Io as Isis: A Lycophronean Myth in Nonnus

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Abstract: This article aims to examine one of the myths belonging to the first part of Nonnus’ Dionysiaca, i.e., that of Io. Starting from the philological analysis of the passages dealing with this myth and adopting an intertextual approach, I will argue that the Panopolitan assimilates Io to Isis following Lycophron, one of the authors employed as a model in his poem. Finally, I will also explain the meaning of this choice inside Nonnus’ work, taking into account its historical context. Nonnus wants to emphasize the role of Dionysus’ lineage in the civilization process, giving it an historical relevance. Therefore, the allusion to Lycophron assimilates Cadmus (Dionysus’ grandfather) to Alexander the Great, who is celebrated as a peacemaker in the Alexandra. Furthermore, Cadmus and his offspring can be connected to the Romans, who, at the time of Nonnus, played the same role in the rising Byzantine empire.

Keywords: Nonnus; Dionysiaca; Lycophron; Alexandra; Io; Isis; Intertextuality

1. Introduction

This article aims to examine one of the myths belonging to the first part of Nonnus’ Dionysiaca, i.e., that of Io. The Dionysiaca is a monumental epic-mythological poem mainly dealing with the story of the god Dionysus, starting from his ancestors, passing through his own deeds—including his victory over the impious Indians—until arriving to his apotheosis. It is clear that the poet wants to emphasize the importance of Dionysus’ coming into the world, with his promise of salvation, symbolized by the wine he gives to humankind. About Nonnus we know very little. This is not the place to discuss the complex issue regarding him and his work1. Today it is generally accepted that he was from Panopolis in Egypt, lived in the mid-fifth century CE and composed, likely in Alexandria, another poem beside the Dionysiaca: the Paraphrase of Saint John’s Gospel. This Christian work, a poetic version of Saint John’s Gospel, has been shown to have many similarities with the Dionysiaca: for example, Christ and Dionysus are represented in an analogous manner, as they both are saviors. Nonnus can thus be considered a key author of late antiquity, because he offers an example of the typically late antique syncretism, i.e., the synthesis of “pagan”, or, better, classical, and Christian elements (Shorrock 2011).

This contribution will focus on the passages of the Dionysiaca dealing with the myth of Io, analyzing them from a philological point of view. In a broad perspective, this myth is an episode in the conflict between Europe and Asia, which we can find, primarily, in Herodotus (1, 2, 1), where Io’s abduction by the Phoenicians, the origin of the conflict, comes before Europa’s abduction, as Europa is abducted in revenge for Io’s abduction. In the Dionysiaca it is linked with the origin of Dionysus’ lineage and the abductor is Zeus, as we will see.

I will argue that the Panopolitan assimilates, i.e., likens, Io to Isis following Lycophron, one of the authors employed as a model in his poem2 and I will try to explain the meaning of this choice inside Nonnus’ work, taking into account its historical context.
I will, thus, follow the intertextual method, which involves three steps: (1) identification of the presences of the text employed as a model (what are the presences); (2) description of the presences (how they present themselves in the text that is to be analyzed); (3) interpretation of the presences (what is their function in the text that is to be analyzed) (Hebel 1989, p. 109). I clarify right away that the presences I will take into consideration are literary allusions. Literary allusion is an intertextual category which consists of an implicit reference to the model, that, although considerably varied, can be recognized by the educated reader thanks to a series of indicators, as words or expressions (Pasquali 1968, pp. 275–82).

This methodology is significant insofar as it provides new keys to interpret a text. This is especially true for Nonnus, whose work cannot be understood without an accurate study and analysis of its sources. As a matter of fact, the poet conceives his Dionysiaca as a summa of the classical culture, in a transitional age, as late antiquity can be considered. He thus incorporates in his poem the authors of the Greek literary past that he considers most significant for every genre, in order to create something totally new, which, although based on the tradition, goes beyond it, and is characterized by poikilia, i.e., variety.

The study of the sources of the Dionysiaca started approximately in the mid-twentieth century, with the works of Stegemann 1930, dealing with the astrological sources of the poem, and D’Ippolito 1964, dealing with the relationship between the poem and Ovid. These works have the merit of trying to interpret Nonnus’ poem in its historical context, without relying on classical criteria that are definitely anachronistic for late antique literature. So, research on the sources has proved to be fundamental for the appreciation of the Dionysiaca. The majority of the contributions in this field have focused especially on Homer and the most famous Hellenistic poets (Callimachus, Theocritus and Apollonius), the most important models employed by the Panopolitan. Nonetheless, more in-depth studies regarding Hellenistic authors who are less famous, such as Lycophron, are needed.

2. Demonstration

The first Nonnian reference to the myth of Io can be traced in the third book of the Dionysiaca, where Cadmus, Dionysus’ grandfather, is received at Electra’s palace. In an atmosphere filled with music, he is offered a rich lunch, but he does not eat much (vv. 226–42). After lunch, Cadmus (finely described as satiated by the aulos rather than by the food), questioned by the queen about his lineage, answers with a long speech, in which he narrates its origins starting from Io, Inachus’ daughter. Nonnus connects the abduction of the maiden by Zeus to her father’s refusal to marry her to the god, due to his absolute devotion to Hera (vv. 264–67). The element on which I will focus here is Io’s assimilation to the Egyptian goddess Isis (vv. 279–83):

ήλυθεν εἰς Αἴγυπτον, ὅπῃ βοέην μετὰ μορφήν
daimonīs ἱνδαλμα μεταλάξασα κεραίης
280
ἔσκεθεν θεὰ φερέκαρπος ἀναπτομένου δὲ καρποῦ
Aἰγυπτίης Δήμητρος, ἐμῆς κεραελκέος Ἰοῦς,
evόδμοις ὀμόφοιτος ἐλίσσεται ἀτμὸς ἀήταις.

(Chuvin 1976)

“She came as far as Aigyptos, where after her cow’s form, after putting off the horned image ordained by heaven, she became a goddess of fruitful crops; when the fruit starts up, the fruit of Egyptian Demeter my stronghorned Io, scented vapour is carried around by the fragrant breezes”.

(Rouse 1940)
These verses hint at a sacrifice in honor of “the goddess of fruitful crops”, the “Egyptian Demeter”, into which Io turns when she arrives to Egypt (in order to give birth to Epaphus: cf. vv. 284–86). This goddess is clearly Isis, although Nonnus does not name her, as she is goddess of fertility too (Vian 1976, p. 146; Gigli Piccardi 1998b, p. 163; 2003, pp. 308–9). The same assimilation Io–Isis can be traced in Lycophron, *Alexandra* 1291–1295, albeit in a totally different context:

όλοιντο ναυταὶ πρῶτα Καρνῖται κῦνες,
οἶ τὴν βοῶπιν ταυροτάρθενον κόρην
Λέρνης ἀνημεῖσαντο, φορτηγοὶ λύκοι,
πλάτιν πορεῦσαι κῆρα Μεμφίτῃ πρόμῳ,
ἐχθρὰς δὲ πυρσὸν ἠπείροις διπλαῖς.

1295

“First of all, perish the Karnitan sailor-dogs!
They abducted the ox-eyed bull-maiden, the virgin,
from Lerna, merchant-wolves that they were,
to lead her off as a ruinous wife for the Memphian lord:
they lifted up a torch of enmity for the two continents”.

1295 (Hornblower 2015)

The *Alexandra* is basically a poetic monologue by Cassandra, Priam’s daughter, in which she predicts the war of Troy and its consequences. The *Suda* attributes it to Lycophron the Chalcidian, the poet and grammarian who was active at the court of Ptolemaeus II (third century BCE), even if some scholars do not agree on this attribution: since the final part of the poem refers to the Romans in order to celebrate them, they propose to attribute it to another Lycophron, who lived later (but not later than the end of the second century BCE)4. In any case, the *Alexandra* can be ascribed to the Hellenistic age.

The passage above opens the section in which Cassandra gives an answer to the question she asks herself some verses earlier, i.e., what caused the long conflict between Europe and Asia (vv. 1283–1290). This war started with Io’s abduction by the Phoenicians, who are defined with two periphrases belonging to Lycophron’s “bestiary”5 (Καρνῖται κῦνες, “Karnitan dogs”, and φορτηγοὶ λύκοι, “merchant-wolves”). They led the maiden from Lerna (synecdoche for Argos) to Memphis, in Egypt, in order to marry her to the city’s sovereign.

So Lycophron, in the wake of Herodotus, follows, as for Europa6, the rationalistic version of the myth: indeed, the abductors are mortals. Nonetheless, there are also traces of the “traditional” version of the myth, at v. 1292, where the epithet ταυροτάρθενον (harpax) has raised problems: indeed, it is referred to Io even if Io is a cow (and not a bull). We know that Io was abducted by Zeus and turned into a cow in order to avoid Hera’s jealousy, and, as Aeschylus recounts7, the god approached her in the form of a bull. Therefore, in my opinion it is perfectly plausible, according to this version8, that the above-mentioned epithet alludes to the bull-Zeus and is thus to be intended as “bull’s maid” (Griffiths 1986, pp. 472–73)9. Anyway, the other epithet attributed to Io, βοῶπιν, is understandable and hints at the most common version of the myth. Now, the identification of Io with Isis is linked to these epithets and to the myth they refer to. The first aspect to be taken into account is drawn from v. 1294, where Lycophron narrates that Io is married to Memphis’ sovereign, who, according to the scholia, is no doubt Osiris, Isis’ groom10. As to the epithet ταυροτάρθενον, if understood as explained above, it could hint also at Epaphus, generated by Io and assimilated to the Egyptian bull Apis, generated by Isis (Hdt. 2, 153), so it could support the identification of the maiden with the Egyptian goddess. Besides, this identification is supported by scholars who provide a different interpretation of the epithet: Stephanie West (1984, p. 153), for example, considers it an allusion to the procreation of Harpocrates by Isis and this element would act as a link between Isis and Io.
addition, Herodotus, who is Lycophron’s main source, compares them in 2, 41, 2, pointing out that both are represented with horns:

τὸ γὰρ τῆς Ἴσιος ἄγαλμα ἐὸν γυναικήιον βούκερων ἐστι κατά περ Ἕλληνες τὴν Ἰοῦν γράφουσι, καὶ τὰς βοῦς τὰς θηλέας Αἰγύπτιοι πάντες ὁμοίως σέβονται προβάτων πάντων μᾶλιστα μακρῷ. (Wilson 2015)

“The statue of this goddess has the form of a woman but with horns like a cow, resembling thus the Greek representation of Io; and the Egyptians, one and all, venerate cows much more highly than any other animal”. (Rawlinson 1880)

Instead, the element of the marriage, introduced by the word πλᾶτιν at v. 1294, as it has been noted (West 1984, pp. 151–52), does not come from Herodotus and it is very difficult to define its source. On the ground that the Lycophronian version of the myth is rationalistic, some have thought that the groom could be a mortal, for example Telegonus, the Egyptian king mentioned by Apollodorus 2, 1, 3. However, as Griffiths (1986, p. 474) observes, his identification with Osiris—suggested also by the scholia—would create a connection with Isis and offer a correspondence with the Greek myth, to which Lycophron alludes some verses before: according to this myth, it is a god (Zeus) who sleeps with Io. The marriage could thus be interpreted as a hint at Isis, Osiris’ bride, but also at the Greek myth of Zeus and Io. Therefore, I think that it is possible to detect an interweaving of elements of the Egyptian and Greek myth.

I would also like to highlight that, in my opinion, the problem of the identification of the groom is independent from that of the word attributed to Io as a bride, i.e., κῆρα at v. 1294. This word could simply allude to the fact that she is considered the origin of the conflict between Europe and Asia (Hornblower 2015, p. 456): indeed, this adjective, connected with the term Κήρ, referring to the goddess of death or negative fate, hints at a broader destiny (that of the two continents), rather than at the individual destiny of Isis’ groom (West 1984, p. 152), whoever he is.

As to the comparison with the Nonnian passage, Isis is not named because, as Gigli Piccardi 1998b, p. 163 underlines, the poet wants to assign to Dionysus’ family, and not to Egyptian gods, the main contributions to the development of civilization; as the scholar explains, this is also the reason for the other two silent allusions to the Egyptian goddess in the Nonnian poem.

The first one, the most interesting for our purposes, can be traced in Dionysiaca 31, 37–40, where Hera tries to persuade Persephone to drive Dionysus mad, unleashing the Erinyes on him, so as to depart him from the Indian war. The queen of gods points out that in Egypt the celebration of Io has replaced that of Demeter, Persephone’s mother:

παρὰ σταχυώδει Νείλω
ἀντὶ τεῖς Δήμητρος αμαλλοτόκοι τεκούσης
ἄλλη κώμον ἁγουσόν, νόθη δὲ τις ὀμπνια Δηώ
ταυροφυῆς κερόεσσα φατίζεται Ἰναχίς Ἰω.

40 (Vian 1997)

“Beside the Nile with his harvests they hold festival for another, instead of your sheafbearing mother Demeter; they tell of a spurious bountiful Deo, bullbred, horned, Inachos’ daughter Io”.

(Rouse 1940)

In this passage the identification of Demeter with Io-Isis becomes an opposition, providing a character with a reason to impede the protagonist (and so to expand the narration), while in the passage from the third book it is inserted in the speech of an ancestor of the protagonist. So, Nonnus employs, as usual, the same motive for opposite purposes. But I would like to focus on another aspect. At v. 40 we discover, late as usual in the poet, the identity of the false Demeter, who has replaced the real one: it is Io, Inachus’ daughter, who is defined as “bullbred” and “horned”. I would like to highlight that the first epithet, ταυροφυῆς, can be compared with ταυροπάρθενον at v. 1292 of Lycophron’s passage: the compound, which can be found only in Nonnus, is similar and the common element,
i.e., the bull, could indicate that the silent assimilation Io-Isis comes from the Hellenistic poet\textsuperscript{16}. As to the problems of translation raised by the Lycophronean epithet, perhaps the Panopolitan interpreted it as “with a bovine appearance”\textsuperscript{17} and so decided to replace it with the term ταυροφυής, whose meaning is clearer\textsuperscript{18}: it could thus be a case of interpretatio, a procedure Nonnus very often uses when employing Hellenistic models (Magnolo 2020a). This seems to be confirmed by Dionysiaca 32, 68–70, in which Zeus, seduced by Hera, who wants to distract him in order to take control of the Indian war, tells her that he has never been so burning with desire, not even for Io: this time, in order to define the maiden (here too designated as “Inachus’ daughter”), the poet uses the adjective ταυρῶπις, which means the same as ταυροφυής and is an epithet of Isis in Samothrace\textsuperscript{19}.

The second silent allusion to Isis can be found in Dionysiaca 40, 346–350, but concerns her assimilation only to Demeter and not to Io, so I will not take it into account. I would only like to specify that this implicit assimilation does not contradict that of Io to Isis (Gigli Piccardi 1998b, pp. 163–64), which is here discussed, all the more as it involves, in this passage, a different aspect, i.e., that linked to the sea and not that linked to the harvest. Nonnus in different passages assimilates Isis to different Greek goddesses, depending on the field to which he refers in each case.

Of course, it is important to clarify that Lycophron is not the only one to assimilate Io to Isis. Nonetheless, the first evidence of a real assimilation seems to date back to the Hellenistic age and, more precisely, to be ascribed to Callimachus (West 1984, p. 152), who, in an epigram (Anthologia Graeca 6, 150), writes:

\begin{quote}
Ἰναχίης ἐστηκεν ἐν Ἴσιδος ἡ Θάλεω παῖς
Αἰσχυλὶς Εἰρήνης μητρὸς ὑποσχεσίῃ.
\end{quote}

“In the temple of Isis, the Inachian, stands Aeschylis, Thales’ daughter, as a vow from her mother, Eirene.”\textsuperscript{20}

As it can be seen, Isis is named “Inachian”, a clear reference to Io, Inachus’ daughter. The epigram refers to the votive statue of a maiden, Aeschylis, placed in one of the goddess’ temples. It is not the context to be relevant here (as the myth of Io, to which both Lycophron and Nonnus refer, is not narrated), but, rather, the epithet attributed to Isis, which implies her assimilation to Io and, however, is not employed by Nonnus in reference to the goddess. The same explicit assimilation can be detected in Apollodorus 2, 1, 3\textsuperscript{21} and in Lucian (DDeor. 3). In Lucian’s dialogue, Zeus explains to Hermes that Io has been turned into a cow by Hera and tells him to lead her to Egypt and turn her into Isis: therefore, the author proposes an aitio suggested by the zoomorphic representation of Isis, as the Egyptian goddess is represented as a woman with a cow’s head and horns.

Instead, Lycophron and Nonnus, as already noted, prefer to simply allude to the assimilation. It is true that the reasons for this choice are different: in the case of Lycophron, they depend on the oracular component of the poem, which requires a certain degree of obscurity; in the case of Nonnus, they are narrative\textsuperscript{22}. However, it is also plausible that Nonnus is influenced by his model. Moreover, in both poets the presence of Egypt has not so much space, despite what we could expect from two authors that have a special connection with this country, even if for different reasons\textsuperscript{23}: the fact that we can find the same allusion to the Egyptian culture (the assimilation of Io to Isis) in their work seems to me a further element supporting the hypothesis of a relationship between them. In fact, the parts of the poem in which Nonnus shows an interest for his homeland are the ones pertaining to the so-called “Dionysian pre-history”, that is, to Dionysus’ genealogy (Gigli Piccardi 1998a, pp. 61–62): the passage analyzed belongs to this section. Among other things, the silent reference to Isis leads directly to Dionysus, as Osiris was assimilated to this god, to whom Alexander the Great, in which Ptolemaeus II identified himself, was assimilated. So, through the Egyptian myth, a link between the most important figure of Nonnus’ and Lycophron’s poems (Dionysus and Alexander, respectively) is established. In other words, Lycophron’s work could have been taken into consideration by Nonnus for the
opportunity it offers to establish this link, reminding the reader of the association I have highlighted and giving Dionysus a sort of historical importance.

It is true that the identification between Isis and Io is also common in material culture, but this does not exclude the employment of a literary source, which in Nonnian poetry usually goes hand-in-hand with references to visual arts. In this case, Nonnus could have in mind also the visual representations of Io-Isis, but, in my opinion, the intertextual connections I have traced in the passages under discussion (βοέην cf. βοῶπιν; ταυρῶπις and ταυροφυής cf. ταυροπάρθενον) show his will to refer to the Alexandra.

As to the interweaving of elements of the Egyptian and Greek religion, in Lycophron it appears in line with the Ptolemaic purpose of underlining the common aspects of the two religions for syncretic aims (Gigli Piccardi 1998a, p. 62), in order to overcome the isolation into which the former had fallen. This isolation was no doubt even more marked in Nonnus’ times, but the Panopolitan resumes the syncretic effort, though remaining a “Greek of Egypt” (Chuvin 1991, pp. 277–81).

3. Conclusions

In conclusion, Io’s assimilation to Isis, which can be detected through the erudite Lycophronean allusion, is in line with the complexity of Nonnus’ references to Egypt, which are ideologically important, but always careful to keep the features of the poet’s syncretism blurred. This allusion is significant insofar as it shows, together with other passages of the Dionysiaca hinting at this author (Magnolo 2020b, pp. 133–48; Magnolo 2021a, pp. 403–12; Magnolo 2021b, pp. 199–13; Magnolo forthcoming), one of the aims of the Dionysiaca, i.e., to emphasize the role of Dionysus’ lineage in the civilization process (Magnolo 2021b, pp. 199, 210–11): Cadmus and, then, the god are assimilated to Alexander the Great, who is celebrated as a pacifier in the Alexandra because, being a descendant of the Trojans, redeems them with his triumph. Indeed, Lycophron also helps Nonnus to compare the Indian war, fought and won by Dionysus, with the Trojan war, with which the Alexandra deals, in order to underline the superiority of the first one (Magnolo 2020b, pp. 145–46; and forthcoming): the Indian war is due to religious reasons, i.e., to convert the impious Indians to the Dionysian cult, and not to revenge, as the Trojan war in Cassandra’s view.

So, through the allusion to Lycophron, on the one hand the Indians are implicitly compared with the Greeks as depicted by Cassandra in her monologue, i.e., as impious and evil; on the other, Dionysus and his army are implicitly compared with the Trojans as they are represented by the prophetess: they apparently are the victims, but in Cassandra’s perspective they are the real winners, exactly as Dionysus and his army, since they are finally ransomed by their descendants, i.e., Alexander the Great first, and the Romans after; instead, the Greeks receive unlucky nostoi, since they are punished for their violence, exactly as the Indians in the Dionysiaca.

In this way, Dionysus and his ancestors acquire an historical relevance, in an age like that of Nonnus, in which similar figures, i.e., the “new” Romans in the rising Byzantine empire (Mazza 2010, pp. 145–63), are playing the same role.

This is an interesting case also in a broader perspective, insofar as it shows that the analysis of a literary work has to take into account the other texts on which this work relies and the historical context in which it was composed. Indeed, the author starts from the tradition in order to create something original. Therefore, it is necessary, on the one hand, to study the relationship between the author’s work and its models (with the intertextual method), on the other, to clarify the meaning of the employment of these models (with the reference to the historical context), in order to reach a deep comprehension of the literary work.

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Another famous example of this modus operandi, which consists in taking into account both the visual arts and the literary sources, is the episode of Europa in the third book of the Dionysiaca, on which see (Paschalis 2017, pp. 21–32).
Indeed, in the *Dionysiaca* Dionysus’ civilizing mission is linked to contemporary history as it is put in parallel with the establishment of the Roman order, as we can see in D. 41, 275–398.

This could be an element supporting the placement of the poem in the first Ptolemaic age.

In this respect, (Gigli Piccardi 1998a, p. 63) points out that “l’Egitto, come si è venuto conformando dopo la riforma di Diocleziano, ha perduto molto della sua originalità; è ormai un territorio uniformato al resto dell’Impero, in cui si è verificato inevitabilmente un livellamento di civiltà e in cui l’egizianità è ormai sentita come qualcosa di esotico dagli stessi autoctoni”.

For more detailed conclusions see especially (Magnolo forthcoming).

References


