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GIANFRANCO AGOSTI, Sapienza Università di Roma, ALESSANDRO BAUSI, Universität Hamburg

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by Alessandro Bausi

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Bairu Tafla, Ludwig Gerhardt, Susanne Hummel,
Alexander Meckelburg, and Siegbert Uhlig

Editorial Team

Susanne Hummel, Francesca Panini

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New Evidence of King MḤDYS?

GIANFRANCO AGOSTI, Sapienza Università di Roma,
ALESSANDRO BAUSI, Universität Hamburg

Of the wide range of Greek and Latin sources on Ethiopia in Late Antiquity, the poet Nonnus of Panopolis (approximately 400–460/470 CE) is fundamental. Born in Panopolis (Upper Egypt) and active in Alexandria, Nonnus was pivotal for the flourishing of Greek poetry in Late Antiquity.[1] He composed the *Dionysiaca*, the longest extant Greek epic poem on the life of Dionysus, his war and triumph over the Indians, and his eventual apotheosis (an immense poem of more than 21,000 verses, in 48 books, as long as the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* combined). Nonnus is also the author of a metrical *Paraphrase of St John's Gospel*, a rewriting of the Gospel in his baroque style (around 3,700 hexameters), revealing a deep theological knowledge.

Nonnus devotes attention to Ethiopia and Ethiopians in his poems. In the *Dionysiaca*, Ethiopians are mentioned relatively frequently, and a largely predictable pattern emerges across Nonnian poetry, in which the poet repeats the confusion between India and Ethiopia which featured throughout Graeco-Roman tradition, and continued into Late Antiquity, as demonstrated by Schneider.[2] In the *Dionysiaca*, Ethiopians and Indians have the same physical features generally, that is, black-skinned and curly-haired, and live in a region east of the Nile that includes Arabia. In Book 26, which contains the catalogue of the Indian troops and is a *manifesto* of popular

[1] On the current renewed interest in late antique poetry, see Agosti 2012. On Nonnus, see the collection of articles in Accorinti 2016 and the entry on Nonnus, along with bibliography, in the *Oxford Bibliographies on Line* at https://www.oxfordbibliographies.com/view/document/obo-9780195389661/obo-9780195389661-0332.xml.

[2] *Dionysiaca* 2.683; 13.347; 17.385–397; 26.228; 26.340, 341; 39.197; 43.165. On Nonnus's image of Ethiopia see Chuvin 1991, 277–280; Schneider 2004, 360–361; Schneider 2015.

knowledge about the 'Marvels of the East', Nonnus mentions Ethiopians together with the Derbikes, the Sakai, and the Blemmyes (26.339–349):

> Δερβίκων δὲ γένεθλα συνέσπετο Δηριαδῆι
> Αἰθίοπές τε Σάκαι τε καὶ ἔθνεα ποικίλα Βάκτρων,
> καὶ πολὺς οὐλοκόμων Βλεμύων στρατός. ἀλλοφανῆ δέ
> Αἰθίοπες μεθέπουσι τύπον τεχνήμονα χάρμης·
> ἵππου γὰρ φορέοντες ὀλωλότος ἄντυγα κόρσης
> ψευδόμενοι κρύπτουσιν ἀληθέα κύκλον ὀπωπῆς,
> καὶ κεφαλὴν βροτέην ἑτέρῳ σφίγγουσι προσώπῳ,
> ἄπνοον ἀσκήσαντες ἐς ἔμπνοον, ἐν δὲ κυδοιμοῖς
> δήιον ἀγνώσσοντα νόθῳ κλονέουσι καρήνῳ·
> καὶ πρόμος ἐκ στομάτων ἀπατήλιον ἦχον ἰάλλει,
> ἵππιον ἀνδρομέῃ προχέων χρεμετισμὸν ἰωῇ.
>
> Tribes of Derbices were there with Deriades, Ethiopians and Sacai and various nations of Bactrians, and a great host of woolly-headed Blemyes. The Ethiopians follow a peculiar and clever fashion in battle. They wear the top of a dead horse's head, hiding in this disguise the true shape of their faces. Thus they fasten another face on the human head, and join the dead to the living. So in the battle they startle the unwitting foe with this bastard head; and their chieftain lets out a deceitful sound from his mouth, and gives vent to a horse's neigh with his manly voice.[3]

In this passage, the 'Ethiopians' are probably the Ethiopians of Asia,[4] although the poet seems not to draw any clear distinction between them and the Blemmyes. The latter are described as curly-haired like the Indians in the poem (14.304, 25.327, 43.228). The impression is that the mention of Ethiopians was little more than a pretext for an extensive rewrite of the *paradoxon* of the warriors who fight covered by a horse-head (ll. 342–349), a rewriting of Herodotus 7.70 in the flamboyant Nonnian style. Also in Book 26, the mention of an Indian fleet coming from the archipelago of the three hundred islands introduces a long digression on the Indus and the Nile, where the poet advances the popular idea that the two rivers were connected (ll. 222–246).[5] The confusion or equivalence between Indians and Ethio-

[3] Ed. Vian 1990, 110; tr. Rouse 1984, II, 317.

[4] In Book 13.347, the Western Ethiopians are also mentioned, Ἑσπερίων […] γένος Αἰθιοπήων, and are confused with the Mauroi.

[5] For a thorough commentary on the passage, see Vian 1990, 89–90, 281–283. A chief of the Ethiopians is also mentioned in 39.197–198 καὶ πρόμος Αἰθιόπων Νοτίην ἐπὶ

pians is attested eloquently in Book 35.185–198, where the disgusting episode of the black Indian prince Morrheus attempting to wash off his dark skin-colour in the Red Sea is a transposition of a fable motif, which had become a widespread proverb presenting the idea of washing an Ethiopian to be taking up a task that is wholly futile.[6]

Nonnus appears not to have had any clear idea of Ethiopia or the Aksumite kingdom, and apparently considered all those living east of the Nile to be 'Indians/Ethiopians', but the crucial issue is how to interpret this oversimplification. Schneider has recently argued that it is not to be taken as a sign of a lack of geographical knowledge in Late Antiquity, but rather as a different form of knowledge.[7] This presents the question of the nature of this knowledge in Nonnian poetry. In a problematic passage of the poem (17.385–397), the poet characterizes the Blemmyes/Ethiopians in surprisingly positive terms, emphasizing their prompt 'conversion' to the Dionysiac cause. These lines have long been used as evidence of Nonnus's religious views, and as chronological clues, with their allusion to a treaty between the Roman Empire and the Blemmyes.[8]

Καὶ Βλέμυς οὐλοκάρηνος, Ἐρυθραίων πρόμος Ἰνδῶν,
ἱκεσίης κούφιζεν ἀναίμονα θαλλὸν ἐλαίης,
Ἰνδοφόνῳ γόνυ δοῦλον ὑποκλίνων Διονύσῳ.
Καὶ θεός, ἀθρήσας κυρτούμενον ἀνέρα γαίῃ,
χειρὶ λαβὼν ὤρθωσε, πολυγλώσσῳ δ' ἅμα λαῷ
κυανέων πόμπευεν Ἐρυθραίων ἑκὰς Ἰνδῶν,
κοιρανίην στυγέοντα καὶ ἤθεα Δηριαδῆος,
Ἀρραβίης ἐπὶ πέζαν, ὅπῃ παρὰ γείτονι πόντῳ
ὄλβιον οὖδας ἔναιε καὶ οὔνομα δῶκε πολίταις·
καὶ Βλέμυς ὠκὺς ἵκανεν ἐς ἑπταπόρου στόμα Νείλου,
ἐσσόμενος σκηπτοῦχος ὁμόχροος Αἰθιοπήων
καί μιν ἀειθερέος Μερόης ὑπεδέξατο πυθμήν,
ὀψιγόνοις Βλεμύεσσι προώνυμον ἡγεμονῆα.

πέζαν ἀρούρης μηκέτι νοστήσειε Κορύμβασος ('Let Corymbasos the chief of the Ethiopians never return to the arable land of the south', ed. Simon 1999, 105; tr. Rouse 1984, III, 137).

6 See Agosti 2013, 381–383, and Selden 2013.

7 Schneider 2015.

8 See Chuvin 1991, 277–278 and Barthel 2014, with full bibliography. On Blemmyes, see 'Blemmyes', *EAe*, V (2014), 275b–278b (A. Soldati); Castrizio et al. 2017.

> Now woollyhead Blemys, chief of the Erythraian Indians, bent a slavish knee before Dionysos Indianslayer, holding the suppliant's unbloodied olivebranch. And the god when he saw the man bowed upon the earth, took his hand and lifted him up, and sent him far away with his polyglot people, apart from the swarthy Erythraian Indians, now hating the lordship and the manners of Deriades, away to the Arabian land, where beside the sea he dwelt on a rich soil and gave his name to his people. Blemys quickly passed to the mouth of sevenstream Nile, to be the sceptred king of the Ethiopians, men of colour like his. The ground of Meroë welcomed him, where it is always harvest, a chieftain who handed down his name to the Blemyes of later generations.[9]

This passage shows an imprecise knowledge of the people living between the Red Sea and the Nile Valley,[10] and cannot be taken at face value. One of the authors of this note recently argued that Blemmyes's submission in Nonnus reflects hope rather than a historical evidence. In the perfect world of Dionysus, the warlike and dreadful Blemmyes do not behave like irreducible Indians; they immediately recognize the light of justice and peace brought by Dionysus. Nonnus provides his audience with a representation of the Blemmyes and their relationship to Egyptian society which is also present in similar passages in Coptic hagiography.[11] In a poem dealing with 'Indians' in the broadest sense of the term, Nonnus could not avoid alluding to Blemmyes, who, unlike 'Indians', were an accessible and threatening presence to his Egyptian audience. Significantly, he adopted a reassuring triumphalist narrative, which his audience presumably favoured. Nonnus makes the Blemmyes behave exactly like Egyptians, especially from the χώρα, as the audience would have wanted. His pacific and devout Blemmyes are imaginary, and it is significant that he does not mention the Noubades,

9 Ed. Gerlaud 1994, 172; tr. Rouse 1984, II, 61.

10 As Schneider 2004, 361 notes correctly, 'on reste étonné de constater, dans la légende de Blémys, la proximité de l'Inde, de l'Erythrée, de l'Arabie, de l'Éthiopie et de l'Égypte, pays qu'aucun obstacle ne paraît séparer'. See also Chuvin 1991, 277, who points out that at l. 392 'la "terre bénie" d'Arabie ne peut désigner que l'Arabie Heureuse, le Yémen. L'expression exclut le désert entre Nil et Mer Rouge qui faisait aussi partie de l'Arabie pour les Anciens'.

11 Agosti 2018, dealing with a passage of Besa's *Life of Shenoute* (*FHN*, III, no. 301), where Shenoute does not hesitate to face a group of aggressive Blemmyes, whom he miraculously defeats receiving obedience from their king.

despite their growing influence over the Dodekaschoinos during the fifth century CE, as attested in Greek sources.[12]

Despite—or due to—this striking disjuncture with reality, Nonnus composed a story his audience expected, based on what we might call a 'triumphalist perspective'. His version of the prompt conversion of the Blemmyes/Ethiopians exorcises fear, and alters cultural memory. The 'confusion' should not be ascribed to a lack of geographical knowledge but is attributable to the shared cultural imagination of poet and audience.

Moreover, we would like to suggest that the representation of the converted Blemmyes makes a timely allusion to the rising Aksumite kingdom. The image of pious 'Ethiopians' moving from Egypt to 'Arabia' (17.390–393) may reflect the expansion of the Christian Aksumite kingdom.[13] Nonnus was a Christian, and adopts a Christian perspective in the *Dionysiaca*, in which the Indians represent the enemy of the true faith, and the 'Dionysiac' conversion of the Blemmyes may represent the hoped-for conversion to Christianity of the 'Indians/Ethiopians'. If so, the 'confusion' conveys an ideological reinterpretation of reality. In view of the extensive relations between Egypt and Ethiopia, amply attested in archaeological and literary sources, the poet may be alluding to the Christian kingdom of Aksum by way of the converted Blemmyes.

This idea is backed further by a re-reading of a crucial passage in Nonnus's narrative. After his victory against the Indians, in Book 40, as successor to King Deriades Dionysus appoints a certain Modaios (40.235–236):

> ὤπασε λυσιμόθοισι θεουδέα κοίρανον Ἰνδοῖς, 235
> κρινάμενος Μωδαῖον
>
> (Dionysus) assigned a governor for the Indians, choosing the godfearing Modaios.[14]

[12] Like the well-known petition of Appion, dated to 425–450 (*P. Leiden Gr.* Z = TM 23768 = *FHN*, III, no. 314); the inscription carved in the wall of the Mandulis temple at Kalabsha by Silko, the *basiliskos* of the Noubades and all the 'Ethiopians' (*FHN*, III, no. 317); and the letter of Phonen, king of the Blemmyes, to the king of the Noubades (*FHN*, III, no. 319). See Dijkstra 2012; Dijkstra 2014; Obłuski 2013; Obłuski 2014.

[13] See e.g. Phillipson 2012, 69–78; Bowersock 2013.

[14] Ed. Simon 1999, 172; tr. Rouse 1984, III, 171.

Modaios had already been mentioned in Book 32.163–174 as a fearsome warrior; Ares himself takes on his likeness to fight against the Dionysiac army (32.165–167):

> Μωδαίου προμάχοιο φέρων τύπον, ὃς πλέον ἄλλων 165
> ὑσμίνης ἀκόρητος ἀτερπέι τέρπετο λύθρῳ,
> ᾧ πλέον εἰλαπίνης φόνος εὔαδεν
>
> (Ares) took the form of the champion Modaios, more than all others unsated with battle, whose joy was joyless carnage, whom bloodshed pleased better than banquets.[15]

The poet's choice of a fierce warrior as Deriades's successor has always been interpreted in terms of literary sources. The name Modaios is of Cretan origin, and it appears in a poem of the first century CE (?), the *Bassarica* of a certain Dionysius, on Dionysus's campaign against the Indian king Deriades. This poem, known to us only through papyrus fragments and some quotations in the geographical work by Stephanos of Byzantium (sixth century CE), was read and imitated by Nonnus.[16] In the longest surviving fragment, a certain Modaios is captured by the Bacchants, disguised as a deer, and offered as a victim to the Indians, who make a human sacrifice in the guise of an animal (fr. 33v).[17] Due to the poor state of the papyrus, many features of Dionysius's passage remain unclear, and the surprising transformation of Modaios in Nonnus from fearsome warrior to pious chief is usually interpreted as a sign 'that he was fleshed out more fully in the *Bassarica*'.[18] Nonnus surely encountered the name Modaios in Dionysius's poem, and wanted to reuse the character for a variation on his source material. Nonetheless, the choice of Modaios as new king of 'India' remains surprising and may in fact be attributable to a connection between the name Μωδαῖος and the somewhat enigmatic MḤDYS, a mid-fifth-century king of Aksum, known only from numismatic evidence.[19]

The similarity with the Greek form is undeniable and, although the etymology of the name is still unclear,[20] a match of Μωδαῖος with MḤDYS is

15 Ed. Vian 1997, 108; tr. Rouse 1984, II, 457.

16 Chuvin 1991, 54–55; Vian 1998.

17 A detailed analysis of the scene can be found in Agosti 2001 and Benaissa 2018, 180–200.

18 Benaissa 2018, 190.

19 See Brakmann 1994, 78–80; Hahn 1996; 'MḤDYS', *EAe*, III (2007), 947a–949b (G. Fiaccadori); Marrassini 2014, 77–78, all with further bibliography.

20 On the name, see the different proposals advanced by Kropp in Hahn 1996, whose hypotheses and others are discussed by Bausi 2003, 172–175 (with further references

entirely plausible linguistically. *Mōdaîos* could well represent a form such as **Maḥdəy-os*/*Māḥdəy-os*, according to (1) the nominal pattern *ma12ə3*, that is mainly used for the participle of the causative form,[21] (2) followed by an *-os* ending to serve as a device providing a Greek-like appearance to a Semitic name.[22] The latter hypothesis is not new,[23] and examples of *-s* endings attached to names of Aksumite kings in coins have been attested.[24] The well-known lowering of the vowel close to a Semitic guttural can have facilitated the perception of *aḥ*/*āḥ* as—and its rendering with the—Greek ω (*ō*),[25] whatever is the hypothesis on the diachronic development of the Ethiopic reflex of the vowel *a* followed by laryngals (*ʾ*, *ḥ*, *ḫ*) at the end of a closed

at n. 42). An update of the numismatic evidence on King MḤDYS in Hahn and West 2016, 80–84, still provides a doubtful interpretation of the Ethiopic legend *bz msql +mwʾ* on the reverse of his silver coin as 'By this cross + you shall (be) conquer(or)' (see already West 1999, 6, who gives only *bz msql mwʾ* and accordingly translates 'by this cross victorious'). Munro-Hay and Juel-Jensen 1995, 162, provide 'By this cross he will conquer' (the same also in Munro-Hay 1999, 36, criticized by Ricci 1999, 244). The interpretation that restitutes the Constantinian flavour precisely, 'In this cross you will conquer', was clearly pointed out by 'MḤDYS', *EAe*, III (2007), 947a–949b (G. Fiaccadori), esp. 947b; see also Buzi and Bausi 2013, 413. The obverse of the silver reads *ngś mwʾ MḤDYS*, 'The conqueror king MḤDYS'. The legends on the copper coins are the following: obverse: *MḤDYS n+gś ʾksm*, 'MḤDYS king of ʾAksum'; reverse: *+bz +mwʾ bmsql*, '+ by this you shall (be) conquer(or), by the cross' (see 'MḤDYS', *EAe*, III (2007), 947a–949b (G. Fiaccadori), esp. 947b). See now Hahn and Keck 2020, 94–98 (nos 40–41), with the rejection of the silver coins as forgery (see pp. 152–153), and a reference (p. 96, n. 279) to the hypothesis presented in this note as anticipated in a communication presented at the 20th International Conference of Ethiopian Studies. Most spectacular and still much debated is the *unicum* of a golden coin of MḤDYS, with legends *bz mwʾ MḤDYS*, 'The conqueror king MḤDYS' on the obverse and *bz msql +mwʾ*, 'By this cross + you shall (be) conquer(or)' on the reverse, on which see Hahn and Keck 2020, 95–97.

21 See Tropper 2002, 63–64 ('Nomen agentis zu A_1 oder 0_1'), and 93.

22 There is obviously abundant evidence to support a phonetic rendering of *-əyos* with -αῖος, see Gignac 1976, 191–194.

23 This argument was first advanced by Manfred Kropp in his seminal contribution on the interpretation of MḤDYS, 'Die Endung -ys im Gəʿəz deutet auf eine fremde, griechische Namensform (Həzəqyas usw.) hin; umgekehrt wird eine solche Endung an semitische Namen zur Gräzisierung angesetzt, wenn die Originalform keine aufweist (Ezana -gr. Ezanas etc.)', see Kropp in Hahn 1996, 98.

24 For an example of this same process, notable are the cases of King Kāleb ʾElla ʾAṣbəḥa, rendered Ἐλλατζβάας, Ἐλλησθεαῖος, Ἐλεσβαάς, and similarly in the Greek tradition (see Marrassini 2014, 119–120).

25 On the lowering of the vowel adjacent to guttural, see the recent study by Alsager 2020 on Saudi Arabic, also with references to other Semitic cases.

syllable, either *a*L|| > *ā*L|| or *ä*L|| > *a*L||.[26] Moreover, within the Semitic domain, there are examples where the phoneme *ḥ*, in the transcription of biblical names from Hebrew into Greek and Latin—languages which 'could not convey the guttural sound of the Hebrew letter'—is 'not expressed at all' or 'transcribed with a vowel'.[27] As far as etymology is concerned, a hypothesis of connection of MḤDYS with a Semitic root *ḥdy*, attested in Arabic, merits further investigation.[28]

If this is true, Nonnus chose the name Modaios not only for literary reasons, but because he wanted to allude to the king of a new Christian state south of Egypt. It is debatable whether his audience was more plausibly aware of the name of King MḤDYS rather than that of an obscure character in a first-century poem, or not, although we cautiously favour the idea that the name of the Ethiopian king was known in Alexandria. Aside from the numismatic evidence, Nonnian passage should be considered to be the only literary source attesting the name of King MḤDYS. This connection would also illuminate the passage in 32.165–167 (quoted above); if Nonnus was aware of the existence of the Aksumite king, the poet's portrait of him, as a fearsome pagan warrior later converted and made peaceful, is it implausible that he wanted also to allude to the special devotion of the pagan Ethiopian kings up to ʿEzānā towards MḤRM, equivalent to Ἄρης?[29] Needless to say, speculation on the possible sources of Nonnus would be untimely given the

[26] See Bulakh 2016, 103–110, for detailed discussion and further references; the question, however, has not been solved definitively, for it is obvious that all transcription systems include aspects of transliteration and it is no accident that the system indicated as 'Transcription I' is in fact described as a 'type of notation' (p. 104); moreover, if it is true that Marcel Cohen also suggests that, in the orthographic evolution *a*L|| > *ā* L||, the vowel was never lengthened and was an orthographic device to denote quality, it is also true that he supports the hypothesis that the phonetic value of *a* in *a*L|| was *preserved*, so that the vowel *a* in this position *never* was nor became *ä* (see Cohen 1927, 26, 'la voyelle *a* devant laryngale faisant partie après elle de la même syllabe résiste à toute altération de timbre et reste *a* pur').

[27] See Krašovec 2010, 98–99, with the equivalence in Exod. 6:19 between Hebrew *Maḥlî* and Greek Μοολί, also *Vulgata* 'Mooli'.

[28] See Biberstein Kazimirski 1860, 395, s.v. *ḥadiya*, 'S'attacher à un lieu, et y rester […] IV. Faire exécuter exprès, et avec soin. V. 1. Rivaliser avec quelqu'un dans quelque chose, pour accomplir quelque chose […] 2. Lutter, combattre'. A root *ḥdy* is attested also in Ethiopic, with meaning of 'grind grain', 'pulverize', yet probably from metathesis of *daḥaya*; of no help is *ḥədey*, 'name of a tree which grows straight' (see Leslau 1987, 226); for further attestation in Semitic, see Cohen et al. 2010, 834–835.

[29] See Marrassini 2014, 44–45, and Manzo 1999, 361–362 (useful also for a thorough study of the presence of Dionysiac attributes in Aksumite ideology).

present state of research. The significance of these findings for Ethiopian studies is that of suggesting hitherto unexplored connections between Aksum and the wider world of Late Antiquity. As for Nonnus, this analysis provides additional evidence of the fact that multilayered allusions to contemporaneous political and cultural life underlie the deceptively neutral literary surface of his poetry.[30]

List of Abbreviations

EAe = S. Uhlig, ed., *Encyclopaedia Aethiopica*, III: *He–N*; A. Bausi in cooperation with S. Uhlig, ed., V: *Y–Z. Supplementa. Addenda et Corrigenda. Maps. Index* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2007, 2014).

FHN = T. Eide, T. Hägg, R. H. Pierce, and L. Török, eds, *Fontes Historiae Nubiorum: Textual Sources for the History of the Middle Nile Region between the Eighth Century BC and the Sixth Century AD*, I: *From the Eighth to the Mid-Fifth Century BC*; II: *From the Mid-Fifth to the First Century BC*; III: *From the First to the Sixth Century AD*; IV: *Corrigenda et indices* (Bergen: University of Bergen, Department of Classics, 1994, 1996, 1998, 2000).

TM = *Trismegistos. An interdisciplinary portal of the ancient world*, https://www.trismegistos.org.

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[30] On Nonnus and his own society see Agosti 2016, with further bibliography.

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Summary

The role assigned by the late antique poet Nonnus of Panopolis (mid-fifth century CE) to Modaios, king of the 'Indians', in a few passages of his huge poem *Dionysiaca*, suggests that the choice of the character may be attributable to a connection between the Greek name of the king (Μωδαῖος) and the somewhat enigmatic MḢDYS, a mid-fifth-century king of Aksum, known only from numismatic evidence. The hypothesis opens the way to further reflection on the role allusions to contemporary events play in Nonnus's poem as an evidence of a precise awareness about Aksum in Late Antique Egypt.