Foreword

Nonnus of Panopolis, a Greek poet from late antique Egypt who probably lived and worked in the cosmopolitan city of Alexandria in the fifth century AD, is a mysterious figure. Considering the lack of biographical details, scholars have focused their research on Nonnus’ poetic output, which is a much more gratifying field of study than his biography (which remains difficult to reconstruct). The poet’s legacy is composed of two works only, but both may prove very interesting to contemporary readers for a number of reasons. The first poem, the *Dionysiaca*, is the longest of all ancient epics to have survived to this day. As its title makes evident, Nonnus dedicated it to Dionysus, the Greek god of wine, mysteries and ritual ecstasy. Written in forty-eight books and only slightly shorter than the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* put together, the *Dionysiaca* forms a colourful mosaic of styles, literary references and, often considerably modified, mythological motifs. It is worth mentioning that, as a closer reading reveals, the numerous scenes of the poem refer directly to models derived from Christian literature. In this way, what at first glance might seem to be a companion to the classical Dionysiac mythology proves to be a much more complex work, one that escapes easy categorisation.

The other poem, the *Paraphrase of the Gospel of Saint John*, is an epic rendering of the deeds of Jesus Christ described in the Fourth Gospel. The simple, meditative language of John gives way to heroic hexameter rhythm and is endowed with Homeric aplomb, while the message of the Gospel, although unchanged, receives an additional dimension. This is especially noticeable in Nonnus’ use of poetic imagery, often informed by Greek mythology, ambiguous terminology and the interpretative clues embedded in the poem that result from a deep understanding of the Bible and the writings of the Church Fathers.

At first glance, the stark difference in subject matter may seem to set Nonnus’ poems apart from each other to the point of contradiction. This, together with the lack of biographical information, has given rise to numerous, often very peculiar conjectures regarding the Panopolitan poet. His lively and intriguingly puzzling interest in Jesus and Dionysus has provoked scholars to see Nonnus’ poetry in the light of the purported twists and turns of his life: some have suggested that he had been a recalcitrant pagan who ultimately converted to Christianity, whereas others, contrarily, presumed that he was first a Christian but later apostatised, and still others held that he had regarded pagan and Christian beliefs as a mutually intertwined, syncretic whole. Views on the literary quality of his epic poems were also exceedingly disparate: they were decried as decadent, bloated, chaotic and soporific, but also, especially in recent
decades, recognised for their seductively innovative and original characteristics
that draw the reader into a whirl of highly erudite allusions.

The fragmentary and conjectural image that emerges from research on Non-
nus’ biography gave rise to a number of fictional, pseudo-biographical writings.\footnote{This paragraph is based on Hernández de la Fuente, 2018. David Hernández de la Fuente him-
self authored a short story on the discovery of the *Dionysiaca* by Count de Marcellus: *La confe-
sión del Conde de Marcellus* in Cano Cuenca, Hernández de la Fuente, and Martínez García 2006,
103–139.} Among them, we find both deftly fabricated forgeries and genuine literary works
that emerged in response to questions that vexed those who were especially fond
of Nonnus’ poetry. In the nineteenth century, the biography of Nonnus caught
the attention of a highly skilled forger, Konstantinos Simonides. Having counter-
feited a papyrus that described Nonnus as a pagan poet who received baptism
and dedicated himself to Christian literature, he tried to excite the curiosity of
the first translator of Nonnus’ poetry into a modern language, the French Count
de Marcellus. An analogous portrayal of the poet’s life is found in the short story
*The Poet of Panopolis* by Simonides’ contemporary, Richard Garret. In it, the
pagan Nonnus, unsatisfied with the poor reception of the *Dionysiaca*, decides to
convert and amaze Christian readers with his *Paraphrase*. He also agrees to be-
come a candidate for episcopacy in his hometown of Panopolis, incurring the
wrath of the god Apollo, who, as a punishment, orders the repentant poet to pub-
lish the *Paraphrase*, which dooms him to lingering for perpetuity as an unsolv-
able enigma in the eyes of future generations. Nonnus is also the main character
in the novel *Im Garten Klaudias* by the twentieth-century scholar Margarete
Riemschneider. The poet goes here by the name of Ammonios, and it is only later
that he is nicknamed Nonnus. Having finished his studies in Alexandria, Ammo-
nios travels widely across the eastern parts of the Roman Empire, which allows
him to witness historic events and collaborate with such important personalities
of his day as Gregory of Nazianzus and Stilicho. Towards the end of his turbulent
life, the poet, still as a pagan, finds refuge in the Egyptian monastery of Koptos,
where over time he converts to Christianity, adopts the name of Nonnus and
writes the *Paraphrase*.

It is readily noticeable that these reconstructions of Nonnus’ life have
emerged from fascination not only with his oeuvre, but also with the world of
Late Antiquity. That historical period, which started to be thoroughly studied
only relatively recently, was long considered a period of the gradual decline of
ancient civilization and culture, one that lacked originality when compared
with earlier centuries. Today, however, it reveals itself ever more manifestly not
as a world of despondent nostalgia for the glory of the classical past, but as one
that boldly and consciously drew from earlier traditions and endowed them with new dimensions. It was a world where two great traditions, classical and Judaeo-Christian, were becoming inextricably intertwined, creating an entirely new quality. The elements that, on an equal footing, constituted the culture of Late Antiquity included Homeric epics and the Bible, mythological figures and Christian saints, Dionysus and Jesus. Despite the gradual Christianization of the Roman Empire, the classical heritage was certainly not disparaged; on the contrary, it was subject to reinterpretation and thrived as an integral part of everyday life. Without considering this context, one cannot fully understand Nonnus’ poetry.

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