Reconstructing Nonnos: a Pagan Writer and a Christian Bishop?

The 4th-5th centuries AD present us with two presumably distinct figures named Nonnos: an author and a sainted bishop. Very little information about either of these individuals has been preserved and what we do have is clouded by inconsistencies and confusing chronologies. Scholarship is divided as to whether these individuals are mutually exclusive or one and the same (Sherry 1996, Shorrock 2011). This paper suggests that the evidence is strong enough to support a syncretic view of these figures, exploring and ultimately arguing that they were the same man.

The lynchpin in this argument rests with the author, Nonnos of Panopolis, and a question of the veracity of his authorship. The two works linked to his name are the pagan epic, the Dionysiaca, and a paraphrase of the Gospel of John, the Metabole; while the former is undisputedly his, the latter is sometimes viewed as a cento of a later date (Whitby 2007). This inquiry will use textual analysis of the Metabole to show that this author held a deep understanding of both paganism and Christianity and that its language suggests it being by the same author as the Dionysiaca (De Stefani 2002, Shorrock 2011). Similarly, this paper will analyze select episodes of the Dionysiaca which reveal both a prevalence of Christian themes as well as a deep knowledge of Syria, where St. Nonnos served as bishop and where paganism persisted through this period (Spanoudakis 2007, Liebeschuetz 1996).

Within this analysis, the information will be taken and synced to the available biographical sources on both figures (including scholia and early Church records) in order to establish a potential chronology and to demonstrate that the given information about their lives is too similar to be coincidental (Lind 1934, Woods 1993).
Bibliography


