

Nonnus' *Dionysiaca* and Late-Antique Discourse on Warfare

Nicholas Kauffman

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

¹ E.g. K. Spanoudakis, "Αἰῶνος λῆται (Nonn. *Dion.* 7.1–109)," *Aitia* 2 (2012) ¶20; J. Dijkstra, "The Religious Background of Nonnus," in D. Accoriniti (ed.), *Brill's Companion to Nonnus of Panopolis* (Leiden 2016) 75–88, at 86. A somewhat earlier strain of scholarship tended to minimize the importance of Christian parallels: e.g. W. Liebeschuetz, "The Use of Pagan Mythology in the Christian Empire with Particular Reference to the *Dionysiaca* of Nonnus," in P. Allen and E. M. Jeffreys (eds.), *Sixth Century: End or Beginning?* (Brisbane 1996) 75–91; Alan Cameron, "The Poet, the Bishop, and the Harlot," *GRBS* 41 (2000) 175–188. More recently, L. Miguélez-Cavero has advocated a variation on this theme, suggesting that Nonnus intentionally distances his epic from Christian associations: "The Appearance of the Gods in the *Dionysiaca* of Nonnus," *GRBS* 49 (2009) 557–583, and "Rhetoric of Novelty in the *Dionysiaca* of Nonnus of Panopolis," in R. García-Gasco et al. (eds.), *The Theodosian Age* (Oxford 2013) 191–195.

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

Dionysiaca are widely acknowledged, they have not been studied in much detail.⁴ Contemporary scholarship on the issue has tended to focus on topics of mystical or theological significance,⁵ and especially on the relation between Dionysus and Christ.⁶ Less clearly ‘religious’ areas, by contrast, have been relatively neglected, and this is especially true of the narratives of warfare in the *Dionysiaca*.⁷ 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*⁸ rather than of engagement with contemporary culture, let alone with Christian thought.⁹

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.

⁴ Spanoudakis, *Aitia* 2 (2012) ¶20: “The question of Christian influence in the *Dionysiaca* is largely unexplored.”

⁵ 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...”

⁶ See e.g. K. Spanoudakis, “Icarius Jesus Christ? Dionysiac Passion and Biblical Narrative in Nonnus’ Icarius Episode,” *WS* 120 (2007) 35–92; D. Hernández de la Fuente, “Dionysos and Christ as Parallel Figures in Late Antiquity,” in A. Bernabé et al. (eds.), *Redefining Dionysos* (Berlin 2013) 464–487; and P. Chuvin, “Revisiting Old Problems: Literature and Religion in the *Dionysiaca*,” in K. Spanoudakis (ed.), *Nonnus of Panopolis in Context* (Berlin 2014) 3–18.

⁷ A lacuna in scholarship alluded to in G. Agosti, “Nonnus and Late Antique Society,” in *Brill’s Companion* 644–668, at 665 n.103.

⁸ 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.

⁹ 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.¹⁰ 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,¹¹ history, theology) and

Dionysus and religious violence in Nonnus' world.

¹⁰ L. Miguélez-Cavero, "Gesture and Gesturality in the *Dionysiaca* of Nonnus," *Journal of Late Antiquity* 2 (2009) 251–273, at 256: "The extract from the previous monument can be modified to suit the new context, even if retaining an ancient impression." See also G. Agosti, "Contextualizing Nonnus' Visual World," in *Nonnus in Context* 141–174, at 160–162, and in *Brill's Companion* 660–661.

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 to 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 forbidden¹² (although some Christians certainly did serve in the army¹³). Christian thinkers were often sharply critical of Rome's obsession with bloodshed and lust for domination through warfare.¹⁴ Yet, with the conversion of Constantine, this (at least nominally¹⁵) critical and

tiquity 2 (2009) 251–273.

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).

¹³ J. Helgeland, "Christians and the Roman Army from Marcus Aurelius to Constantine," *ANRW* II.23.1 (1979) 724–834; Shean, *Soldiering*.

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 strengthened¹⁶) to show that there was nothing explicitly un-Christian about military service.¹⁷ And many Christian leaders came to celebrate the military triumphs of the (now Christian) emperors.¹⁸ But the anti-militarist origins of Christianity, which remained influential in some circles,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.²⁰ Instead, in the

expediency, and thus eager enough to embrace violence once granted the opportunity; for a more nuanced view, with further references, see H. A. Drake, "Intolerance, Religious Violence, and Political Legitimacy," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 79 (2011) 193–235, at 195–197.

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.

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.

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).

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.

²⁰ Studies that treat this subject more fully are M. McCormick, *Eternal Victory: Triumphal Rulership in Late Antiquity, Byzantium, and the Early Medieval*

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.²¹ This is perhaps most clearly expressed in a passage of Eusebius' encomiastic *Life of Constantine* (1.5.1–2):²²

τῆς δ' αὐτοῦ μοναρχικῆς ἐξουσίας τὴν εἰκόνα δούς, νικητὴν ἀπέδειξε παντὸς τυραννικοῦ γένους θεομάχων τ' ὀλετήρα γιγάντων ... τὸν δ' αὐτοῦ θεράποντα θεὸς ὁ εἷς καὶ μόνος ἕνα πρὸς πολλοὺς θεϊκῆ φραζάμενος παντευχία, τῆς τῶν ἀθέων πληθύος δι' αὐτοῦ τὸν θνητὸν ἀποκαθήρας βίον, εὐσεβείας εἰς αὐτὸν διδάσκαλον πᾶσιν ἔθνεσι κατεστήσατο...

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

²¹ 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.

²² Ed. F. Winkelmann, *Eusebius Werke* I.1 (Berlin 1975); transl. Averil Cameron and S. Hall, *Eusebius: Life of Constantine* (Oxford 1999).

γένους, γιγάντων).²³ 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.²⁴

Similar conceptions of the emperor's mission recur later as well, especially in the time of Theodosius I.²⁵ 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.²⁶ 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*.²⁷ 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,²⁸ 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).²⁹

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.

²⁵ R. Markus, *Saeculum: History and Society in the Theology of St. Augustine* (Cambridge 1970), ch. 2.

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: *videret etiam ipsos reges terrae Christi imperio iam salubriter subiugatos, 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 αὐλῖα θέσκελα Ῥείης
 Ἴριν ἀπαγγέλλουσαν ἐγερσιμόθῳ Διονύσῳ,
 ὄφρα δίκης ἀδίδακτον ὑπερφιάλων γένος Ἰνδῶν
 Ἀσίδος ἐξελάσειεν ἐὼ ποινήτορι θύρσῳ,
 ναύμαχον ἀμήσας ποταμήιον υἷα κεράστην,
 Δηριάδην βασιλῆα, καὶ ἔθνεα πάντα διδάξῃ
 ὄργια νυκτιχόρευτα καὶ οἴνοπα καρπὸν ὀπώρης.

Father Zeus sent Iris forth to the wondrous halls of Rheia 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 (ἐγερσιμόθῳ) 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

³⁰ Text R. Keydell, *Nonni Panopolitani Dionysiaca* I–II (Berlin 1959). Translations of Nonnus are my own, though they often draw on those in W. H. D. Rouse's Loeb edition (Cambridge [Mass.] 1940).

³¹ Cf. F. Vian, *Nonnos de Panopolis: Les Dionysiaques* III (Paris 1995) 110–111.

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,³³ 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 (ἄλκαρ 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' (ἔθνεα πάντα διδάξει and διδάσκαλον πᾶσιν ἔθνεσι). Rather than positing that Nonnus knew Eusebius' text, we can suggest a common source, a well-known passage³⁴ in the gospel of Matthew in which Christ sends out his disciples (28:19–20):³⁵

πορευθέντες οὖν μαθητεύσατε πάντα τὰ ἔθνη, βαπτίζοντες αὐτούς εἰς τὸ ὄνομα τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ τοῦ υἱοῦ καὶ τοῦ ἁγίου πνεύματος, διδάσκοντες αὐτούς τηρεῖν πάντα ὅσα ἐνετειλάμην 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

³³ G. Bowersock, "Dionysus as an Epic Hero," in *Studies in the Dionysiaca* 157–166, at 162, speaks of Dionysus' "*saving mission* across Greece, Asia Minor, the Near East, and India" (emphasis added). See also H. Frangoulis, "Nonnos et les combats singuliers de Dionysos," *Aitia* 2 (2012) ¶12, who describes Dionysus, even in his military aspect, as primarily peaceful ("un dieu propagandiste et civilisateur, désireux de convertir à son culte tous les Indiens").

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: Paraphrasis of the Gospel of John XI* [Oxford 2014] 18–19).

³⁵ Text K. Aland et al., *The Greek New Testament*² (Stuttgart 1968); transl. New International Version. Nonnus' allusion to this passage is noted in Spanoudakis, *Aitia* 2 (2012) ¶13.

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 *θημᾶχος* (his metrical adaptation of *θεομᾶχος*) 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 *θεομαχέω*, 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 disciples,⁴⁰ and becomes in-

³⁶ *Dion.* 18.268–271; some Indians also resemble giants: 34.180–183.

³⁷ For a discussion of this theme see F. Hadjittofi, "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).

³⁹ Eur. *Bacch.* 45, 325, 1255; it is also found once in *IA* (1408). On the word and its significance see J. C. Kamerbeek, "On the Conception of *θεομᾶχος* in Relation with Greek Tragedy," *Mnemosyne* IV.1 (1948) 271–283.

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 *θημάρχος/θεομάρχος* occurring 288 times in the fourth and fifth centuries CE, compared with only 23 in the all the centuries before. It is common in Eusebius⁴¹ and favored by Cyril of Alexandria (whose works Nonnus drew on⁴²), used to describe military opponents as well as Jews and heretics.⁴³ Nonnus' use of *θημάρχος*, 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,⁴⁴ or a band of heavenly warriors aids him in the conflict,⁴⁵ or the hand of God itself comes down to the battlefield.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.⁴⁷ Closer to Nonnus' own time, in the

Friesen, *Reading Dionysus: Euripides' Bacchae and the Cultural Contestations of Greeks, Jews, Romans, and Christians* (Tübingen 2015) 208–212.

⁴¹ In addition to the passage cited above, see *Laus Const.* 9.8–13 (where it occurs three times to describe Constantine's opponents).

⁴² See n.3 above.

⁴³ E.g. Cyr. *Jō.* I 27.47, II 28.14, 108, 3.

⁴⁴ Euseb. *Vit. Const.* 1.28.

⁴⁵ Nazarius *Pan. Lat.* 4.14.

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.

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 τόξοις καὶ βέλεσιν, οὐδὲ δόρασι πολεμῶν, ἀλλὰ δάκρυσι καὶ εὐχαίς).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

Cameron, *The Last Pagans* 112–116.

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 θώραξι καὶ ἀσπίσι, μηδὲ ἐν σώμασιν ἀναριθμήτοις, 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 oratione 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

*fidant 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
corporis.*

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).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,⁵⁵ the discourse often prefers to have them surrender, becoming pacified or even united with the victors.⁵⁶ This rhetoric is especially prominent in discussions of Theodosius’ victory over Maximus, which, according to various Christian historians was quite bloodless⁵⁷ 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,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:⁵⁹

multa utique, sicut omnes recognoscimus, Theodosium filiumque eius Honorium usque ad nunc et externa bella et ciuilia consecuta sunt, et tamen omnia paene usque in hodiernum diem et quidem cum fructu simplicis sanctaeque uictoriae uel nullo uel minimo sanguine quieuerunt.

⁵⁴ F. Heim, “Le thème de la ‘victoire sans combat’ chez Ambroise,” in Y.-M Duval (ed.), *Ambroise de Milan* (Paris 1974) 267–281. On the same theme see Cameron, *The Last Pagans* 97–98, and Wynn, *Augustine* 74–86.

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

⁵⁶ See section (c) below.

⁵⁷ E.g. Thdt. *HE* 5.15 ἀναίματόι; Oros. 7.35.7 *formidulosissimum bellum sine sanguine*; see also Soc. *HE* 5.14.1.

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

⁵⁹ Oros. 7.35.9; transl. R. Deferrari, *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 θοῦρον ἐκούφισεν, οὐ ξίφος ὄμφ, / 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,⁶⁰ 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: ὀλίγω δ' ἐνὶ δέρματι νεβρῶν / ἀρραγέες γλωχῖνες ἐδοχμώθησαν 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

⁶⁰ E.g. 17.15–16, καὶ στρατιῆς ἀσίδηρον ἄναξ ὄπλισσεν ἐνυῶ, / οὐ ξίφος, οὐ μελίην θανατηφόρον; 22.160, οὐ γυμνὸν ἔχων ξίφος, οὐ δόρυ πάλλων.

cuts through an enemy's strong armor and flesh in a single motion (σὺν βριαρῶ θώρηκι μέσον κενεῶνα χαράσσων, 17.148). Even musical instruments are enough to kill or subdue vast numbers of Indians (17.343–345):

καὶ γυμνῇ παλάμῃ σακέων δίχα, νόσφι σιδήρου,
 Βάκχῃ ρόπτρα τίνασσε, καὶ ἤριπεν ἀσπιδιώτης·
 τύμπανα δ' ἔσμαράγησε, καὶ ὠρχήσαντο 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.⁶¹ But, as with the *θημᾶχος* 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.⁶² Even more striking is the phrase Nonnus uses in describing this victory, when he triumphantly calls it a "bloodless battle" (ἀναιμάκτῳ δῆιστῆτι, 15.123). The battle may have been fought by and for a 'pagan' god, but the nar-

⁶¹ Eur. *Bacch.* 762–765, 798–799.

⁶² *Par. Jo.* 2.35–38. For the parallels see J. Golega, *Studien über die Evangeliendichtung 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' presentation 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,⁶³ and this was especially so in late-antique imperial discourse. Images of the emperor receiving supplicating barbarians are common in imperial iconography.⁶⁴ Menander Rhetor teaches that royal encomia should include some mention of the emperor's forbearance towards the conquered as evidence of his *φιλανθρωπία*,⁶⁵ and this advice is put into practice in various extant panegyrics.⁶⁶ 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,⁶⁷ 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 φιλανθρωπία τὰς πράξεις ἀνῆκε συγχωρήσας τὸ λείψανον τοῦ γένους σώζεσθαι, ἅμα μὲν ἵνα μνημεῖον τοῦ πάθους τοῦ γεγονότος σώζηται τὸ λειπόμενον, ἅμα δὲ ἵνα καὶ τὴν φιλανθρωπίαν ἐνδείξηται (375.1–4).

⁶⁶ E.g. *Lib. Or.* 59.85, *Procop. Gaz. Pan.* 10.

⁶⁷ *Themist.* 10.132a, and 34.25. For a similar sentiment see *Julian Or.* 2.37.33–37.

enemies.⁶⁸

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,⁶⁹ 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.⁷⁰ Accordingly, emperors wanted to be seen as reluctant to shed blood:⁷¹ 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;⁷² and he was unwilling to execute the captured usurpers Maximus and Eugenius.⁷³

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 Panegyric Topos and Moral Concern,” in G. Partoens et al. (eds.), *Virtutis Imago: 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), Morrheus (whom he wounds but never kills, 39.354–356), and Deriades (whom he merely scratches with his thyrsus, ἀκρότατον χρόα μόνον 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.⁷⁴ 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:⁷⁵

οὕτω μὲν δὴ βασιλεὺς ἄγειν ἑαυτὸν τε καὶ τὸν αὐτοῦ στρατὸν ἐν ταῖς τῶν πολέμων παρατάξεσι καὶ πάλαι πρότερον εἰώθει, τὸν ἑαυτοῦ θεὸν πρὸ τῆς ψυχῆς ἀεὶ τιθέμενος καὶ πάντα ταῖς αὐτοῦ βουλαῖς πράττειν διανοούμενος ἐν εὐλαβείᾳ τε τιθέμενος τὸν τῶν πολλῶν θάνατον. ἔνθεν οὐ μᾶλλον τῆς τῶν οἰκειῶν ἢ τῶν ἐχθρῶν προὔνοει σωτηρίας, διὸ καὶ κρατήσασιν ἐν μάχῃ ταῖς οἰκειοῖς τῶν ἀλόντων φειδῶ ποιεῖσθαι παρήνει 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.⁷⁶ 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).

⁷⁴ E.g. Soc. *HE* 7.22, Sozom. *HE* praef.1.16. See Gardiner, in *Theodosius II* 248–254.

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 virtue⁷⁷ and serves to strengthen the empire, civilizing and improving dangerous barbarian peoples.⁷⁸ Although Themistius is not a Christian, his orations are generally considered to reflect official imperial ideology,⁷⁹ and the language he uses often draws on, or is at least concordant with, Christian thinking.⁸⁰ Choosing to better those conquered rather than to slaughter them, he says at one point, is a more pious kind of victory (34.23): *τοιαῦται γὰρ αἱ νῖκαι τῆς εὐσεβείας, οὐκ ἀνελεῖν, ἀλλὰ βελτίω ποιῆσαι τὸν ἡττημένον*. This rhetoric correlates nicely with the kind of benevolent triumphalism characteristic of Christian imperial thinking at the time, as discussed above:⁸¹ the Christian emperor conquers as bloodlessly as possible, and so increases the scope of the Christian empire, teaching all

⁷⁷ E.g. 10.133b, 34.23.

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

⁷⁹ See e.g. P. Heather and J. Matthews, *The Goths in the Fourth Century* (Liverpool 1991) 15, where he is called "a publicist for successive imperial regimes." For a contrary view see L. Daly, "The Mandarin and the Barbarian: The Response of Themistius to the Gothic Challenge," *Historia* 21 (1972) 351–379, and J. Vanderspoel, *Themistius and the Imperial Court* (Ann Arbor 1995).

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 χειροῦται*, 16.207c) according to the will of God.

nations about his religion.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 (ἀντιβίους δ' ὄκτειρε θεός, 14.411), a characteristic rather foreign to the Dionysus of classical literature, but central to the characterization of Christ.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):

κύμβαλα δ' ἐκροτάλιζε, καὶ ἀνχένα κάμψε Λυαίῳ
Ἴνδὸς ἀνὴρ ἰκέτης.

[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 ζώγησαν ἀπὸ πτολέμοιο 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 *Iliad* are uniformly rejected.⁸⁴ In having his combatants accept supplication, then, Nonnus is departing from the Homeric model, a

⁸² See also August. *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.

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

⁸⁴ For discussion see F. Naiden, *Ancient Supplication* (Oxford 2006) 135–136. In the *Odyssey*, by contrast, a suppliant in battle is accepted (*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 thyrsus, 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.⁸⁵ 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.⁸⁶ 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 conquered 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 (ἀρχένα κάμψε and ἀρχένα 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 (ἀρχένα 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.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.⁸⁸ In addition to its miraculous efficacy, the fawnskin is symbolically important: the preference for fawnskin and thyrsus

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, *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 *Selected Papers on Late Antiquity* (Bari 2000 [1994]) 93–108.

⁸⁸ P. G. Maxwell-Stuart, "Dionysus and the Fawnskin," *CQ* 21 (1971) 437–439.

over breastplate and spear seems to be central to Dionysus' program,⁸⁹ 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·
καὶ Βρομίῳ γόνυ δοῦλον ὑποκλίνων μετὰ νίκην
Ἴνδὸς ἄναξ ῥίψειεν ἐδὸν θώρηκα θυέλλαις,
κρείσسونι λαχνηέντι δέμας θώρηκι 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,⁹⁰ while to wear armor and wield weapons is to oppose him and his ways.⁹¹

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.⁹² 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 (ἔνδυσε φόνῳ πεπαλαγμένον Ἴνδῶν / 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.⁹³ 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):

πολλοὶ δ' ἐν προχοῇσιν ἀπορρίψαντες ἀκωκὴν
 ἱκεσίην ἀνέφαινον ἀτευχέες, ὃς μὲν ἐπ' ὄχθης,
 ὃς δὲ παρὰ ψαμάθοις τετανυσμένος, ὃς δ' ἐπὶ γαίῃ

⁹³ Deriades derides him for it at 39.61, and it protects him at 48.75–76.

ὄρθιος ὀκλάζων, κυρτούμενον ἀχένα κάμπτων·
 ἀλλὰ λιτὰς ἀπέειπεν ἄνω νεύοντι προσώπῳ
 Αἰακὸς ἀντιβίοισιν ἀκαμπέα μῆνιν ἀέξων·

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 (ἀχένα κάμπτων 22.376, ἀχένα 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 μῶθου Διόνυσος ἐοὺς ἀνέκοψε μαχητάς,
 εἰ μὴ πάντας ἔπεφνεν ἐῶ ταμεσίχροϊ θύρσῳ...

Dionysus would not have stopped his warriors from fighting if he had not slain all [the Indians] with his wounding thyrsus...

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

⁹⁴ Shorrock, *The Challenge of Epic* 165: “The ‘crossing of the Hydaspes’

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 *aristeiai* 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 μῆνιν ἀέξων*, 22.378). We are also told, significantly, that Aeacus slays more than one Lycaon (*οὐχ ἓνα 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" (*ἡμιτέλεστον*, 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

functions as a suggestive symbol of Nonnus' own poetic crossing into the territory of epic. In the first place the crossing [is] directly modelled on Achilles' fight with the river Scamander in *Iliad* 21."⁹⁸

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' αἶματι θώρηξ*) and Hector's description of himself at 6.268 as *αἶματι καὶ λύθρω πεπалаγμένον* (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):

“ἀλκήμεναι Διόνυσε, τεὸς γενέτης σε κελεύει
εὐσεβείης ἀδίδακτον ἀϊστῶσαι 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.⁹⁹ 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;¹⁰⁰ 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.¹⁰¹

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

⁹⁹ Vian, *Les Dionysiaques* III 110. In his reading, the use of the verb ἀἴστωσαι is an "inexactitude."

¹⁰⁰ 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).

¹⁰¹ Shorrock, *The Challenge of Epic* 60.

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.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.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.¹⁰⁴

¹⁰² On the disturbing and problematic side of Dionysus' nominally peaceful mission, see R. Newbold, "Gifts and Hospitality in Nonnus' *Dionysiaca*," *CB* 77 (2001) 169–185, and in *The Paraphrase* 259–270.

¹⁰³ E.g. at *Dion.* 27.207–220 and 35.353–391.

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

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,¹⁰⁵ 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)¹⁰⁶ about the ways in which contemporary wars were justified and celebrated.¹⁰⁷

July, 2016

Lilly Fellows Program
Valparaiso University
nicholas.kauffman@valpo.edu

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 Icarus episode of the *Dionysiaca* prompt dialogue about contested and controversial issues, using mythological distance for safety.

¹⁰⁷ I am grateful to Silvia Montiglio and to the editor and anonymous referee at *GRBS* for their incisive comments on an earlier version of this paper.