Phaëthon in Dioscorus of Aphrodito

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In a monograph published in 1988 we find the statement “Dioscorus is fond of the myth of Phaëthon.”¹ The sixth-century Byzantine Egyptian lawyer-poet several times incorporated references to the ancient son of the Sun and his spectacular fall into works that looked both upward to the heavens and outward to down-to-earth concerns of the poet’s own time. By now it is of interest to revisit this motif and see what its deployment can tell us about the society and the sensibility of Late Antique Egypt in the reigns of Justinian and Justin II.²

Why Phaëthon? What appeal would this particular figure from classical mythology have had for a Byzantine Egyptian man-of-letters/teacher³ who composed for practical ends

¹ L. S. B. MacCoull, Dioscorus of Aphrodito: His Work and His World (Berkeley 1988) 83, in discussing the poem then designated “H24.”
praise poems prompted by crises in his own life, poems that seem to be transpositions into verse of requests sketched originally in prose. Dioscorus’ choices of classical figures for, as it were, learned decoration include Olympian gods, Homeric heroes, the Muses, Hours, and Graces, and such figures as Adonis, Bellerophon, Daphne, Leda, and Eros (as well as personifications of Thebes and the Nile). What is Phaëthon doing in this repertory company?

The first time Dioscorus referred explicitly to Phaëthon was in connection with his visit to Constantinople in 551, when he composed what is now termed an (acrostic) “encomium of petition” to one Paul son of Domninus, cancellarius on the staff of the praetorian prefect. In praising this official, whose noble descent and illustrious name also compel admiration, Dioscorus declares, “Your beauty truly has flashed forth like that of Phaëthon” (line 3). Fournet also remarks on the frequency of Phaëthon references in Dioscorus’ works, and adduces contemporary poetic parallels such as the sixth-century Anacreontists John of Gaza and George the Grammarian. He correctly points out that this Byzantine Phaëthon is not the wayward youth of the story whose impetuosity had to be punished, but rather “a completely positive figure” (Dioscore II 508). However, he immediately adds that this makes him “a simple equivalent of
Helios.” Perhaps not so simple here. In hope of a positive fiscal outcome for his home town, Dioscorus praises this bureaucrat of Justinian’s capital for his good looks, his noble and high-achieving family, and his virtue (ἀρετή, line 7) that makes both God and men love him. (The poet had also praised another official for this same ἀρετή, having used the line already in poem 6 line 8, dated to the same year: see below on poem 6.) This complex of qualities will prove important in the functioning of Byzantine society.

About seventeen years later, in 568 under the new emperor Justin II, in another encomium of petition Dioscorus called the dux of the Thebaid, John, “new Phaëthon of Egypt,” saying that he has come with a leap into another country (i.e. his provincial posting) to save the cities. In the whole length of the poem (91 lines), this apostrophe comes between praise of the dux’s imperial connections (“your name shone out near to the imperial Olympus,” 36—appropriately classical) and mention of his high birth and strongly orthodox faith (39–41): “No one, no, no one is your equal in lineage, in the land of the King of All you have

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9 As indeed he is in Anth.Pal. 5.223 (Macedonius) and 274 (Paul), as well as in the ekphrasis of the Church of St Polyeuktos (Anth.Pal. 1.10.54).

10 Fournet identifies Paul’s father Domninus as possibly the laudandus of poem 7 (Dioscore II 500–501), where he introduces the subject of family succession in the imperial bureaucracy: cf. PLRE IIIA “Domninus I.” See below on the dynastic culture of Byzantine Egypt.

11 MacCoull (supra n.1) 105 on this poem adduces the association of Phaëthon with the zodiac: a point which will receive further treatment below.

12 Poem 11.37–38: Fournet, Dioscore I 394–399, II 524–549, esp. 533. MacCoull (supra n.1) 140, 142 (cf. 135) interpreted line 38 as having to do with “saving (κορυφάω) the cities,” i.e. acting as their curator; Fournet’s new rereading stresses John’s having held other posts in his young days (as a kouros), which he probably did. For the curator civitatis see R. Alston, The City in Roman and Byzantine Egypt (London/New York 2002) 278–281, 309–312, cf. 316; and K. A. Worp, “Bouleutai and Politeuomenoi in Later Byzantine Egypt Again,” ChrEg 74 (1999) 124–132, at 132 no. 2.2 in the list; also J. H. W. G. Liebeschuetz, Decline and Fall of the Roman City (Oxford 2001) 192–195, 199.

13 A line, mostly borrowed from Nonnus’ Paraphrase of the Gospel of John (9.52), that Dioscorus often recycles: cf. poems 5.9, 13.2, 18.30, 20.3, 32B4, 50B5.
ever received the helping gift of the single-essenced Trinity.”

Why was the province’s new leader hailed as the “new Phaëthon of Egypt”?

Just a little later another official is called “new Phaëthon” by our poet, and with the same verb:15 “Just now, new Phaëthon, you have come with a leap to save us” (poem 15.1).16 Here the addressee is the comes Dorotheos, punningly praised as a real and much-needed “gift of God” (4). Fournet has reconstructed this man’s career as that of a “member of a great family of Antinoite landowners” (Dioscore II 546), whose two brothers were a dux and a pagarch.17 It is to the scion of such a family that the people of Aphrodito are to look to “save” them. And finally, in a (slightly earlier) epithalamium18 for the wedding of two children of local leading families (poem 35.4–5),19 Dioscorus (speaking through the figure of eloquent Hermes as his mouthpiece) praises the bride Patricia as being as virtuous as if it had been Phaëthon, of immeasurable virtues, whom her mother had loved. This bride is an Athena born in the land of Aphrodite, and well-born of course (her real father being one Callinus, a nobleman [Fournet, Dioscore II 635]). In conventional fashion the poet wishes descendants and a “shining, renowned life” for the couple. Again Phaëthon figures in the praise of lineage at what

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15 Cf. Fournet, Dioscore II 533, on the appropriateness of the verb to the cometlike figure of Phaëthon.
16 Fournet, Dioscore I 407, II 564–566.
18 On “identification of Phaëthon with the nuptial star” see J. Diggle, Euripides: Phaëthon (Cambridge 1970) 10–15: a different Phaëthon, apparently. This play is known from late antique Egyptian papyrus transmission.
19 Fournet, Dioscore I 438–439, II 634–637. According to Fournet, the bridegroom here, Paul, cannot be the same person as the Paul who is the laudandus of poem 9.
would have been a conspicuous ceremonial occasion,\(^{20}\) when continuity of lineage was in the minds of all who were prayerfully present (cf. line 17, a prayer to Christ borrowed from *Anth. Pal. 1.19.12*).

Phaëthon, not the hubristic\(^ {21}\) but the positive figure, played many cultural roles after antiquity. What role does Dioscorus assign him in these works—works that carried their own expectations of genre—and what associations would have been called up for the audience by his appearance?

About eight years before Dioscorus’ visit to the capital in 551, a Constantinopolitan poet, Leontius the *scholastikos*, composed an epigram on the portrait of the eparch Gabriel (city prefect a.D. 543: *PLRE IIIa* 498 “Gabrielius 1”), a poem that operates along much the same lines as and uses similar terms to Dioscorus’ praises of powerful officials and their depictions. *Anth.Pal. 16.32* addresses Gabriel as *πτολιάρχε*, the same word Dioscorus uses in poem 1 (dated 551) to address another city prefect, perhaps John Coccorobius or Areobindus.\(^ {22}\) Leontius distinguishes between Phaëthon (“Even Phaëthon has his representation [τύπον] in [visual] art”\(^ {23}\) [γραφείνεσθαι, an expression Dioscorus uses in other encomia to mean either written formulations or visual art]\(^ {24}\) and the sun (1–2). Leontius too joins the

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\(^{23}\) I thank Kent Rigsby for consulting the Index of Christian Art online and informing me that there do not seem to be surviving depictions of Phaëthon in late antique art from either Egypt or Constantinople. Presumably this poet had his own examples at the time.

\(^{24}\) Fournet, *Dioscore II* 462, 654.
figure of Phaëthon with the virtues (ἀρετῶν, 4) of the laudandus: the point being the well-worn one that a likeness in art cannot depict the interior excellence, the “hidden light.” Both sixth-century poets use the Phaëthon image to tell their poem’s recipient that he outshines all others. In their hands we can see the figure of Phaëthon being changed from the hubristic, negative one to the virtues-oriented, positive one. When the Egyptian poet Claudian had transposed the hubristic Phaëthon myth to the Constantinopolitan court in his panegyric on Honorius’ sixth consulship in 404, Phaëthon’s fall served as an example to the defeated Alaric (165–192). And yet line 190 of that poem, mortalique diem ... diffundere vultu, contains the seed of what could become an almost Christological reading (as per Matthew 17:2). Phaëthon had wanted to be what Christ was, the manifest son of divinity able to shed light from a human face. By the time of Leontius and Dioscorus, the image has been transvalued.

Recalling the Platonic dictum that the Phaëthon myth is “really” (τὸ ἀληθὲς) about the movements of the heavenly bodies and their consequences, we are led to the link between Phaëthon and the zodiac that would have been plain to Byzantine Egyptian readers and hearers. Dioscorus, consciously composing hexameters in the tradition of Nonnus and using Nonnian material often throughout his work, both poetry and prose, clearly had in mind Dionysiaca 38.105–434, Hermes’

27 While in Anth.Pal. 9.822.1 “Phaëthon” does equal the sun, the epigram describes a silver vessel—or possibly a decorated ceiling—from Justinian’s time the decoration of which also includes the signs of the zodiac.
28 Fournet, Dioscore II 678–680.
“Phaëthonica” if you will. The Phaëthon figure in Nonnus, who also has the qualities of beauty (153–154) and virtuous helpfulness (172), learns from his father about the course of the heavens with its twelve houses and seven zones.\(^{30}\) The highest point comes, importantly, in Cancer, when both the Nile and the grape are made to swell (284–286): calendrically accurate for Egypt. But this immediately opens the door to the predominantly Neoplatonic interpretation\(^{31}\) deriving from Porphyry, *De Antro Nympharum* 28, in which Cancer is the source of the souls\(^{32}\) that descend into matter. The best formulation of the Neoplatonic solar zodiac is in Proclus’ *Hymn to Helios*,\(^{33}\) which should now be considered as a parallel.

While Proclus’ *Hymn to Helios* is indeed addressed to that divinity and does not mention Phaëthon, it does articulate the solar course that Phaëthon would do his best to traverse in order to prove his true parentage. (And line 34, ἔκβολος παραγωγής, ἐνεργεία, openly invites a Christological interpretation by any late antique reader of this pagan text, by way of Colossians 1:15–16.)\(^{34}\) In Proclus the annual cycle of sun and planets also benefits all living things (lines 8–12; van den Berg 159–161). The driver of the solar chariot is the “dispenser of light” (lines 2, 155–156) who is personified as having power


\(^{32}\) Cf. also O. Neugebauer and R. A. Parker, *Egyptian Astronomical Texts III* (London 1969) plate 51, in which Cancer is depicted as a scarab, the symbol of rebirth. (I owe this reference to T. Wilfong.) In the West the locus classicus is Macrobius’ *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio* 1.12.1–2.


\(^{34}\) ὅμοιος Ἅκης (line 38) is picked up by the Dioscorian ὅμοιος Νίκης (24.24; Fournet, *Dioscorae II* 608); and 43–44 about scholarly responsibility to forebears anticipate Dioscorus the teacher.
to free souls (15–17, 40, 49–50). Like Nonnus’ Johannine Christ, he can reverse fate. This point of contact between non-Christian and Christian Neoplatonisms is what Dioscorus brings forward in his various poems of praise, an evocative image of the perpetual possibility of restoring order to the world. It was the Byzantine Egyptian world in particular, so dependent on the regular seasons and regularly flooding Nile, in which Dioscorus’ audience lived. His repeated allusions to the hidden sources of the Nile would have also recalled for his audience the part of the Phaëthon legend according to which the great river fled and hid its head from the hero’s fiery fall. Dioscorus’ Christianized Nile is the same Nile as that of the Dionysiaca: in poem 11.42–44 and poem 23.3 it flourishes under the rule of the rightful and just dux together with his aides.

Indeed, astrological beliefs and Christian beliefs could converge. Specifically, for Dioscorus’ audience, the solar figure of Phaëthon is a Christianized figure who moves through his zodiacal course in the fashion exemplified by sixth-century Egyptian exegesis of Psalm 18:5b–7 (LXX):

> ἐν τῷ ἡλίῳ ἦθεν τὸ σκήνωμα αὐτοῦ. καὶ αὐτὸς ὡς νυμφίος ἐκπορευόμενος εἰς παστοῦ αὐτοῦ, ἀγαλλιάσται ὡς γίγας δραμεὶν ὅδον αὐτοῦ. ἀπ’ ἄκρου τοῦ οὐρανοῦ ἐξεῴκου αὐτοῦ, καὶ τὸ κατάντημα αὐτοῦ ἐως ἄκρου τοῦ οὐρανοῦ, καὶ οὐκ ἐστιν ὃς ἀποκρυβῇσθαι τὴν θέρμην αὐτοῦ.

He hath set his tabernacle in the sun: which cometh forth as a bridegroom out of his chamber, and rejoiceth as a giant to run his

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36 Cf. Simon 41–45. The court of the Sun-Father (cf. Nonnus *Dion. 11.485–521*) in Proclus’ line 32 (van den Berg 177) also recalls the heavenly court in the *Vision of Dorotheos* (ODB I 653–654).

37 Fournet, *Dioscore II* 592, 697 (index s.v. Νεῖλος); MacCoull (*supra* n.1) 98, 141.

38 Compare the link with Ethiopia, where the flood-generating rains fall, mentioned in Diggle (*supra* n.18) 45–46.
course. It goeth forth from the uttermost part of the heaven, and runneth about unto the end of it again: and there is nothing hid from the heat thereof.39

This passage is repeatedly brought forward by the sixth-century Alexandrian Miaphysite philosopher and exegete John Philoponus as a proof-text to illustrate his picture of a spherical cosmos, confuting the Antiochene Dyophysite schema of Cosmas Indicopleustes and his predecessors.40 Philoponus is commenting on Genesis 1:6–8, the creation of the firmament (στερέωμα), to show his audience that only an account of creation and cosmology that is informed by Miaphysite Christology41 can be shown adequately to agree with the data of physical science. Not only does the Psalm text reintroduce bridal imagery into the mix, it also further biblicizes Phaëthon’s trajectory as both spanning the sky and bringing universal heat. Dioscorus’ Egyptian Christian audience could not have avoided hearing the echo.42

39 The Sahidic text, very close to the Greek (and which we can assume Dioscorus also knew), can be seen in E. A. W. Budge, The Earliest Known Coptic Psalter (London 1898) 20. See J. Horn, “Die koptische (sahidische) Überlieferung des alttestamentlichen Psalmenbuches: Versuch einer Gruppierung der Textzeugen für die Herstellung eines Textes,” in A. Aejmelaeus and U. Quast, edd., Der Septuaginta-Psalter und seine Tochterübersetzungen (Göttingen 2000) 97–106.


42 In later Coptic usage this text is used in the pre-Christmas monastic midnight office: e.g. L. Störk, Koptische Handschriften der Staatsbibliothek I Liturgische Handschriften (Stuttgart 2002) 168. We still do not have a reconstructed Sahidic lectionary from the classical period: F. Feder, Biblia Sahidica: Corpus Jeremiae (TU 147 [Berlin/New York 2002]) 15–18, 40–46.
Above all, Dioscorus was writing in a society which was coming to place increasing emphasis on family, dynasty, inheritance, and legitimacy, especially in the area of office-holding within the imperial system. The legend of Phaëthon really begins with the query "Who is my real father?"\(^{43}\) Such a query was of deep import in the elite families of administrators for whose members Dioscorus composed praise poems and epithalamia.\(^{44}\) His poems comment obliquely on current affairs while drawing on the literary traditions of classical antiquity, and they present virtues such as justice as inhering in the blood of noble families (\textit{e.g.} poems 10.8–13, 27–35, 44; 11.1–2, 33, 39; 12.3–7; 13.27–28; 14.3–11; 18.1–7; 24.19–22, etc.).\(^{45}\) He is tacitly exploring the relations among proper elite behavior, good government, and the study and use of the past: as it has been put in another context, in effect “re-historicizing” the deeds of earlier generations.\(^{46}\) We must thus look at what can be known about the realities of inheritance and legitimacy in Byzantine Egypt\(^{47}\) to hear the overtones of the Phaëthon figure’s symbolic resonance.\(^{48}\)

\(^{43}\) Diggle (\textit{supra} n.18) 35–38, 57, 62.

\(^{44}\) “La transmission de père en fils des plus hautes fonctions provinciales”: Fournet (\textit{supra} n.17) 75; “This tendency of sons to follow their fathers into government service is evidenced … in the papyri; … following his father in service in the same \textit{officium} thus fits both an expected familial pattern and a pattern sanctioned by late imperial law”: J. G. Keenan, “Egypt,” in \textit{CAH} 2 XIV (2000) 612–637, here 624–625 (with n.48).

\(^{45}\) Cf. Bestor (\textit{supra} n.2).

\(^{46}\) Tristano (\textit{supra} n.2).


\(^{48}\) “Phaëthon’s story is itself directly related to the question of lineage”: A. Ingber, “Multiculturalism Gone Wrong: Spain in the Renaissance,” \langle\texttt{http://www.dean.sbc.edu/ingber2.html}\rangle (paragraphs not numbered). Also, the hubristic Phaëthon, embodying the rashness thought to inher in the illegitimate
Justinian’s Novel 89 *De naturalibus liberis* / Περὶ τῶν νόθων dates to A.D. 539 in the consulship of Fl. Apion.\(^49\) It is a legislative measure designed to strengthen the town councils of the empire\(^50\) by enabling councillor fathers to enrol their freeborn but illegitimate sons as *bouleutai*;\(^51\) sons who *ipso facto* become legitimate and capable of inheriting from their father (cc. 2–6). Additionally, children who remain unlegitimized can, in the absence of legitimate children of the same father (*i.e.* if they are the only children of his body), receive and inherit paternal property by gift or whatever other means of transfer the father desires (12.3). When legitimate children also exist, the illegitimate ones can receive or inherit not more than 1/12 of the disposable property. We can see the effects of this legislation at work in *P.Cair. Masp* II 6715/67152 of 15 Nov. 570, the famous will of Fl. Phoibammon the Antinoite physician. Phoibammon, himself the son of a physician, entrusts the running of his hospital (*xenon*) to his brother John, and makes bequests both to the Hermopolite monastery of St Jeremias (where he wants to be buried) for the salvation of his soul and commemorative liturgies, and to his legitimate children (line 61). He further stipulates (205ff): “I wish and order that the illegitimates (*nothous*) and freedmen of my inherited portion and holding shall be in all things guaranteed of goods, ... (for) let each enjoy his own.” This corresponds to the way in which Justinian’s legislation permitted a father to provide for both legitimate and illegitimate children, with the latter not being left without any means to have property.

\(^49\) Cf. Keenan (*supra* n.44) 627.

\(^50\) See A. Bowman, *Egypt After the Pharaohs* (London 1986) 68–73.

For the less deserving *nothoi*, on the other hand, we may contrast Dioscorus’ poem 6, an encomium of petition addressed to Dorotheos the Constantinopolitan imperial palace silentiary *ca* 551.52 Dioscorus, in poet mode, praises his laudandus for his virtuous and just family and for having suppressed the *nothoi* (line 16).53 The silentiary, a man of both cultural and military attainments, has used his order-keeping function to see to it that only the deserving, not those bearing faked requests, obtained access to the emperor. Another meaning for *nothoi* is “forgeries,” specifically forged documents (an extension of the patristic meaning of “non-canonical” or “spurious texts”). In a bureaucratic, paper-generating world in which titles to land, inheritance, and so on were vital matters for which the papyrus proofs had to be registered in a government office and producible for any case of legal contestation,54 forged documents were a very serious matter.55 A clause stating that the document being drawn up was to be valid “wherever and whenever it may be produced in evidence” was a standard Byzantine notarial inclusion, one Dioscorus knew (compare Phoibammon’s will, lines 222–228 [with divine protection involved as well], 303–304). This kind of “bastardy” would create havoc in the dynastic world Dioscorus was writing in and for; so his praise

52 Fournet, *Dioscor* I 383–385, II 496–500, esp. 499. This official is, according to Fournet, not the same person as the Dorotheos brother of Callinus of poem 15.

53 Fournet points out that *nothoi*, “hommes faux,” is a word with heavily Christian (scriptural) connotations; it is also used metaphorically in Nonnus’ *Paraphrasis* 2.25, of divine recognition of “illegitimate utterance.”

54 Cf. Bowman (*supra* n.50) 61–64.

55 On the world of Byzantine documentation cf. Simon Franklin, *Writing, Society and Culture in Early Rus* (Cambridge 2002) 162: “Public bodies—the imperial and patriarchal administration—produced and preserved written records as a standard practice, and documentary methods were also routinely available, through notaries, to private individuals and institutions. Documents had a place in judicial processes, with procedures to guard against forgery or to determine the status of claims supported by documents which turned out to have been stolen. Documentation was a habit, a tradition, a normal expectation, a way of thought.”
of an official whose policies reduced it makes sense. Thus his introducing the figure of Phaëthon, a “bastard” determined to prove he was not one, into his dynastic praise poems carried a strong message to his Byzantine Egyptian elite audience. Like the European nobility much later, they too were Phaëthon’s mind-children, concerned both with la bella figura and with negotiating ways to pass on a splendid patrimony to whoever showed himself energetic enough to undertake the role.

The poems in which Dioscorus used the classical image of Phaëthon came from a rich and highly urbanized province of the empire, one with a vital tradition of legal studies and a visually stimulating surrounding full of ancient and classical monuments. Dioscorus was writing at a point of tension in his society between the hereditary impulse of the dynastic service families and the more meritocratic impulse fostered simultaneously by the classical paideia and the dominant Miaphysite Christian faith of his region. Weddings and presentations of petitions were seen as dynastic events at the headquarters of powerful families whose seats were sources of patronage and loci of civilized behavior. In addition, it was the Miaphysite religious thought of Dioscorus’ time that was trying to make plain the philosophical basis of the Incarnation. Dioscorus’ Christianized Phaëthon image is used in a context of elite education and family continuity, illustrating a new kind of poetics that perhaps will one day be termed “Miaphysite Mannerism” or perhaps the “Coptic Baroque.” Miaphysitism was the “old religion” of the recusants who refused the innovations of

56 Dioscorus’ poems were performances, and, since they accomplished something for their audiences, they were also performative (Fournet, “Pratiques lettrées” 77–78).

57 More from the Renaissance: much can be learned from the forthcoming monograph by Roderick J. Lyall, Alexander Montgomerie: Poetry, Politics and Cultural Change in Jacobean Scotland. This kind of approach will yield great results when applied to Late Antiquity.
Chalcedon, and it would be constructive for Dioscorus and his works to be viewed in that light.

Fournet has expressed the sanguine opinion that Dioscorian studies are “en plein essor.” One can only hope so. Viewing the fiery ride of Phaëthon through the eyes of a bilingual Coptic man of letters illustrates the late antique Egyptian audience’s awareness of how many ingredients made up their experience of their world.

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59 As always, in loving memory of Mirrit Boutros Ghali (“‘Scholar,’ saith Love, ‘bend hitherward your wit’”).