Nonnus’ Dionysiaca and Late-Antique Discourse on Warfare

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Recent work on Nonnus’ Dionysiaca has highlighted the pervasive presence of Christian themes and ideas in the epic.1 Scholars seldom puzzle now over how the same author could write both a ‘Christian’ paraphrase of the gospel of John and the ‘pagan’ Dionysiaca:2 Nonnus is generally accepted as a figure who can straddle both worlds, speaking at times in the Christian mode and at times in the classical, exploring many of the same themes and questions in two very different genres.3 Yet, while the Christian influences in the


2 Previously a vexed question, eliciting all sorts of ingenious answers; for a history of the debate see Dijkstra, in Brill’s Companion 80–84.

3 For an insightful treatment of the connections between the two poems see R. Shorrock, The Myth of Paganism (London 2011); see also F. Tissoni, Nonno di Panopoli: I canti di Penteo (Dionysiache 44–46) commento (Florence 1998) 79. Crucial to an understanding of the compatibility of the poems is a

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Dionysiaca are widely acknowledged, they have not been studied in much detail. Contemporary scholarship on the issue has tended to focus on topics of mystical or theological significance, and especially on the relation between Dionysus and Christ. Less clearly ‘religious’ areas, by contrast, have been relatively neglected, and this is especially true of the narratives of warfare in the Dionysiaca. The Indian War is traditionally seen as the Iliadic portion of the Dionysiaca, and it is thus primarily treated in terms of its relation to its ancient predecessor, read as a site of aemulatio rather than of engagement with contemporary culture, let alone with Christian thought.

Recognition of the nature of the educational system in late antiquity: on this generally see E. Watts, City and School in Late Antique Athens and Alexandria (Berkeley 2006); on the specific context of Panopolis see L. Miguélez-Cavero, Poems in Context: Greek Poetry in the Egyptian Thebaid 200–600 AD (Berlin 2008), ch. 3.


2 Spanoudakis, Aitia 2 (2012) ¶23: “As a general rule, themes, motifs and expressions occurring in the Dionysiaca in ‘mystic’ context which overlap with Christian parallels in the Paraphrasis are particularly important…”


5 This view is pervasive in the Budé commentaries on the war books, as it is in e.g. N. Hopkinson, “Nonnus and Homer,” in N. Hopkinson (ed.), Studies in the Dionysiaca of Nonnus (Cambridge 1994) 9–42, esp. 22–30; see also R. Shorrock, The Challenge of Epic: Allusive Engagement in the Dionysiaca of Nonnus (Leiden 2001), esp. 26–27.

6 An important exception is R. Newbold, “Nonnus, Dionysus and Christianity,” in M. A. Prost, The Paraphrase of the Gospel of St. John (Ventura 2003) 259–270; Newbold suggests a connection between the violence of
This paper explores Christian resonances in the Dionysiaca that go beyond the specifically theological, showing that the epic’s battle scenes reflect and engage with the complex contemporary discourse on warfare, and especially warfare under a Christian empire. Though the poet of course makes ample use of Homeric materials in developing his war narrative, he does so in ways that assume and speak to his own society’s concerns, values, and aesthetics. To employ an image applied to Nonnian poetics by Laura Miguélez-Cavero, we might liken Nonnus’ use of the Homeric in his war narratives to the contemporary use of spolia: he takes ancient materials and changes their context, combining them with new ones in ways that will be readily intelligible to contemporary audiences while maintaining, and leveraging, a link with the past. Even in Nonnus’ battle scenes, when he would seem to be at his most Homeric, he is not merely bookishly imitating (or bookishly challenging) the master poet of antiquity, but dynamically engaging with the issues and discourses of his own world.

I will trace this engagement by means of a close analysis of scenes from the early stages of the Dionysiaca’s Indian War narrative, suggesting that the way Nonnus frames and describes this war has much in common with accounts of warfare in the largely Christian world of late antiquity. In drawing these connections, I will present material, both Latin and Greek, from a variety of genres (poetry, panegyric, history, theology) and Dionysus and religious violence in Nonnus’ world.


11 The encomium has long been recognized as an important generic model for Nonnus, with Menander Rhetor’s prescriptions for such a speech providing grounds for comparison. See esp. E. Lasky, “Encomiastic Elements in the Dionysiaca of Nonnus,” Hermes 106 (1978) 357–376, and more recently Miguélez-Cavero, Poems in Context 340–366 and Journal of Late An-
chronological periods (from Constantine’s victory at the Milvian Bridge in 312 through the reign of Theodosius II in the mid-fifth century). My purpose is not to suggest that Nonnus was alluding to (or even necessarily knew of) any of these works, but rather to show how his narrative fits into his milieu, sharing many of the themes and concerns that appear in widely disparate texts from his period and the century or so prior. His audience, I suggest, might have recognized in the Indian War narrative not only Homeric allusions but also resonances with their lived reality, which might have prompted them to reflect on their own society and its discourses.

1. Dionysiac and Christian warfare: continuities

The discourse surrounding warfare in late antiquity was extremely complex, full of paradoxes and contradictions, many of which resulted from the peculiar religio-cultural context in which it developed. The early church had been stridently anti-military, such that for a Christian to serve in the military was looked down on if not outright forbidden (although some Christians certainly did serve in the army). Christian thinkers were often sharply critical of Rome’s obsession with bloodshed and lust for domination through warfare. Yet, with the conversion of Constantine, this (at least nominally) critical and

12 How strong or widespread prohibitions against soldiering were, and what exactly motivated such prohibitions, are topics of long and continuing debate. A. Kreider, “Military Service in the Church Orders,” Journal of Religious Ethics 31 (2003) 415–442, at 415–417, offers a concise history of scholarship on this topic. More recent (and sharply opposed) voices in this debate are J. Shean, Soldiering for God: Christianity and the Roman Army (Leiden 2010), and G. Kalantzis, Caesar and the Lamb: Early Christian Attitudes on War and Military Service (Eugene 2012).


14 See e.g. Lactant. Div.inst. 1.18.8–16, 6.6.18–24; August. De civ. D. 5.12 (reflecting on pre-Christian Rome).

15 Some have taken early Christians as only non-violent for reasons of
countercultural force found itself suddenly allied with a militarist power, and changes in ideology and practice naturally ensued: Christians came to dominate the army, so much so that pagans were eventually excluded from military service by imperial decree in 416 (Cod. Theod. 16.10.21). New teachings were developed (or old ones strengthened\textsuperscript{16}) to show that there was nothing explicitly un-Christian about military service.\textsuperscript{17} And many Christian leaders came to celebrate the military triumphs of the (now Christian) emperors.\textsuperscript{18} But the anti-militarist origins of Christianity, which remained influential in some circles,\textsuperscript{19} gave the discourse of warfare in this era a very distinctive character. This discourse is vast and nuanced, and I will not attempt to describe it exhaustively.\textsuperscript{20} Instead, in the


\textsuperscript{16} We have no Christian texts from before Constantine that make any allowance for military service, though A. Kreider, “Military Service in the Church Orders,” Journal of Religious Ethics 31 (2003) 415–442, at 423–424, finds evidence that such teachings did exist in the arguments that Tertullian combats in De Idolatria 19.

\textsuperscript{17} A striking early example is the way Lactantius omits or modifies his early anti-war teachings when he epitomizes the Divine Institutes, after the ascendancy of Constantine: P. Wynn, Augustine on War and Military Service (Minneapolis 2013) 52–53. For a later example, which testifies to lingering anxieties about the propriety of military service for the Christian, see August. Ep. 189.

\textsuperscript{18} Lactantius also offers a dramatic example of this shift: after vigorously asserting that the taking of human life was always wrong, under any circumstances (e.g. Div. inst. 6.20.15–17) and offering withering critiques of Roman military values (see n.14 above), he celebrated Constantine’s and Licinius’ bloody victories with some jubilation (De mort. pers. 52.4).

\textsuperscript{19} See 000 below for examples of the long-lasting negative associations of killing and military service in Christian thought. Wynn, Augustine, ch. 3, offers a good account of the complexity of the situation.

\textsuperscript{20} Studies that treat this subject more fully are M. McCormick, Eternal Victory: Triumphant Rulership in Late Antiquity, Byzantium, and the Early Medieval

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following discussion, I will highlight three common themes in this discourse that are at least partially influenced by Christian thought and that will prove important in Nonnus’ Indian War narrative.

(a) Mission

One important element of this discourse was the need to show that warfare was part of some divine plan, that the emperor was chosen by God to conquer and convert the world. This is perhaps most clearly expressed in a passage of Eusebius’ encomiastic Life of Constantine (1.5.1–2):

Making [Constantine] the model of his own monarchical reign, [God] appointed him victor over the whole race of tyrants and destroyer of the God-battling giants … while God, who is one and only, fortified with divine armour his servant as one against many. By him he cleansed humanity of the godless multitude, and set him up as a teacher of true devotion to himself for all nations…

Eusebius’ Constantine is a conqueror, but not on ordinary mortal terms, for his enemies are the enemies of God (θεομάχων), and they are tyrannical and monstrous (τυραννικοῦ

West (Cambridge 1986), and F. Heim, La théologie de la victoire de Constantin a Théodose (Paris 1992).

21 The notion of a divine commission for a ruler is not of course restricted to Christian thought. Menander Rhetor advises discussing this (422.16–19), and the motif is used of the decidedly non-Christian Diocletian (P.Oxy. LXIII 4352 fr.5.ii.18–20), in a passage that has similarities with Dionysus’ mission as described by Zeus in Nonnus’ Book 7. For discussion see Miguélez-Cavero, Poems in Context 343–344.

In killing these foul enemies, he is doing a service to humanity. In fact, as we see in the end of this passage, his role as conqueror is closely linked to his role as teacher: after clearing away the blight of God’s enemies, he can instruct all nations (πᾶσιν ἔθνεσι) in his own, true religion.

Similar conceptions of the emperor’s mission recur later as well, especially in the time of Theodosius I. The emperor’s seemingly miraculous victories over the ‘usurpers’ Maximus and Eugenius are interpreted as triumphs over paganism, signs of God’s favor for the eminently orthodox emperor. Perhaps even more than Constantine, he is seen as inaugurating a universal, Christian empire. The most passionate proclaimer of this message is the poet Prudentius, who presents Christian scriptures as a weapon used to subdue and instruct the barbarian peoples, and imagines Theodosius himself as instrumental in creating a divinely ordained imperium sine fine. St. Augustine, likewise, exulted at the sight of all nations being made subject to Christ in his own time, which he took as a fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies, and he lists the desire to spread the worship of God as one of the key characteristics of a good emperor (Theodosius being his prime example).

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23 On the connection between usurpation, tyranny, and impiety in late antique rhetoric see Alan Cameron, The Last Pagans of Rome (Oxford 2011) 95.

24 For Constantine as religious teacher see also Euseb. Laus Const. 2.4.


26 This narrative is riddled with historical problems, on which see Cameron, The Last Pagans, ch. 3.

27 C. Symm. 1.praef.1–6 and 1.541–543. For discussion see Heim, La théologie 286–287.

28 C. Faust. 13.7: videre etiam ipsos reges terrae Christi imperio iam salubriter subjugatos, omnesque gentes eidem servientes. According to Markus (Saeculum 33–39), however, his jubilation reflects only a short-lived period in his thinking about the empire and history.

29 De Civ. D. 5.24: sed felices eos dicimus … si suam potestatem ad Dei cultum maxime dilatandum maiestati eius famulam faciunt.
The divine purpose of Dionysus’ mission is not, of course, in any doubt, inasmuch as he is himself a divinity; yet the framing of his Indian campaign recalls this Christian discourse in some fairly specific ways. Consider the description of Zeus’ plan for the campaign at the beginning of Book 13 (13.1–7):³⁰

Ζεὺς δὲ πατὴρ προέηκεν ἐς αὐλία θέσκελα ῾Ρείης ᾿Ιριν ὀπαγγέλλοσαν ὑπερσημόθο Σιωνύσφ, ὁφρα δικής ἀδίδακτον ὑπερφιάλων γένος Ἰνδῶν Ἀσίδος ἔχελάσειεν ἐς ὅ ποινὴτορ θύρσῳ, ναύμαχον ἀμήσας ποταμίου υἱά κεράστην, Δηριάδην βασιλῆα, καὶ ἔθνεα πάντα διδάξῃ ὀργία νυκτιχόρευτα καὶ οἴνοπα καρπὸν ὀπώρης.

Father Zeus sent Iris forth to the wondrous halls of Rhea to announce to battle-stirring Dionysus that he should drive the race of arrogant Indians, untaught of justice, out of Asia with his avenging thyrsus; after cutting down King Deriades, the horned, sea-fighting son of a river, he should teach all the nations the rites danced by night and the wine-dark fruit of the vintage.

From the beginning, there is a clear link between military and pedagogy, conquering and converting. It is clear from Dionysus’ very epithet (ἐγερσιµόθθο) that battle will necessarily be involved in his mission: the Indians must be pushed out of Asia (i.e. Asia Minor)³¹ and their leader Deriades must be deposed. But these are intermediate rather than ultimate goals;³² the message ends with, and is rooted in, the education of all peoples, who will learn about wine and the mysteries associated with it as a result of Dionysus’ campaign. All the world, it is predicted, will become devoted to Dionysus. This seems to be

³² Shorrock, Myth of Paganism 108: “The most prominent aspect of Zeus’ command is the emphasis that is placed on teaching.”
fundamentally a philanthropic mission, and one that accords with Zeus’ original purpose in begetting Dionysus, as revealed in his exchange with Aion in Book 7: the new god will bring wine as a defense against sorrow (άλκαρ ἀνίης, 7.76), and he himself will be a protector of humanity (ἀνδρομέης … ἀλεξητήρα γενέθλης, 7.96).

Moreover, the language Nonnus uses to describe Dionysus’ educational purpose is strikingly similar to Eusebius’ (ἐθνεα πάντα διδάξῃ and διδάσκαλον πάσιν ἔθνεσι). Rather than positing that Nonnus knew Eusebius’ text, we can suggest a common source, a well-known passage in the gospel of Matthew in which Christ sends out his disciples (28:19–20):

πορευθέντες οὖν μαθητεύσατε πάντα τὰ ἔθνη, βαπτίζοντες αὐτοὺς εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος, διδάσκοντες αὐτοὺς τηρεῖν πάντα ὅσα ἐνετειλάθην ὑμῖν…

Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you...

Christ’s desire, like Zeus’, is to see his message taught to all peoples. Dionysus and Constantine share this commission to


34 The allusion could hardly have been lost on Nonnus, or his readers. For instance, the phrase μαθητεύσατε πάντα τὰ ἔθνη is quoted verbatim four times in Cyril of Alexandria’s commentary on John (I 27.24, II 414.18, III 152.4, 160.9 Pusey), a work that Nonnus was almost certainly familiar with (see K. Spanoudakis, *Nonnus of Panopolis: Paraphrase of the Gospel of John* XI [Oxford 2014] 18–19).

spread their religion, and both are ready to use force if necessary.

Dionysus’ enemies, like Constantine’s, are presented as god-fighting and monstrous. He is celebrated in the epic for his giant-slaying (it is this that makes him greater than Achilles in Nonnus’ second prologue, 25.257–260) and the Indians themselves are descended from giants.36 His opponents throughout are presented as god-fighting,37 and Nonnus often uses derivatives of θεομάχος (his metrical adaptation of θεομάχος) to refer to Indians and their actions.38 This is not particularly surprising: since Dionysus is a god, what else could his enemies be but god-fighting? Yet Nonnus’ insistent use of this word creates a significant link with contemporary discourse, and serves as an excellent example of his ability to look simultaneously to the present and the (literary) past.

Though the concept of a human fighting against a god is an old one (e.g. Diomedes in Iliad 5), neither the adjective itself nor any related compound appears in Greek epic before Nonnus. The verb θεομάχεω, however, has an important pedigree: it is first attested in Euripides, occurring three times in the Bacchae.39 This classical reference is an obvious source for Nonnus’ use of the term, but it is also significantly filtered through Christianity. It appears in the New Testament to denote opposition to Christ’s disciples40 and becomes in-

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36 Dion. 18.268–271; some Indians also resemble giants: 34.180–183.
37 For a discussion of this theme see F. Hadjithi, “Major Themes and Motifs in the Dionysiaca,” in Brill’s Companion 125–151, at 135–143.
38 14.274–275 (the war itself); 17.248 (Orontes); 28.185 (Indian men); 29.42, 32.257, 36.317, 36.355, 36.389, 40.67 (Deriades); 36.252 (Indian blood).
40 Acts 5:39. It may be that its use here stems from the Dionysiac tradition: New Testament scholarship has highlighted a substantial number of parallels, thematic and linguistic, between Acts and the Bacchae. See C.
creasingly common in Christian discourse; a search of the TLG shows θεηµάχος/θεοµάχος occurring 288 times in the fourth and fifth centuries CE, compared with only 23 in the all the centuries before. It is common in Eusebius\textsuperscript{41} and favored by Cyril of Alexandria (whose works Nonnus drew on\textsuperscript{42}), used to describe military opponents as well as Jews and heretics.\textsuperscript{43} Nonnus’ use of θεηµάχος, in light of this history, is wholly in keeping with his mythological subject, and yet at the same time evocative of contemporary, Christian discourse. The same could be said of Dionysus’ overall mission, which is at once triumphantly militarist and yet motivated by a desire to spread a religious message.

(b) Miraculous victory

In addition to showing that warfare served some religious end, late antique discourse was keen to point out the role of divine aid in battle. Famous examples of dramatic and obvious supernatural intervention are plentiful. At the battle of the Milvian bridge, Constantine receives a divine vision,\textsuperscript{44} or a band of heavenly warriors aids him in the conflict,\textsuperscript{45} or the hand of God itself comes down to the battlefield.\textsuperscript{46} At the battle of the Frigidus River, a divine wind causes the weapons of Eugenius’ followers to blow back on them, lending victory to the good Christian Theodosius.\textsuperscript{47} Closer to Nonnus’ own time, in the

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\textsuperscript{41} In addition to the passage cited above, see Laus Const. 9.8–13 (where it occurs three times to describe Constantine’s opponents).

\textsuperscript{42} See n.3 above.


\textsuperscript{44} Euseb. Vit. Const. 1.28.

\textsuperscript{45} Nazarius Pan.Lat. 4.14.

\textsuperscript{46} Lactant. De mort. pers. 44.7. This theme was also apparently the subject of visual art: pictures showing the hand of God in battle are described (and ridiculed) by Eunapius (fr.68 Blockley); see discussion in McCormick, Eternal Victory 96.

\textsuperscript{47} For an account of the origins and development of this narrative see
reign of Theodosius II a Roman force besieging Nisibis was said to be reinforced by angels, and God himself caused the enemy to panic, leading one hundred thousand of them to throw themselves into the Euphrates and drown; somewhat later, the barbarian supporters of the usurper John were struck by lightning and fire from heaven.⁴⁸

A few specific types of divine aid common in this discourse can be singled out here as particularly relevant on account of their resonance with Nonnus’ narrative. First is the tendency to downplay the importance of traditional weapons and techniques.⁴⁹ This is a familiar feature of various accounts of the Frigidus: Paulinus of Nola delivered a panegyric to Theodosius after the battle in which he stressed that the victory was due to faith rather than weapons;⁵⁰ John Chrysostom makes a similar comment in a sermon, noting that Theodosius conquered with spiritual rather than physical weapons (οὐ τάξις καὶ βέλεσιν, οὐδὲ δόρασι πολεμῶν, ἀλλὰ δάκρυσι καὶ εὐχαῖς).⁵¹ In Theodosius’ earlier victory over Maximus, too, divine aid made weapons redundant, such that no one even needed to draw a sword from the sheath (Oros. 7.35.6).

In many of these accounts, it is God’s protection, rather than

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⁴⁸ Soc. HE 7.18.7, 7.18.23, 7.43.3.
⁴⁹ This motif was not limited to Christian accounts. Themistius, for instance, often praises Theodosius and other emperors for coming to peace terms with various enemies, celebrating their disavowal of traditional weapons (e.g. μὴ ... ἐν σιδήρῳ μηδὲ ἐν θόραξι καὶ ἄσπισι, μηδὲ ἐν σώμασιν ἄναριθητοῖς, 16.207c). He does not frame this praise in specifically Christian terms, but it seems clear that he is playing on a Christian frame of reference; see e.g. 16.211b, where he imagines Goths hammering their swords and armor into agricultural implements, clearly a biblical allusion (see P. Heather and D. Moncur, Politics, Philosophy, and Empire in the Fourth Century: Select Orations of Themistius [Liverpool 2001] 280 n.252).
⁵⁰ The text is not extant, but it is mentioned in Gennadius De vir. ill. 49 (fide et oratone plus quam armis vicerit); see discussion in McCormick, Eternal Victory 108.
⁵¹ PG 63.492; see discussion in Cameron, The Last Pagans 107–108.
human armor, that keeps his followers safe. This is symbolized above all by the sign of the cross. In earlier narratives this is used as a supplement to regular armor, carried as a standard before Constantine’s army or painted on a shield or helmet (Euseb. Vit. Const. 1.31). But in later and more miraculous accounts, the sign takes the place of such human defenses. Paulinus expresses this view poetically: \[52\]

\begin{flushright}
bidant legionibus illi
perfugioque parent reparatis moenia muris,
nulla salutiferi quibus est fiducia Christi;
nos crucis invictae signum et confessio munit,
armatique deo mentem non quaerimus arma
\end{flushright}

Those who have no confidence in Christ as Bearer of salvation must put their trust in legions and repair their walls as a defence prepared for refuge. But the sign of the unconquered cross and our proclamation of it defends us. Our hearts have God as their armour, so we seek no armour for the body.

Thus did St. Martin offer to go into battle unarmed, claiming that the sign of the cross would defend him rather than shield or helmet.\[53\] Related, though not in a military context, is the story of St. Donatus, who fought a dragon unarmed (οὐ γὰρ ξίφος ἢ δόρυ φέρων οὐδὲ ἄλλο τι βέλος ἔχων) and was protected from the beast’s attacks by making the sign of the cross with his fingers (Sozom. HE 7.26.2).

A closely related element is the concept of ‘victory without combat’. François Heim has discussed this theme in an important article, noting how fourth-century Christians—who often

\[52\] Carm. 26.103–108; transl. P. G. Walsh, The Poems of St. Paulinus of Nola (New York 1975). The imagery here, as with much of this discourse, draws on Old Testament themes (e.g. Ps 20:7, “Some trust in chariots and some in horses, / but we trust in the name of the Lord our God”). The miracles of the Christian present were often correlated with episodes from the history of Israel; Maxentius’ drowning in the Tiber, for instance, was traditionally linked with the drowning of Pharaoh in the Red Sea (e.g. at Euseb. Vit. Const. 1.38).

\[53\] Sulp. Sev. Vit. S. Mart. 4.5, signo crucis, non clipeo protectus aut galea.
advocated withdrawal from the military—emphasized God’s control over the outcome of battles, to the extent that victories could be won without fighting or bloodshed (or at least not much).\textsuperscript{54} Such victories showcase both his power and his mercy, in that the loss of human life is minimized by his intervention. While this sometimes involved the absolute slaughter of the enemy,\textsuperscript{55} the discourse often prefers to have them surrender, becoming pacified or even united with the victors.\textsuperscript{56} This rhetoric is especially prominent in discussions of Theodosius’ victory over Maximus, which, according to various Christian historians was quite bloodless\textsuperscript{57} since Maximus himself was captured, and Andragathius committed suicide. Strikingly, though, a contemporary source, the Gallic panegyrist Pacatus, speaks of the conflict in graphically violent terms,\textsuperscript{58} which suggests that Christians had a special interest in emphasizing the non-violent nature of the battle. In fact, Orosius goes so far as to assert that bloodless victories are characteristic of the Christian age:\textsuperscript{59}

\begin{quote}
\textit{multa utique, sicut omnes recognoscimus, Theodosium filiumque eius Honorium usque ad nunc et externa bella et ciulia consecuta sunt, et tamen omnia paene usque in hodiernum diem et quidem cum fructu simplicis sanctaeque victoriae uel nullo uel minimo sanguine quiuerunt.}
\end{quote}


\textsuperscript{55} E.g. the “bloodless” victory of Constantine as described by Nazarius (\textit{Pan. Lat.} 4.7.1), which involved the slaughter of many enemies and was bloodless for Constantine’s forces alone.

\textsuperscript{56} See section (c) below.

\textsuperscript{57} E.g. Thdt. \textit{HE} 5.15 ἀναιμωτί; Oros. 7.35.7 formidulosissimum bellum sine sanguine; see also Soc. \textit{HE} 5.14.1.

\textsuperscript{58} His narrative includes references to whole squadrons writhing in blood, the ground being covered with corpses, and the river reddened with gore (\textit{Pan. Lat.} 2.34.2–4; see also 36.1–2). The contrast between Pacatus and the Christian sources is pointed out in Cameron, \textit{The Last Pagans} 97–98.

\textsuperscript{59} Oros. 7.35.9; transl. R. Deferrari, \textit{Paulus Orosius: The Seven Books of History against the Pagans} (Washington 1964).
surely many civil and foreign wars have followed Theodosius and his son, Honorius, up to the present day, and yet almost all up to our own time have subsided with the fruit of a simple and holy victory at the cost of very little or no blood at all.

Dionysus’ battles in the Indian War, like the battles of this contemporary discourse, are the sites of many miracles. This is immediately apparent from the personnel present in the first two battles: instead of traditional warriors fighting with sword and spear, there are bacchants, hybrid creatures (Silens, Pans, and centaurs), and special devotees of the god (the Couretes). These combatants eschew normal weapons, the bacchants using ivy and musical instruments (14.394–402), the Pans using horns, hooves, and (in one instance) a sickle (17.154), the centaurs unarmed (ἀτευχέες, 17.139), the Couretes armed but using their weapons in a cultic dance (14.386–390). Dionysus himself will have nothing to do with human weapons, as the narrative emphasizes in a paradoxical arming scene in which we are first told what he does not have: οὐ σάκος, οὐ δόρυ θούρον ἐκούφισεν, οὐ ξίφος ὀμφ, / οὐ κυνέην, “he lifted no shield, no bold spear, no sword on his shoulder, no helmet” (14.231–232). Instead, he dresses himself like a bacchant, with buskins on his feet, a snaky garland on his head, and a fawnskin on his chest. His lack of traditional military equipment is emphasized again and again in the narrative, often, as here, with series of negatives, quite like those used in Christian accounts. Some may trust in armor, but not Dionysus and his devotees.

This lack of weapons proves no hindrance to their success in battle, however. The fawnskin, despite its thinness, protects the bacchants and Dionysus from enemy spears: ὀλίγῳ δ’ ἐνὶ δέρματι νεβρῶν / ἀρραγέες γλωχῖνες ἐδοχώθησαν ἀκόντων, “on the insubstantial skin of fawns the unbreakable points of javelins were bent” (17.347–348, see also 17.244–245). And the sacred implements of Dionysus’ followers, though seemingly unwarlike, prove miraculously efficacious. The hoof of a Pan

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60 E.g. 17.15–16, καὶ στρατιῆς ἀσιδήρον ἀναξ ὀπλισσεν ἔνυφω, / οὐ ξίφος, οὐ μελίνην θεανατηφόρον; 22.160, οὐ γυμνὸν ἔχον ξίφος, οὐ δόρυ πάλλων.
cuts through an enemy’s strong armor and flesh in a single motion (σὺν βριαρῷ θώρηκι μέσον κενεών χαράσσων, 17.148). Even musical instruments are enough to kill or subdue vast numbers of Indians (17.343–345):

καὶ γυμνὴ παλάμη σωκέων δίχα, νόσφι σιδήρου,
Βάκχη ρόπτρα τίνασσε, καὶ ἤρπεν ἁπατισίωτης:
τύμπανα δ’ ἐσμαράγδησε, καὶ ὄρχησαντο μαχηταί.

With a naked hand—without shield, unaided by iron—a Bacchant shook her tambourines, and a shield-bearing man fell; tympani crashed, and warriors danced.

What ultimately wins the battle is not human effort, skill with the spear or shield; it is rather devotion to and worship of the god. Most effective of all, naturally, is Dionysus’ characteristic weapon: wine. At the end of the first battle, he turns the water in the river into wine (14.411–413), making the entire Indian army drunk and thus allowing them to be easily captured. Thanks to the intervention of the divine, combat itself proves unnecessary.

That Dionysus should win his victories by supernatural means is hardly unexpected, given that he is himself a god; and the motif of unarmed bacchants triumphing over armed men goes back at least to Euripides. But, as with the θεημάχος theme, Nonnus develops this traditional material in ways that resonate strikingly with the discourse of the contemporary world. The way Dionysus conquers the Indians by turning water to wine, for instance, recalls Christ’s miracle at the wedding in Cana, a miracle that Nonnus himself develops in his Paraphrase, in a passage that parallels this one in some important ways. Even more striking is the phrase Nonnus uses in describing this victory, when he triumphantly calls it a “bloodless battle” (ἀναιμάκτῳ δηιοτήτι, 15.123). The battle may have been fought by and for a ‘pagan’ god, but the nar-

62 Par. Jo. 2.35–38. For the parallels see J. Golega, Studien über die Evangeliedichtung des Nonnos von Panopolis (Breslau 1930) 75.
rative of it would be familiar in many ways to the readers of
accounts of battles fought for the Christian one.

(c) Mercy

A final point of correspondence between Nonnus’ pre-
sentation of battles and those of his contemporaries is their
common emphasis on the mercy of conqueror. Some degree of
mercy toward conquered peoples had long been celebrated in
the Roman tradition, and this was especially so in late-
antique imperial discourse. Images of the emperor receiving
supplicating barbarians are common in imperial iconogra-
phy. Menander Rhetor teaches that royal encomia should
include some mention of the emperor’s forbearance towards
the conquered as evidence of his φιλανθρωπία, and this
advice is put into practice in various extant panegyrics. This
ideology was so important that it led some thinkers to take issue
with the behavior of Homeric warriors, who showed little
mercy toward suppliants. Themistius uses Agamemnon’s
harshness towards suppliants—and his famous wish to kill the
unborn babies of the Trojans—as a negative exemplum, in
contrast to the philanthropic behavior of Theodosius I, and
Julian praises Constantius for being better than Achilles on
account of his willingness to forgive rather than slaughter his

63 Most famously in Anchises’ admonition to Aeneas: parcere subiectis (Aen. 6.853). For references to some of the extensive scholarship on imperial clemency see L. Gardiner, “The Imperial Subject: Theodosius II and Panegyric in Socrates’ Church History,” in C. Kelly (ed.), Theodosius II: Rethinking the Roman Empire in Late Antiquity (Cambridge 2013) 244–268, at 250 n.25.
64 See Miguélez-Cavero, Journal of Late Antiquity 2 (2009) 256–259, with
further references. She makes an important connection between the imperial ideology and Dionysus’ behavior in Nonnus.
65 ἐνταῦθα στήσας φιλανθρωπίᾳ τὰς πράξεις ἀνήκε συγχωρήσας τὸ λείψανον τοῦ γένους σώζεσθαι, ἀμα μὲν ἵνα μην ἔχεις τὸ πάθος τοῦ γεγο
νότος σώζηται τὸ λειπόμενον, ἀμα δὲ ἵνα καὶ τὴν φιλανθρωπίαν ἐνδείξηται (375.1–4).
67 Themist. 10.132a, and 34.25. For a similar sentiment see Julian Or. 2.37.33–37.
The issue of mercy towards enemies becomes even more important in light of the professed Christian faith of many emperors. For the taking of human life, even in ways now considered legitimate—e.g. just wars or capital punishment—remained controversial in Christian thought. St. Basil recommended that soldiers who had killed in battle should refrain from communion for three years, and individuals who had held public office were generally forbidden, even into the fifth century, from joining the clergy, on account of the blood-guilt associated with their public duties. Accordingly, emperors wanted to be seen as reluctant to shed blood: Theodosius I felt that he had to hold himself back from receiving the sacrament after winning a glorious victory, because he had contributed to the death of so many men, and he was unwilling to execute the captured usurpers Maximus and Eugenius.

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68 Julian Or. 2.7.46–50.
69 Canon 13.
70 See e.g. the letter of Innocent I to Vitricius (PL 20.472), dated to 404; for a fuller treatment of the pollution associated with public service see Wynn, Augustine 97–121.
71 See P. Van Nuffelen, “The Unstained Rule of Theodosius II: A Late Antique Panegyrical Topos and Moral Concern,” in G. Partoens et al. (eds.), Virtutis Image: Studies on the Conceptualisation and Transformation of an Ancient Ideal (Louvain 2004) 229–256, at 249–250. Van Nuffelen is right to point out that imperial discourse emphasizing freedom from bloodshed has multiple sources, Christian ethics being only one.
72 Ambrose De obitu Theodosii 34; for discussion see Heim, in Ambroise de Milan 276–279.
73 They were executed nonetheless, but by imperial agents, without any apparent instructions (see Pacatus Pan.Lat. 2.44.1–3 and Soc. HE 5.25.15). This imperial reluctance to do direct violence against an enemy leader may be correlated to Dionysus’ reluctance to kill the Indian chiefs: Orontes (whom he first deliberately misses with the cast of his thyrsus and then merely disarms, 17.245–289), Mortheus (whom he wounds but never kills, 39.354–356), and Deriades (whom he merely scratches with his thyrsus, ἀκρότατον χρῶ τοῦ μούναν ἐπέγραφε, 40.92, but who nonetheless dies rather mysteriously, perhaps from the scratch, perhaps by drowning, or perhaps by
Likewise, Theodosius II was routinely praised for not using capital punishment. In battle, they were eager to take their enemies captive rather than to slaughter them. We see this in Constantine’s behavior after his victory over Licinius:

οὐπαν δὲ βασιλεὺς ἐγείνει ἐκείνον τε καὶ τὸν αὐτοῦ στρατὸν ἐν ταῖς τῶν πολέμων παρατάξεσι καὶ πάλαι πρώτερον εἰόθει, τὸν ἐκείνην θεὸν πρὸ τῆς ψυχῆς ἀεὶ τιθέμενος καὶ πάντα ταῖς αὐτοῦ βουλαῖς πρὸς τρίτην διανοούμενος ἐν εὐλαβείᾳ τε τιθέμενος τῶν τῶν πολλῶν θάνατον, ἐνθεν οὐ μᾶλλον τῆς τῶν οἰκείων ἢ τῶν ἐκείνων προύνοις σωτηρίας. διὸ καὶ κρατήσασιν ἐν μάχῃ τοῖς ὁλόκληρον ἕξεν ποιεῖσθαι παρῄνει μηδ’ ἀνθρώπους ὄντας τῆς ὁμογενοῦς φύσεως ἐν λήθῃ γίγνεσθαι.

Such then had been for a long time past the practice of the Emperor in conducting military operations: he always kept his God before his mind and endeavoured to conform his actions to God’s purposes, and he was anxious to avoid great slaughter. He was therefore careful to preserve the enemy’s men as his own. So he also urged his men when they had won a battle to spare their prisoners, and as men themselves not to forget their common humanity.

There is an appeal to φιλανθρωπία in his admonishment to his troops, but the ultimate motivation seems to be religious, based on mindfulness of God’s precepts and an accompanying fear of too much killing. This issue was also explicitly addressed, later on, in Christian teaching, as for example in St. Augustine’s letter to Boniface, where he advises the young man that a Christian soldier should show mercy to those defeated or captured (Ep.189.6).

 having his body stabbed by Dionysus’ followers). These scenes have puzzled scholars; for an attempt to explain them, without appeal to the Christian context, see Frangoulis, Aitia 2 (2012).


75 Euseb. Vit. Const. 2.13.1–2. See also 2.10.1.

76 Whether Constantine and his soldiers actually showed such mercy is another story (see Cameron and Hall, Eusebius 234–235).
The emperor’s forbearance toward conquered peoples is also praised as a way of strengthening and extending his kingdom. This is a central theme of many orations of Themistius, who constantly praises emperors for choosing not to slaughter their enemies. This, he asserts, both demonstrates their virtue and serves to strengthen the empire, civilizing and improving dangerous barbarian peoples. Although Themistius is not a Christian, his orations are generally considered to reflect official imperial ideology, and the language he uses often draws on, or is at least concordant with, Christian thinking. Choosing to better those conquered rather than to slaughter them, he says at one point, is a more pious kind of victory (34.23): 

\[\text{τοιαῦτα γὰρ \ νῖκαι τῆς \ εὐσεβείας, \ οὐκ \ ἀνελεῖν, \ ἀλλὰ \ βελτίω \ ποιῆσαι \ τὸν \ ἥττηµένων.} \]

This rhetoric correlates nicely with the kind of benevolent triumphalism characteristic of Christian imperial thinking at the time, as discussed above: the Christian emperor conquers as bloodlessly as possible, and so increases the scope of the Christian empire, teaching all

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77 E.g. 10.133b, 34.23.

78 E.g. 10.131d–132a, 16.211b–d. A similar sentiment is found in Pacatus’ panegyrical, where Theodosius is praised for generously accepting a company of suppliants and also, thereby, making them Romans (Pan.Lat. 2.36.3).


80 See n. 49 above. For another example see Vanderspoel, Themistius 162. For an overview of Themistius’ use of Christian scripture see G. Downey, “Allusions to Christianity in Themistius’ Orations,” Studia Patristica 5 (1962) 480–488.

81 Relevant here is another passage in which Themistius discusses Theodosius’ peace with the Goths, using the motif of a triumph without weapons, and speaking of the emperor subduing all nations (πάντα µὲν ἔθνη χειροφόραται, 16.207c) according to the will of God.
nations about his religion.\textsuperscript{82}

Mercy is a crucial aspect of the first two battles of the Indian War, as well. In the first battle, when Dionysus makes the Indians drunk, this is explicitly said to be on account of his pity for his enemies (\textit{ἀντιβίος δ᾿ ἕκτειρε θεός}, 14.411), a characteristic rather foreign to the Dionysus of classical literature, but central to the characterization of Christ.\textsuperscript{83} He feels this pity immediately after the battle begins to intensify, as the narrative moves from individual acts of combat to more widespread slaughter, complete with a description of the earth and water being polluted with blood (14.408–410). He is moved by this bloodshed, and takes decisive action to stop it, to change it into a bloodless combat (15.123). In the second battle, the miraculous accomplishments of Dionysus’ followers lead some Indians to supplicate (17.346–47):

\begin{quote}
κύμβαλα δ᾿ ἐκροτάλιζε, καὶ αὐχένα κάμψε Λυαίῳ Ἰνδὸς ἄνηρ ἱκέτης.
\end{quote}

[A Bassarid] banged the cymbals, and an Indian suppliant bent his neck to Lyaios.

We later learn that there are many taken alive at the conclusion of the battle (πολέας ζῷρησαν ἀπὸ πτολέμου μαχητάς, 17.378), including one of the Indians’ champions, Blemys, who supplicates Dionysus himself (17.385–387). None of these suppliants is denied, which is in stark contrast with Homeric practice; those who supplicate on the battlefield in the \textit{Iliad} are uniformly rejected.\textsuperscript{84} In having his combatants accept supplication, then, Nonnus is departing from the Homeric model, a

\textsuperscript{82} See also August. \textit{Ep}. 189.6, in which Augustine encourages Boniface with the notion that, even as he fights, he is teaching those he conquers, giving them the benefit of peace.

\textsuperscript{83} E.g. Mt 9:36. On the Christlikeness of Dionysus’ pity see G. Bowersock, \textit{Hellenism in Late Antiquity} (Ann Arbor 1990) 44; Friesen, \textit{Reading Dionysus} 247–249.

\textsuperscript{84} For discussion see F. Naiden, \textit{Ancient Supplication} (Oxford 2006) 135–136. In the \textit{Odyssey}, by contrast, a suppliant in battle is accepted (\textit{Od}. 14.278–279).
move wholly in keeping with the ideology of his time, with its criticisms of Homeric suppliant-rejecters.

Those Indians taken captive by Dionysus’ army, moreover, are not merely saved from death, but become allied with Dionysus. He declares that the captives from the first battle will shake the thrysus, wear the buskin and ivy, and sing the ritual songs (15.124–131). By accepting their supplication, Dionysus is also thus converting them to his religion. Blemys is granted a kingdom of his own (17.388–397). In an interpretation recently offered by Gianfranco Agosti, the subjugation of Blemys to Dionysus was a “reassuring triumphalistic narrative” which would have pleased his Alexandrian audience, who were themselves sometimes under threat from the Blemmyes. We might also see this scene as linked with specifically Christian triumphal narratives, in which even the most savage nations are civilized and converted. Augustine, for instance, speaks of barbarian peoples in Africa being conquerred and Christianized, as evidence of a (partial) fulfillment of biblical prophecy (Ep. 199.46). Dionysus’ mercy toward suppliants is thus closely connected with his overall mission: though he fights, his goal is not the slaughter of his opponents, and so he mercifully accepts them and includes them in his cult. And thus advances the education of all nations.

2. Dionysiac and Christian warfare: ruptures

We have seen that Nonnus’ presentation of the Indian War has much in common with accounts of wars fought by em-

85 The posture used by the suppliants in battle may have specifically Christian overtones. Whereas Homeric suppliants usually grasp the knees, Nonnus’ bend their necks (οὐχένα κάµπτων, 17.346, 22.376), a gesture not commonly associated with supplication (not discussed among the gestures of supplication in Naiden, Ancient Supplication 44–62). But the image of bending the neck is used as a posture of conversion in Nonnus’ Paraphrase. In his version of John 3:16, for instance, those who believe in Christ are saved when they bend their necks to him (οὐχένα κάµπτων, Par. Jo. 3.84; see also 9.173).

86 Agosti, in Brill’s Companion 654–657.
perors from Constantine to Theodosius II. While I would not go so far as to assert that Nonnus intentionally creates parallels with contemporary discourse, I think that his audience would have heard echoes of this discourse in his narrative, that it would perhaps have made them see a bit of the Christian emperor in the campaigning wine-god.\textsuperscript{87}

The analysis thus far has focused almost entirely on the beginning of the Indian War, particularly on its first two battles. In his narrative of those conflicts, Nonnus’ presentation of Dionysus’ way of waging war has been fairly consistent, both internally and with the rhetoric of the time: it is presented as philanthropic, bringing civilization and religion to the conquered; as miraculous, effected with divine aid and clearly sanctioned by a god; and as characterized by mercy. But this does not remain so: between the second and third battles, there are a series of ruptures, in which Dionysus and his followers diverge strikingly from earlier practice. These, I will argue, call into question the triumphal quality of the earlier sections.

The first change is relatively minute—it might better be called a discrepancy—but it nicely illustrates the broader movement of this section of the narrative. This is a change in the equipment Dionysus uses in battle. As noted, Dionysus has been presented from the beginning as eschewing traditional armor and weaponry in favor of cultic implements, and above all that quintessential piece of Dionysian garb, the fawnskin.\textsuperscript{88}

In addition to its miraculous efficacy, the fawnskin is symbolically important: the preference for fawnskin and thyrsus

\textsuperscript{87} Scholars have sometimes suggested links between Dionysus and historical figures, reasonably enough, given the connection between Dionysus’ campaign and that of Alexander the Great. See e.g. P. Chuvin, \textit{Mythologie et géographie dionysiaques: recherches sur l’oeuvre de Nonnos de Panopolis} (Clermont-Ferrand 1991) 162–166, who suggests that Dionysus’ early battles in Asia Minor may be modeled (through one of Nonnus’ sources) on the triumph of Septimius Severus over Pescennius Niger; cf. G. Bowersock, “Nonnos’ Rising,” in \textit{Selected Papers on Late Antiquity} (Bari 2000 [1994]) 93–108.

over breastplate and spear seems to be central to Dionysus’ program, and he wishes everyone to follow him in this practice, imagining that even Deriades will eventually discard his traditional armor (27.207–211):

“νεβρίδα χαλκοχίτωνι καθάψατε Δηριαδῆι· και Βρομίῳ γόνυ δούλον ὑποκλίνων μετὰ νίκην Ἰνδὸς ἄναξ ῥίψειν ἕν ὑθώρηκα θυέλλαις, κρείσσονι λαχνήεντι δέμας θώρηκς καλύπτων.”

“Put a fawnskin on bronze-clad Deriades; when he has bent a slavish knee to Bromios after my victory, let the Indian lord hurl his corselet to the winds, covering his body with a stronger corselet, a furry one.”

The symbolism of this equipment stands out here: to wear a fawnskin is to submit to Dionysus, while to wear armor and wield weapons is to oppose him and his ways.

Given all of this, it is striking that we find Dionysus arming himself at one point in a metal corselet, the very equipment that proves so powerless in comparison with the fawnskin, and which is associated with resistance to Dionysus. This happens in Book 18, after he has enjoyed grand successes in the first two battles. In this scene, Dionysus wakes up and immediately puts on a corselet, which is spattered with Indian gore (ἔνδυνε φόνῳ πεπαλαγένον Ἰνδὸν / χάλκεον ... χιτῶνα, 18.197–198). The other elements of his equipment remain unchanged, and it is

89 And his poetics, as is clear from its inclusion as a symbol in the first prologue (Dion. 1.34–37).

90 See Eur. Bacch. 835–836, where the fawnskin is the last item Dionysus tells Pentheus he must wear, and the one that makes Pentheus resist most vehemently.

91 See also Dion. 15.73–75, where an Indian hurls his quiver away after he has become drunk, and just before he is taken captive and brought into the Dionysiac cult.

92 This has not, to my knowledge, been addressed in Nonnian scholarship. The Budé commentary does not mention the replacement of the fawnskin with a corselet: J. Gerbeau, Nonnos de Panopolis: Les Dionysiaques VII (Paris 1992) 146.
clear that Dionysus does not abandon the fawnskin for good.\footnote{Deriades derides him for it at 39.61, and it protects him at 48.75–76.}

Yet at this juncture, he picks up a piece of armor totally antithetical to his ideology and normal practice. This is a small and easily overlooked detail, yet it adds a note of dissonance to the narrative, and, as will be seen, it is hardly an isolated one.

Parallel to the shift from fawnskin to corselet is a shift in personnel in the early battles. In the first two conflicts of the war, as we have seen, the only combatants mentioned on Dionysus’ side are all clearly Dionysian, fighting with unconventional arms and tactics and triumphing miraculously. All this changes drastically in the third battle, beside the Hydaspes (22.136–23.116), where we see no Bassarids, Pans, satyrs, or the like. With the exception of Dionysus himself, the warriors who do the killing are exclusively human and bear conventional arms. As the battle opens, Dionysus himself appears briefly, wielding his thyrsus and scattering the enemy (εφόβησε, 22.159). After a few lines, however, he fades away, and a series of human heroes come to dominate the rest of the scene: Oeagrus, Aeacus, and Erectheus. The paradoxical successes of the previous battles are nowhere to be found, and instead we see these warriors fighting in strictly human mode, the narrative giving them aristeiai according to typical Homeric patterns. Eventually Dionysus returns to the scene, when he joins Aeacus in his grim work of killing Indians in the river (22.13–14). It seems here that, despite the success of the fawnskin in the previous battles, the breastplate has taken its place.

A further and perhaps more significant rupture is a change in policy regarding suppliants. In the first two battles, slaughter was restrained and suppliants were welcomed. But in the third battle, supplication is rejected, as we see in Aeacus’ aristeia (22.373–78):

\begin{quote}
πολλοὶ δ’ ἐν προχοῇσιν ἀπορρίγαττες ἄκωκὴν ἱκεσίην ἀνέφαινον ἀτευχές, ὃς μὲν ἐπ’ ὀχθης, ὃς δὲ παρὰ ψαμάθοις τετανυσμένος, ὃς δ’ ἐπὶ γαίῃ
\end{quote}

\footnote{Deriades derides him for it at 39.61, and it protects him at 48.75–76.}
δρθιος ὀκλάζων, κυρτούμενον αὐχένα κάμπτων· ἄλλα λιτάς ἀπέειπεν ἄνω νεόντι προσώπῳ
Αἰακὸς ἀντιβίοισιν ἀκαμπέω μηνίν ἕξειν·

And many hurled their spears into the river and offered supplication, unarmed—one on the bank, one stretching himself out beside the sandy shore, another crouching upon the earth, upright, and bending a hunched neck. But Aeacus, increasing his unbending wrath against his foes, denied their entreaties, turning his face upwards.

Unlike the Bassarids in Book 17, this more conventional warrior has no intention of taking captives. Their posture is the same (αὐχένα κάμπτων 22.376, αὐχένα κάμψε 17.346), but not their reception. In the earlier battle, suppliants were received into Dionysus’ cult; here, they are brutally killed. Different too is the conclusion of the battle, which comes with the wholesale destruction of the Indian army. In the final phase of the battle, Dionysus himself joins Aeacus in the river, and he is explicitly said to kill Indians for the first time in the epic (23.18–51). He fights insatiably, and it seems that he too is intent on the destruction of all the enemy, with no allowance for prisoners (23.113–114):

οὐδὲ μόθου Διόνυσος ἑους ἀνέκοψε μαχητάς,
εἰ μὴ πάντας ἐπεφνεν ἑφ ταμεσίχροι θυρσι... [Homer, Iliad 21.94]

The god becomes an agent of unchecked slaughter. He has no interest in the education or conversion of the Indians here, only their death.

Now we might attribute this change, and perhaps the others as well, to a shift in genre, or generic influence. For the battle at the Hydaspes, where we move away from the distinctively Dionysian character of the earlier conflicts, is the first battle scene that is clearly modeled on a Homeric parallel—the battle at the Scamander in Iliad 21.94 We might well imagine that the

changing violence in the epic is due to Nonnus’ moving in a more Iliadic direction, which is naturally not very Dionysian. This interpretation could be supported, indeed, by the presence in this battle of several stylistic elements absent from the first two conflicts, e.g. the aristéiai given to various heroes and the use of Homeric similes to describe combatants.95

The Iliadic intertext is clearer still in the scene where Aeacus refuses his suppliants. Like his more famous grandson, Aeacus is motivated by wrath (ἀκαμπέα μήνιν ἄεξον, 22.378). We are also told, significantly, that Aeacus slays more than one Lycaon (οὐχ ἔνα μοῦνον ἔπεφνε Λυκάονα, 22.380); in the Iliad, Lycaon is an unarmed man who supplicates Achilles, but is rejected (21.64–119). Nonnus also draws a direct comparison between Aeacus’ battle and Achilles’, calling the latter “half-finished” (ἡμίτελεστον, 22.388), and thus inferior to his own hero’s.96 This intertext would seem to provide a neat explanation for Aeacus’ lack of clemency to the Indians who submit themselves to him. As the Indian War comes more and more to resemble the Trojan War as depicted in the Iliad, it begins to take on the character of that war, and indeed to surpass it in violence and brutality, because of the poet’s manifest desire to surpass Homer. This might even serve to explain Dionysus’ mysterious donning of the bronze breastplate: as his poem draws nearer to the Homeric mode of battle, the god’s armaments change accordingly. His blood-spattered breastplate, indeed, has clear parallels in the Iliad.97 We might take Nonnus’ mention of it

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95 Hopkinson, in Studies in the Dionysiaca 19.

96 For a discussion of the complicated intertextual dynamics of this scene, in which mythological chronology and literary chronology are reversed, see N. Hopkinson, Nonnos de Panopolis: Les Dionysiaques VIII (Paris 1994) 91–92 and 244–245.

97 E.g. the result of Diomedes’ wound at 5.100 (παλάσσετο δ’ αἵματι θόρηξ) and Hector’s description of himself at 6.268 as αἵματι καὶ λόθρῳ πεπαλατημένον (both cited by Gerbeau, Nonnos 146).
then as a sort of metapoetic foreshadowing, a sign of the narrative transition to come.\(^98\)

However revealing these intertexts may be, however, they are less than fully explanatory. While the change in genre is certainly part of the way Nonnus represents the changing nature of violence in the epic, I do not think it is sufficient to explain it. This would make Nonnus into merely a passive imitator, allowing not only the style and structure but even the ethics of his narrative to be dictated by his model. This is hardly in keeping with the Nonnus that has been revealed by recent scholarship. Furthermore, Nonnus’ choice to have Aeacus reject suppliants is not just a reversal of earlier practice in the epic; it is also in defiance of contemporary discourse. As we have seen, the conquering emperor is supposed to show mercy, to refrain from killing all his enemies, as a demonstration of his φιλανθρωπία. This is all the more stark in light of Christian discourse, according to which bloodshed is to be avoided at all costs, and the conquered are to be converted.

Nor is this shift from philanthropic and evangelistic conquest to all-out slaughter wholly unexpected. Indeed, it has in some ways been long been anticipated and even thematized in the narrative. At the beginning of Book 13, as we have seen, Zeus decides to send Dionysus on a mission to teach all nations about his rites. But this pedagogical mission is almost immediately distorted beyond recognition. When Iris delivers the message to Dionysus, there is no mention of rites or teaching, only violence (13.19–20):

“ἀλκήεις Διόνυσε, τεὸς γενέτης σε κελεύει εὐσεβίης ἀδίδακτον ἀϊστώσαι γένος Ἰνδῶν.”

“Valiant Dionysus, your father orders you to annihilate the race of Indians, untaught of piety.”

\(^{98}\) Relevant here might be Dionysus’ shield, which he does not really need for defense, and which is never mentioned again after it is described and presented in Book 25. Hopkinson, in *Studies in the Dionysiaca* 23, concludes that “emulation of the ἀσπίδα πατρὸς Ὀμήρου has motivated inclusion of this scene in the Dionysiaca.”
The scholars who have addressed this apparent discrepancy have not made much of it. Vian sees the two passages as together offering a full expression of Zeus’ plan, and accounts for the difference between the two by reference to Nonnus’ avoidance of direct repetition in favor of variation.\footnote{Vian, Les Dionysiaques III 110. In his reading, the use of the verb ἀφιέρωσαι is an “inexactitude.”} Shorrock follows Vian, but minimizes the importance of the destruction of the Indians, suggesting that Iris’ failure to mention anything about teaching is due to the effects of the wine she has drunk in Rheia’s hall. For him, however, this is only interesting at a metapoetic level;\footnote{He suggests that the wine’s effect on her gives “a clear indication of the transformative power of Nonnus’ new poetic over Homeric epic, which causes Iris to lose her status as a wholly reliable epic messenger” (The Challenge of Epic 138 n.98).} what is most important about Dionysus’ sending is the generous nature of his mission:

The plan for the Indian War is not that people should die, but rather that all the world should learn about the pain-killing properties of wine. Here then is a new plan for a new cycle with a new ethical code. In comparison with the Trojan Cycle, the Dionysiac Cycle appears to be much more compassionate.\footnote{Shorrock, The Challenge of Epic 60.}

This move, however, softens the discrepancy too much. Regardless of Zeus’ intention or of the reasons for Iris’ message, this is the only version of the plan that Dionysus hears. And there is nothing whatsoever compassionate about it. However we try to reconcile the two statements, we still face a transition, in the course of a dozen lines, from a primarily philanthropic mission to a genocidal one.

This distortion maps onto what actually unfolds over the course of the early stages of the war, as we have been examining. In the first two battles, Dionysus pushes the Indians out of Asia, using force, yes, but also teaching his rites to those who submit or are captured, educating them in the ways of wine and worship. But in the third battle, he has no interest in...
teaching, only in slaughter, and he manages to destroy the entire army. Iris’ message, then, may be telling, hinting at the change that will take place in the campaign, alerting us of how easily a mission like Dionysus’ can be distorted, or, perhaps, of how similar ‘conversion’ can be to annihilation.\(^\text{102}\)

3. Conclusion

We have seen, then, a rather sudden and dramatic shift in the representation of Dionysus’ warfare. Initially characterized by mission, divine aid, and mercy, along the same lines as contemporary battles, it quickly becomes less miraculous and merciful, and much more brutal. Ultimately, of course, Dionysus will defeat the Indians, and will teach those who remain alive to celebrate his rites, thus fulfilling his mission (40.234–250). But the ruptures that Nonnus introduces early on seem pointed, and they are reinforced by constant vacillation on the part of the wine-god, between a desire to slaughter his enemies and a desire to see them converted.\(^\text{103}\)

We might take this sudden and marked change in character and behavior as subversive. On this reading, Nonnus sets up the warfare in the first battles to correspond with imperial propaganda, presenting the campaigning god and his victories in just the way Christian emperors would like their own campaigns to be represented: as restrained, divinely-sanctioned, and constructive. But his subsequent accounts explode this rosy picture, revealing that Dionysus’ war, for all its coloring of mission and mercy, is in fact bloody and all too human.\(^\text{104}\)


\(^\text{103}\) E.g. at Dion. 27.207–220 and 35.353–391.

\(^\text{104}\) Cf. Gardiner, in Theodosius II 244–268, who argues that Socrates Scholasticus subtly criticizes (or at least resists idealizing) Theodosius II even in what seems to be a panegyric of him, by drawing attention to the “inherent contradictions” of panegyric, pointing out by juxtaposition ways in which his behavior did not correspond to the extraordinary praise given him. See also Lasky, Hermes 106 (1978) 375–376, who argues that Nonnus

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Alternately, we might see Nonnus as simply playing with and exploiting the novelty and paradox inherent in many of the elements of contemporary discourse on warfare: miraculous combat, bloodless victory, evangelical warfare.

My goal here, though, is not to provide an explanation of what exactly Nonnus is (or might be) aiming at, as such a project would require more exhaustive analysis than is possible here. What I hope to have shown, at a more basic level, is that Nonnus’ epic, even in the ultra-literary context of (quasi-)Homeric battle scenes, is engaging with his own world, and that we miss some of the complexity of the text if we consider these scenes, as has often been done, only against a literary background. Regardless of what Nonnus may have intended, his presentation and problematization of divinely-sanctioned battles would likely have prompted his audience to reflect on the peculiar discourse of their own day, inviting them to think (perhaps critically) about the ways in which contemporary wars were justified and celebrated.

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exaggerates typical encomiastic features in a kind of satire.

105 Shorrock, *Myth of Paganism* 114–115: “The connections and echoes that I have explored might well be seen (without any appeal to the intentions of the author) as an inevitable consequence of writing about similar themes in the Christian world of late antiquity. However, the inevitability of such echoes and connections does not in any way negate their force.”

106 For a reading of Nonnus that sees him as having this relation with Christian discourse, see Spanoudakis, *WS* 120 (2007) 88–89, who argues that the Dionysus-Christ parallels in the Icarius episode of the *Dionysiaca* prompt dialogue about contested and controversial issues, using mythological distance for safety.

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