

The God and the King: Images of Alexander in Nonnos' *Dionysiaca*

In this paper I will show that the various biographies of Alexander are paralleled in Nonnos' epic of Dionysos, the *Dionysiaca*. While it is commonly accepted that Alexander, at times, modeled himself on Dionysos (Bosworth (1994), 147), the idea that Nonnos' narrative about Dionysos was, in part, inspired by stories about Alexander has only been suggested (Shorrock 2011, 121) but not developed. Although stylistically dissimilar from the prose written about Alexander, I seek to show that Nonnos, the author of the Dionysos epic, drew heavy inspiration from the life of Alexander.

I accomplish this with comparative textual analysis between the *Dionysiaca* and extant Greek biographies of Alexander, as well as a few other ancient sources. While stylistically and linguistically these works are quite different, the *Dionysiaca* contains episodes in the life of Dionysos which do not occur in any other surviving source about the god. These episodes have strong analogies to stories about Alexander the Great, which have been noted but left largely unexamined (Harries 1994, 64). Specifically, I focus on comparing episodes such as Zeus' impregnation of Olympias (Plut. *Alex.* 2.1-3.1) and Persephone (Nonn. *D.* 6), Alexander's and Dionysos' wrath against Thebes (Ps.-Callisth. 1.46 and Nonn. *D.* 44-46), their battles at the Hydaspes river (Arr. *Anab.* 5.9ff, Curt 8. 13-14. Plut. *Alex.* 60, Diod. 17.87-89 and Nonn. *D.* 22-24) and their subsequent establishment of cult and administration (Shorrock 2001, 90).

Furthermore, I demonstrate that Nonnos' understanding of geography and various eastern ethnic groups is heavily contingent upon the geography and ethnography described in the accounts of Alexander's conquests. I do this by tracking the occurrence of place and people names from book 26 of the *Dionysiaca*, in works of geography and history such as those of Strabo, Arrian, Plutarch, and others. Many of the works which mention places in India are

describing Alexander's conquest there.

Finally, I show that, thematically, Nonnos contrived his story by attributing some of the same characteristics and aspirations to Dionysos that were attributed to Alexander. Both Nonnus' Dionysus and Alexander have similar successes as generals, a certain fluidity of character, and a struggle towards godhood. Nonnos' close mirroring of Alexander's character, creates a new Dionysos, who goes beyond his classical role and into that of a pseudo-historical conqueror.

Bibliography

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