(^\text{85}\) The Eastern campaign is referred to as a war against the Indians and their king Deriades (13.1–7, 19–20), but also as a confrontation with Hydaspes,\(^\text{86}\) its main river, whose body becomes a physical representation of India while retaining natural and cosmic resonances.

In Books 21–24 battles are fought against the background of

---

\(^{82}\) Chuvin, *Mythologie et géographie* 176–178.

\(^{83}\) Chuvin, *Mythologie et géographie* 190–196.

\(^{84}\) The Milky Way is known as the constellation of the River or Eridanos (Aratus *Phaen. 358 ff.*; Nonn. *Dion.* 2.326–327, 23.298–301, 38.429–431.

\(^{85}\) Other Indian rivers are mentioned, but none has the importance of the Hydaspes: see Chuvin, *Mythologie et géographie* 286–290.

\(^{86}\) Dionysus’ proposal to the Indians, through his envoy Pherespondos: 21.236–237, εἰ δὲ κε μὴ δέξαιντο, κορύσσεται, εἰπόκε θύρσοις / Βασισαρίδοις γόνο δούλον ὑποκλίνειν Ἰνδὸς Ὑδάσπης. See also Deriades’ answer, 21.224b–226, ἡν ἐθελήσῃ, / χεύμει τος παφλάζοντι πατὴρ ἑμός, Ἡνδος Ὑδᾶςπης, / Ζηνὸς ἀποσβέσσειε τυρίπνοον ἀσθμὰ κεραυνοῦ.
the Hydaspes, filled with the corpses of the defeated Indians.\textsuperscript{87} The river fights against the Bacchic troops with its waters, nearly drowning the whole army, and is punished by Dionysus, who sets fire to the reeds and banks (23.162–279). Hydaspes then acknowledges his defeat and asks Dionysus for mercy.\textsuperscript{88} This leads to his physical transformation into a Bacchic river with winy waters,\textsuperscript{89} but his admitted defeat does not bring the submission of the whole country. Though Dionysus menaces him with a powerful retaliation if he takes sides again with the Indians (27.176–185), he helps them by rescuing Deriades (28.212–213) and Morrheus (30.86–99). The Indians are finally defeated with the definitive punishment of their main symbols: Deriades drowns in the waters of his father, Hydaspes.\textsuperscript{90}

Nonnus’ Hydaspes is a twist on the tradition of the Homeric Scamander (\textit{Il.} 21.205–327).\textsuperscript{91} In the \textit{Iliad}, nature, in the form of the Scamander, rebels against man-made destruction, whereas in the \textit{Dionysiaca} the Hydaspes not only jeopardises the survival of the Bacchic army (23.162–224), but also he is about to start a rebellion which Ocean and Tethys might turn into a new and final deluge (280–320). The confrontation between Dionysus, son of Zeus, god of the sky and of all celestial entities (including the fire caused by lightning), and the Indians, children of the Earth (18.221, 22.273–284) and worshippers of Earth and Water (17.283b–285, 29.62b–67), reaches cosmic proportions, and is presented as a war of the elements sustain-

\begin{footnotesize}
88 24.7–67, esp. 7–9 (καὶ δειρὴν παλάμην ὄργιόν αἰκτήριμον Βάκχῳ / παιδὶ Δίῳ πυρὸνέν χύσας Ἄνατσης, / μῆθον ἀναβλύζον ἱκετήσιον ἀνθερεῶνος); see also 43.136–138.
90 40.84–95, and references to his watery death in the mourning speeches of his wife and daughters (40.115–122, 135–154, 202–212).
\end{footnotesize}
ing the universe. Dionysus proves his cosmic power over the elements by defeating Hydaspes by fire and turning his waters into wine.\textsuperscript{92}

However, the cosmic tinge of the episode is toned down by the motivations of Hydaspes and Dionysus' speech to the river. As to the former, though an anonymous Indian complains that the Hydaspes is drowning his own people as no decent river would (23.79–103), Hydaspes is more preoccupied with the effect this affair is going to have on his reputation: he is ashamed to appear before Oceanus and Poseidon with his waters full of blood (24.18–20) and takes offence at seeing Bacchus and his army easily crossing him (23.165–191, esp. 168–169, 179, 186–187). He does not even mention that he has been manipulated by Hera, who, in her particular crusade against Dionysus, has provoked him to attack the Bacchic troops in order to stop the slaughter of the Indians (23.117–121).

Nor does Dionysus’ response to the attack on his troops (23.226–251) play the cosmic key. He asks Hydaspes to control his waters for 'scientific' and mythological reasons: his waters come from Zeus’ clouds and he can punish him with drought and thunderbolt (226–231, 234–235), as he has done several times before with other rebels (Asopos, 232–233; Helios and Phaethon, 236–242; Eridanos, 243–251).

The power exercised by Dionysus over the Hydaspes highlights his power over nature: though he is a necessary element for balance in the cosmos, Dionysus needs to assert his own space by defeating other forces and to prove that he is their equal and merits being counted among the gods on Olympus. The presentation of the Hydaspes as one of Bacchus’ archetypal enemies is particularly significant because, had Nonnus

\textsuperscript{92} On Dionysus' power over the four elements see L. Miguélez-Cavero, “Espectáculos acuáticos en las Dionisíacas de Nono de Panópolis,” in A. Quiroga (ed.), \textit{Hiera kai logoi} (Zaragoza 2011) 193–229, at 216–222.

\textsuperscript{93} Hopkinson and Vian, \textit{Nonnos VIII} 121–122.
depended on human acclaim in the form of personifications of towns and regions to illustrate Dionysus’ power as a god, he would have faced two dangers: 1) downgrading him to an emperor to whom personified cities and regions paid homage on his visit; or 2) upgrading him to a real pagan god with a true cult, which was unthinkable given how carefully Nonnus avoids references to cults of any kind. In the same line of thought, the cosmic resonance of the confrontation between Dionysus/Zeus and Hydaspes/Oceanus is underexploited, and the Homeric foil of the episode, anchoring it safely in the epic tradition, justifies its inclusion in the Dionysiaca without resorting to allegorical readings.

b) Regions, towns, and mountains

Regions, towns, and mountains are seldom personified in the Dionysiaca, and, when they are, the references are too brief to include geographical features. As with rivers, some mountains come to embody the region where they are situated (pars pro toto). This is the case with Cithairon of Boeotian Thebes (engrained in the mythical fabric of the ancient Greek world).


the Taurus, loosely referring to Cilicia,97 and, more interestingly, Niobe transformed into a rock. The latter was a distinctive feature of Magnesia by Sipylus, in the valley of the river Hermus, but Nonnus uses it as a mobile referent to mean ‘somewhere in Asia Minor’.98 A similar process operates in India, where Dionysus simply attacks a Troy-like, anonymous city at the mouth of the Indus which represents the whole territory.99

The limited presence of personified towns and regions in the poem implies a clear break from the world of Late Antiquity, in which they were generally present in everyday life: on coins and consular diptychs, where they paid homage to the emperor or important Imperial officials like consuls, in mosaics and textiles, as part of a variety of different iconographic formulas,100 and in high-brow poetry (Claudian is particularly well known for this).101

This choice is a consequence of the internal chronology of the Dionysiaca, set in the hazy mythological past, when gods and eponymous heroes were still founding cities.102 Thus, instead of

---

97 2.34–41, 684–685; 17.87–397 (battle of the Taurus—to be read with Gerlaud, Nonnos VI 127, 134; Chuvin, Mythologie et géographie 165–166), 23.83–84; 34.188–192.
98 12.79–81 (Sipylus, in Phrygia), 130–132 (Sangarius and Niobe in Phrygia); 14.269–283 (the god passed the stream of Sangarius, passed the bosom of the Phrygian land, passed the mourning rock of Niobe); 15.374–375 (Sipylus); 48.406–408 (Sipylus), 424–429 (Phrygia), 454–457 (Sipylus). See Chuvin, Mythologie et géographie 100–101, 148. After Callimachus: see Vian, Nonnos V 189, n. to 79–81.
99 27.145–166. See Chuvin, Mythologie et géographie 286; Vian, Nonnos IX 127.
101 As pointed out by Cameron, Claudian 273–278.
102 2.679–691, Cepheus found favour with the Cephenes of Ethiopia.
personifications of cities, we find cities presented as the product of the personality of their founder. Most relevant is the city of Beroe (Beirut), whose connection with the eponymous nymph is complete: the references, from the very birth of the nymph, to the future of the city as the seat of the school of Roman law are frequent, the physical shape of the city is described as responding to her body, and the intimate connection of the city with the sea is a consequence of her marriage to Poseidon. In fact, had Dionysus married her, the city’s topography would have been different, more continental

Thasos went to Thasos, Cilix is king over the Cilicians, Cadmus will be king of the Cadmeians; 3.188–194, Dardanos and Dardania; 3.300–301, Aegyptus and Egypt; 3.365–369, Byzas; 17.385–397, Blemys and the Blemyces; Books 41–43, Beroe.

103 Contrast the episode of Nicaea in Books 15–16. Dionysus founds the city in double celebration of the victory (νίκη) over the Indians and over the nymph (16.403–405, καὶ πόλιν ἐν λάιγᾳ παρὰ λήμνη / τεῦξε θεὸς Νίκαιαν, ἐπὼν νύμφην / Ἀστάκιος ἔκαλεσσε καὶ ᾿Ινδοφόνον μετὰ νίκην), and the foundation takes place, not immediately after the first battle with the Indians and the rape of the nymph, but when Dionysus has finally defeated the Indians (on which see Gerlaud, Nonnos VI 238, n. to 404b–405; D. Lauritzen, “À l’ombre des jeunes villes en fleurs: les ekphraseis de Nicée, Tyr et Beyrouth dans les Dionysiaques,” in P. Odorico and C. Messis [eds.], Villes de toute beauté [Paris 2012] 181–214, at 186–189). Cf. Chuvin, Mythologie et géographie 316: “Il faut comparer le portrait de Nicaia avec celui d’une autre éponyme, Béroè, pour comprendre à quel point Nicaia est détachée de la ville qu’elle patronne. Le destin de Béroè est rappelé constamment alors qu’on oublie que Nicaia n’est qu’une ville personnifiée.”


and mountainous, to reflect his influence.106 A similar case is Tyre:107 in the initial description the city, connected to the sea, is compared to a swimming girl,108 and its physical distribution is later related to the ancestry of its inhabitants from Earthborn men (40.429–537) and nymphs punished by Eros for their chastity (40.538–573).109

Similar descriptive strategies, comparing topographic elements to (parts of) a body recur in Menander Rhetor’s advice on how to praise countries, cities, and harbours,110 which should not come as a surprise, as the episodes of Beroe and Tyre have long been considered to play upon elements of the genre of patria or local histories, written in verse in Late Antiquity.111 This rhetorical connection with the contemporar

106 43.128–132 (Dionysus before the sea battle for the hand of Beroe), καὶ πόλις τελέσας ἠτερνό τύπον οὐ μιν ἐκσασό / ἐγγὺς ἁλὸς, κραναὰς δὲ ταμών νάρθηκι κολώνας / γείτονα Βηρύτοι γεφυρώσω βυθὸν ἅλης, / χεῖρας ἐφαπλώσασα μέση διδύμι πόντῳ, / γείτονι λευκαίνουσα θαλάσσῃ, / καὶ πόδας ἀμφότεροις εἰπέσκοπτομαι μητέρι γατῆ., καὶ κάλαν Στηρίγματος ἐχον ἰσανομία δοσὶν ἃμφοτεροὶ δοσὶν διδυμοί πόντῳ, / καὶ πόλιν ἐνοικίαν δεσδεμώντος, / θάλασσαι ἄμφοτερας / δέμας ἀφετεν / καὶ πόλιν ἐνοικίαν αὐχένα δῶκε θαλάσσῃ, / καὶ πολεῖς ἀμφότεροις εἰπέσκοπτομαι μητέρι γατῆ. / καὶ κάλαν Στηρίγματος ἐχον ἰσανομία δοσὶν ἃμφοτεροὶ δοσὶν διδυμοί πόντῳ, / καὶ πόλιν ἐνοικίαν δεσδεμώντος.

107 On Tyre see Chuvin, Mythologie et géographie 224–254 (esp. 226–228, on the fountains); Lauritzen, in Villes de toute beauté 189–199.


109 See esp. 40.436–439 (ὁππότε πηγαίησι παρ’ εὐόδροσι χαμεύναιας / ἡλίου πυρόντος ἰμμαισομένης χθονός άτμω / τερπυρούν ἔλπιδαν ἀμεργομενοῖ πετρόν Ὑπνοῦ / εὐόδον ὦμοι) and 570–573 (ὅπιςθοτόνοι δὲ τόξου / τριπλάτα πέμπει βέλεμνα, καὶ εὐόδρο παρά παστῷ / ημώνιον φιλότητι συνήροον νύις ἀροῦρης, / καὶ Τυρίης ἐσφερε θεημένες αίμα γενέθλος). Earlier Dionysus has established a direct connection between the toponography of the city and its founders and inhabitants: 40.423–427.


111 See the detailed comparison of the récits of Nicaea, Tyre, and Beirut.
world and puissance of both Beroe and Tyre in Nonnus’ time illustrates well how Nonnus’ world breaks into the apparently archaic cosmos of the *Dionysiaca*.

The presence of personifications of rivers, towns, and regions in late antique thought was so pervasive that they could not simply be brought in as such in an epic poem wanting to play a Homeric (archaic) game and referring to what was announced as an ancient episode. At the same time, they could be presented with a varied range of procedures and in different degrees of anthropomorphism. Nonnus’ compromise was to present two towns to which he wanted to give the importance they had in his day, Beirut and Tyre, as reflecting the personality of their founders instead of simply personified *Tychai*. With rivers it was easier, since he could count on the Homeric episode of the Scamander as a proper epic antecedent with all the rhetorical blessings. The Homeric model of the Scamander is replayed in the episode of the Hydaspes with the cosmic resonances of an impending universal deluge and trivialised by the petty behaviour of the river, a strategy similar to the one employed for cosmic personifications.

Dionysus’ earth is crossed by numerous rivers in different degrees of anthropomorphism, which at the same time come to represent their regions. Nonnus’ overriding concern was not to describe a map, but to refer to an earth that was densely populated with natural elements endowed with their own will—a complex place, vaguely related to his readers’ habitat, in which Dionysus should travel and assert his divine position. The looseness of the link between geographical reality and literary reference was patched up by flexible mythological lore. Thus the Hydaspes represented India but was only loosely attached to concrete points in its soil. The reader receives a clear image of him based on his anthropomorphic and iconographic features, his genealogy (son of the Ocean, father of Deriades), his importance for the Indians, and his Scamander-like role.

\[\text{with Men. Rhet. by Lauritzen, in } \text{Villes de toute beauté} \text{ } 181–214. \text{ More generally: Chuvin, Mythologie et géographie } 196–221 \text{ (Beroe), 224–250 (Tyre).}\]
Conclusions

Both the cosmic and the earthly frames of Nonnus' *Dionysiaca* benefit from the deployment of personifications. The personified markers of passing time (in particular Harmonia, Aion, and the Seasons) give an image of the world of the *Dionysiaca* as an orderly place yearning for immutability and at the same time for the advent of Dionysus in order to be complete. By making Dionysus (and his vine) a necessary element in the cosmic balance, Aion and the Seasons contribute to his characterisation as a god by birth, independently of his behaviour or martial feats.

Aion, Harmonia, and the Seasons emphasise a beyond-human view of the cosmos, more abstract and complex than Homer’s, but lively details such as the descriptions of Harmonia as a lady of her home (41.288–310), of Aion as an old man yearning for retirement (7.22–28), and of the Seasons (11.485–521) as depicted in late-antique works of art and literature, provide less transcendent anchoring points for the narrative. These allegories of the cosmic forces upgrade the Dionysiac world in terms of its extraterrestrial presentation, embody epic roles sometimes assumed by the gods (especially Zeus), and do not have a concrete cultic presence in the poem or elsewhere.

From a literary point of view, the personifications and allegorical constructs of human action are, like the guiding principles of the universe, somehow connected with the early epic poems (both Homer’s and Hesiod’s), look forward to Callimachus, and are designed to suit the tastes of Nonnus’ readers, if we are to judge by parallels in the literature of the long Imperial age.

The third section of this paper has dealt with personifications of geographical features. The chronological setting of the *Dionysiaca* at an archaic stage of the world, as well as the rhetorical and mythological status of rivers, has as a consequence that different degrees of personifications of rivers feature more prominently than the equivalent for towns and are preferred as symbols of regions. The most significant case is that of the...
Hydaspes, presented in a human form and as a symbol of India. His confrontation with Dionysus acquires cosmic tinges which favour the presentation of Bacchus as a god (he subdues a powerful river), but are thwarted by the Homeric foil of the episode and, as happened with cosmic divinities, by the petty behaviour of the river. Hydaspes and other rivers endow the Dionysiaca with a timeless geographical frame. Personified towns are virtually non-existent in the poem, although Beroe and Tyre are described as physically bound to the bodies of their founders, thus providing a rhetorical connection with Nonnus’ contemporary world.  

March, 2013

Faculty of Classics
66, St Giles’
OX1 3LU Oxford, UK
laura.miguelezcavero@classics.ox.ac.uk

\[112\] An earlier version of this paper was read at the conference “Nonnus of Panopolis in Context,” Rethymno, May 2011. I should like to thank K. Spanoudakis for his kind invitation and hospitality and fellow Nonnians for their comments which helped to improve the text (errors remain my own). A. Quiroga also helped me during the final stages of development of the present text. Research for this paper was funded by the Spanish Ministry of Science and Innovation through the project FFI2010-21125.