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An Attempt to Remove the Asia-Europe Opposition

(*The Dionysiaca* by Nonnus of Panopolis)

The main subject of *Dionysiaca* by epic poet Nonnus of Panopolis (5th century AD) is the expedition to India by Dionysus. Before a battle, Zeus urges Bacchus to use his thyrsus to drive out the savage and arrogant race of Indians from Asida¹ to the sea, fight against the son of a river deity – King Deriades, and teach various tribes the sacred dances of the vigil and the purple fruit of the vintage (XIII, 3-7).² Zeus predicts that Dionysus will find his place close to Zeus on Olympus only after he defeats Indians. Dionysus assembles an army of immortals and mortals and goes for a battle. On his way to India, he goes across Phrygia, Bithynia, the Caucasus, Assyria, Arabia, and the Sea of Eritrea. After Bacchus reaches India, defeats Indians, and teaches them the sacred dances of the vigil and the purple fruit of the vintage, he goes back. He reaches his final destination – Olympus – via Arabia, Phoenicia, the Caucasus, Phrygia, different Greek cities, and is elevated to gods on Olympus.

Relying on the text, let us follow Bacchus, who goes to fight in India. The god of wine receives a warm welcome in Phrygia and Ascania. As is known, Phrygia was situated in the central part of Asia Minor and Ascania was a place in Bithynia, Asia Minor. Dionysius teaches locals the traditions and rules of his cult and vine-growing (XIV, 269-284). The first

¹ The same as Asia.

² Quoting the text of Nonnus, we rely on the following editions: Nonni Panopolitani, *Dionysiaca*, Recensuit A. Koechly, Lipsiae 1857. We also take into account translations: Нонн Панополиганский, *Деяния Диониса*, Перевод Ю. А. Голубца, Санкт-Петербург 1997; Nonnus, *Dionysiaca*, with an English translation by W. H. D. Rouse, Cambridge, Harvard University Press 1940-1942.

battle also takes place near the Astacid Lake in Asia Minor (XIV, 295-385). Describing the battle, Nonnus calls the rivals of Dionysus Indians, which probably means that Nonnus uses the word "Indian" as a metaphor denoting "Asian".

Heading from Phrygia to the east, Dionysus goes across the Caucasus, an area we will return to later. Travelling in Asia, Bacchus reaches the country of Alybes, a tribe residing in Asia Minor. Presumably, Strabo referred to them as Chalybes and Homer as Halyzones. Dionysus meets here a shepherd, Brongus, who lives in the cliffs. The god has him taste wine and teaches him how to cultivate vine (XVII, 1-97).

After that, Dionysus goes to Assyria. Assyrian King Staphylus invites the god to his palace. In response to the king's hospitality, Dionysus names grape bunches after Staphylus,³ drunkenness after Staphylus' wife Methe,⁴ and grapes after his son Botrys⁵ (XIX, 43-58).

Dionysus goes from Assyria to the Arabian city of Nysa ruled by Lycurgus, who persecutes Dionysus and frightened Bacchus disappears in the Eritrean Sea (XX, 353). This is like the scene described in Homer's *Iliad*, where Dionysus chased by Lycurgus also jumps into the sea (VI, 133-138). Both in *Dionysiaca* and with Homer, this passage bears the trace of the old scenario of initiation. It is possible that Dionysus' disappearance in the waves of the sea is a sign of ritual death.⁶

As Dionysus approaches India's borders, he sends a messenger to Indian king Deriades, who refuses to accept Dionysus' gifts, because he does not worship gods on Olympus (XXI, 241-273) and Bacchus has to conquer India with his thyrsus. The decisive battle takes place near the Hydaspes river. In addition to being a tributary of the Indus from the east in *Dionysiaca*, Hydaspes is also the river god, the son of Electra and Thaumatas, and the father of Deriades. Nonnus also regards it as the supreme god of Indians. During the battle, Dionysus' companion in arms Aecus fills the Hydaspes with the dead bodies of Indians and Dionysus helps him with his thyrsus. The enraged river revolts against Dionysus and Bacchus sets fire to everything around the river with a tree inflamed with Helios' force (XXIII, 77-257). The battle of the god of wine with the Hydaspes can be explained as a struggle against death and forces of chaos. This episode echoes the scene of battle between Achilles and the

³ Σταφυλή - grape bunch.

⁴ Μέθη - drunkenness.

⁵ Βότρυς - grape bunch.

⁶ Janmaire H., *Dionysos: Histoire du culte de Bacchus*, Paris 1951, 76.

Scamandrus river described in *Iliad* (XXI, 1-384). It is the only scene, where Achilles is shown frightened and fleeing. Heroes crossing rivers by swimming in *Odyssey* and *Ramayana* are associated with their struggle against sea dragons. The struggle of gods with monsters – first and foremost dragons and snakes – occupies a central place in the mythologies of ancient nations. Given this, it can be said that the struggle between Dionysus and the Hydaspes has a cosmogonic function for Nonnus.

Having defeated Indians, Dionysus returns to Arabia, where he teaches Arabs how to cultivate vine (XL, 291-310). Then he goes to Syria, where he admires Tyrus, the home city of Cadmus (XL, 311-336). Travelling in Lebanon, Bacchus plants and nurtures a vine in the wedding palace of Aphrodite (XLI, 1-9). After that, Dionysus goes to Europe (XLIII, 446). Having visited the Greek cities of Thebes, Athens, and Argos, where he is worshipped as a god albeit after he overcomes numerous obstacles, he finds his place among gods on Olympus.

Let us now go back to the route Dionysus travelled and concentrate on the Caucasus. Moving from Phrygia to the east, Dionysus goes across the Caucasus. The following lines of the poem show this:

Quickly he [Dionysus] drove his car to the eastern clime of the earth,
 Gleaming in his armour like daylight,
 Crossed over the rocky crest of Caucasus and through the valleys,
 And over the light-bringing region of the dawnland
 He went on towards the boundaries, where Helios starts running.
 (XXI, 308-312)

Bacchus' route goes across the Caucasus again, when he returns from India to Phrygia:

Once more he touched up the flanks of his lions with the whip,
 And guided the hillranging car on the road back to Phrygia.
 He drove along the heights above the Caucasian valleys.
 (XXV, 371-373)

For the purposes of this study, we will give relatively more attention to passages of the poem linked to this region. It is noteworthy that Greeks of the ancient period are well aware of the existence of the Caucasus and different authors of Antiquity mention it. For example, Aeschylus mentions Καβκαοος in his tragedy *Prometheus Bound*.⁷ Herodotus describes the geographic location of the region in the following manner: "On the side towards the West of this Sea the Caucasus runs along by it, which is of all

⁷ Aeschylus, Tragedies. *Prometheus Bound*, translated by G. Sarishvili, Tbilisi 1978, 719 (in Georgian).

mountain-ranges both the greatest in extent and the loftiest.”⁸ According to Theocritus: “The Caucasus is spread from the country of Armenians to Colchis.”⁹ *Argonautica* by Apollonius of Rhodes mentions the high mountains of Caucasus situated close to the bay of Pontus, where “with his limbs bound upon the hard rocks by galling fetters of bronze, Prometheus fed with his liver an eagle.”¹⁰

Nonnus knows full well the information about the Caucasus available from old times. *Dionysiaca* reflects the myths of antiquity about Prometheus chained to a mountain in the Caucasus (II, 297-299), and Phrixus and Helle (X, 99-101); it mentions Argo that “long ago, brought Jason's boat to the Colchian coast” (XIII, 87-88). The poet also knows “the ruler of the Colchian tribe” Aeëtes, who Hephaestus made fire-breathing animals for, and the magician's talents of Circe and her ability to cure people with herbs (XXIX, 202-203; XXXVII, 418-419). Thus, Nonnus is aware of where the events described in the myths of Antiquity took place. He knows that Colchis and the Phasis river are in the Caucasus. Of course, the geography of the Caucasus could not have remained unknown to him. In spite of this, *Dionysiaca* comprises information other than traditional about the Caucasus. In addition to Dionysius' travelling across the Caucasus on his way to India, Nonnus mentions the Caucasus as being situated in India. When Eros wounds Indian fighter Morrheus with the arrow of maiden Chalcomede's love, the man is ready to quit his homeland and follow the Bacchic maiden. At that moment, he makes a choice between the Caucasus and the Tmolus, a mountain in Lydia, in other words, his choice is between his homeland and Chalcomede's homeland. This is what Indian Morrheus says:

I want to leave Caucasus and dwell in Tmolus;
Let me throw off my ancient name of Indian and be called Lydian.
(XXXIII, 255-256)

It is obvious that India and the Caucasus are identified with each other here. There are such examples in other passages, too. Ares is depicted as one of the gods supporting Indians in Dionysius' battle in India. He is addressed in the following manner:

⁸ Herodotus, *History*, translation and comments by T. Kauhchishvili, v. I, Tbilisi 1975, 203 (in Georgian).

⁹ Urushadze A., *Ancient Colchis in the Myth of Argonauts*, Tbilisi 1964, 328 (in Georgian).

¹⁰ Apollonius of Rhodes, *Argonautica*, translation and comments by A. Urushadze, Tbilisi 1970, 1246-1249 (in Georgian).

Ares, renounce your arrows, your battlefield spear and shield,
 Save yourself by fleeing. Leave the ridges of the Caucasus,
 As Bromius is bringing other man-slaughtering Amazons to fight.
 (XXXVI, 259-261)

In the battle depicted in the poem, Ares helps Indians, fighting against Dionysus. Of course, the battle takes place in India. Let us recall a passage quoted above:

And over the light-bringing region of the dawnland
 He [Dionysus] went on towards the boundaries, where Helios starts running.
 (XXI, 311-312)

It is of course more logical to imply India in the country, where "Helios starts running", as it is a country located in the remote east. However, it should also be taken into account that this passage by Nonnus reminds us of a passage from Homer's *Odyssey*, which mentions the island of Aea, "where Eos the dawn has her house and dancing floor: to the place where the sun rises."¹¹ Since Nonnus has a good knowledge of Homer's poems and even echoes him, this phrase must not have remained unknown to him.

Ancient Greeks linked Eea-Colchis to the sun. They believed that Aeetes was the son of Helios. Poems by Apollonius of Rhodes and Pseudo-Orpheus are devoted to the trip of Argonauts to the country of the sun (Colchis).¹² In the tragedy by Euripides, Medea says the following words: "Helios - father's father."¹³

Taking this into account, it is quite logical that Greeks viewed Colchis as a remote area in the east, where the sun rose. For example, such a view is unambiguously stated by Plato¹⁴ and Theocritus. The latter calls the Caucasus "extreme land."¹⁵ However, it is known that relations of the Greek world with eastern countries became stronger and the geographic awareness of Greeks expanded in the Hellenistic era. They received information about countries that lay at longer distances and other countries occupied the place of Colchis or the Caucasus. In old views, the Caucasus continued to be the remotest place in the east, but new countries, including India, entered the arena in new circumstances. This is how India and the Caucasus became linked to each other where old and new views intertwined.

¹¹ Homer, *Odyssey*, translation by P. Beradze, Tbilisi 1979, XII, 3-4 (in Georgian).

¹² Urushadze A., *Op. cit.*, 63-64.

¹³ Euripides, *Medea*, ed. H. Van Looy, Stuttgartiae-Lipsiae 1992, 954-955.

¹⁴ Platonis Opera, *Phaedo*, ed. I. Burnet, I, Oxonii, 1905, 109 a-b.

¹⁵ Феокрит, Моск, Бион, *Идилли и Эпиграммы*, перевод М. Е. Грабарь-Пассек, Москва 1958, 77.

It is noteworthy that later, Greeks indeed used the name of Caucasus to refer to a mountain in India. Strabo says in this connection: "For instance: they transferred the Caucasus into the region of the Indian mountains and of the eastern sea which lies near those mountains from the mountains which lie above Colchis and the Euxine; for these are the mountains which the Greeks named Caucasus, which is more thirty thousand stadia distant from India ... And although it was a more glorious thing for Alexander to subdue Asia as far as the Indian mountains than merely to the recess of the Euxine and to the Caucasus, yet the glory of the mountain, and its name, and the belief that Jason and his followers had accomplished the longest of all expeditions, reaching as far as the neighbourhood of the Caucasus, and the tradition that Prometheus was bound at the ends of the earth on the Caucasus, led writers to suppose that they would be doing the king a favour if they transferred the name Caucasus to India."¹⁶

In addition, Hindukush and Pamir peaks were also called Indian Caucasus or Paropamisus.¹⁷ A passage in *Anabasis* by 2nd-century historian Arrian reads as follows: "Alexander's fighters called what was really mount Paropamisus in Bactria by the name of Caucasus, in order to enhance Alexander's glory."¹⁸

As said above, Nonnus must have been aware of all information about the Caucasus, which means that the poet quite deliberately identifies Caucasus with India, resorting to the artistic method of doubling and obscuring. The identification of these two regions with each other may be due to some other factor in addition to the aesthetic and artistic factors. In particular: Dionysus introduced the cult of wine in India, which may have aroused associations with the Caucasus with Nonnus. This is why we think that the aforementioned provides grounds for the assumption that linking the Caucasus both to Colchis and India in *Dionysiaca* is not just an artistic method. Nonnus presents the Caucasus as a symbol of a country of viticulture and wine-making. It is well-known that evidence of viticulture in the Caucasus dates back to the 5th and 4th millennia BC.¹⁹

Let us now go back to the text of *Dionysiaca*, which makes it clear that Dionysius' campaign against Indians continued for seven years (XXV, 6-9). In our opinion, it would be interesting to pay particular attention to the

¹⁶ Страбон, *География*, перевод Г. А. Стратановского, Ленинград 1964, XI, 5, 5.

¹⁷ Ughashadze A., *Op.*, cit., 502.

¹⁸ Арриан, *Поход Александра*, перевод М. Е. Сергеевко, Москва-Ленинград 1962, V, 5, 3.

¹⁹ Gamkrelidze T., Ivanov V., *Indo-European and the Indo-Europeans*, II, Tbilisi 1984, 651 (in Georgian).

symbolism of “seven”, which is a sacred and mystical number particularly for the people in west Asia. It is a symbol of cosmic and spiritual order for people. The special importance of the number, is also linked to the fact that only seven “wandering luminaries” – the Sun, Moon, Mars, Mercury, Jupiter, Venus, and Saturn – could be seen by the unaided eye in the ancient times. In many cultures, week days were given names precisely of these luminaries. In the Bible, seven days of Genesis are linked to the number “seven”.²⁰

Let us recall that India is the seventh country for Dionysius during his trip, just like Olympus is for the god on his way from India. Before reaching India, he goes via six regions – Phrygia, Bithynia, Caucasus, Assyria, Arabia, and the Sea of Eritrea. After Dionysius defeats Deriades, his route again lies across six regions – India, Arabia, Phoenicia, Caucasus, Phrygia, and several Greek cities. Given this, we can assume that Nonnus links Dionysius' trip with cosmic order. The god's trip is linked to celestial movement. It is to connect various regions with his cult like constellations in the sky. Given this, it is noteworthy that in his text, Nonnus describes the location of the Caucasus also with regard to celestial bodies. Having defeated Indians, Dionysius and his companions return to their own homelands. Only Asterius does not return to Crete. He stays in the Caucasus and calls local people, i. e. Colchians, Asterians (XIII, 243-247).

In ancient Greek literature, we encounter the name Asterion with Pausanias. This Asterion seems to have travelled together with Argonauts.²¹ In addition, according to the myth, Aetes' wife was called Asterodia. The work *Argonauts* by Dionysius Scytobrachion says: “Absyrtus, Aetes' son. Caucasian nymph Asterodia gave birth to him.”²² There is no doubt that the names Asterodia, Asterion, and Asterius are similar. However, Nonnus expanded views expressed in ancient literature in this connection with his own imagination. In Greek, “asterios” means “starry” and Nonnus calls residents of the Caucasus, i. e. Colchians, Asterians, making an allusion that the region is linked to the heaven and stars. The poet also describes how stars are located with regard to the Caucasus:

He [Asterius] settled near the river Phasis in a cold land
By the Massagetic Gulf, where he dwelt under the snowburdened feet
Of his father's father, Taurus the Bull, translated to the star.
(XL, 285-287)

²⁰ Тресиддер Дж., Словарь символов, Москва 1999, 327-328.

²¹ Urushadze A., Op. cit., 458.

²² Ibid., 374.

Thus, the main aim of the wine god's campaign to an alien country is to spread viticulture and Dionysius' mysteries. Nonnus unites Asia and Europe by means of a new religion – the Dionysus cult. However, there is one contradiction here. Recent studies of Nonnus' work have confirmed that the author was Christian when writing *Dionysiaca*. So why is the work devoted to a pagan god and his cult? We think that in this case too, Nonnus resorted to the main feature of his style – doubling and deliberate obscuring. The author praises the new religion – the Dionysus cult, metaphorically implying Christianity. *Dionysiaca* that describes an epic campaign of Bacchus, expresses the idea of unity of Europe and Asia achieved by means of one religion. Dionysius travels from Asia to Europe, connecting the areas by means of his cult and removing the Asia-Europe opposition. Bacchus ends his route on Olympus that can be regarded as the centre and symbol of Europe. It is important for us that the Caucasus occupies a prominent place in Nonnus' poem. To support the assertion, we can refer to a passage at the end of the poem, where Dionysus divides in four the females accompanying him and dispatches them to all four parts of the world to disseminate the cult of wine. It is noteworthy that the Caucasus is the first to be named by Nonnus (XXVII, 150-152), which can be regarded as an attempt to present the Caucasus as one of the most important regions of united Asia and Europe.