

Looking from the walls in Nonnus' *Dionysiaca* (39, 14-23)

Throughout the *Dionysiaca* Nonnus is notoriously playing with allusions to the literary tradition. The passage from book 39 (14-23) that will be discussed here might offer another example of this important feature of Nonnus' poetry. In my opinion the passage can be interpreted as a subtle adaptation of the epic motif of a teichoscopy. In scholarly research on Nonnus the contents of this short scene have briefly been discussed before but never in terms of a teichoscopy. The observation by critics Rudolf Keydell and Paul Collart of a small narrative inconsistency between this passage and a passage three books earlier (36, 422-475) was rejected in the commentaries of both recent editions. A sufficient explanation is still lacking. In the last paragraph I will take up this discussion in the hope of contributing to it with my 'teichoscopic' interpretation.

1. A traditional point of view

In speaking of a teichoscopy it is important first to note that the term was already used in Antiquity. Its earliest occurrence is in the *Scholia* on Euripides' *Phoenissae*, referring to the prototype of teichoscopies in *Iliad* 3 (161-242) of which the scene in the *Phoenissae* (88-201) is called an 'εἰκὼν [...] ἐκ τοῦ ἐναντίου'.¹ The 'ἐκ τοῦ ἐναντίου' refers to the change of roles of both gender and age: Antigone takes the role of the uninformed Priam; an elderly servant provides the information and thus takes the role of Helen.

Other examples of teichoscopic scenes from Greek and Latin epic poetry and tragedy indicate the popularity of imitating the Homeric scene.² They may also indicate that the idea of a teichoscopy developed towards a genuine literary *topos*, known and recognized by all πεπαιδευμένοι. Late antique Nonnus and his learned readers perhaps knew more examples, if we think of the great amount of late epic poems lost.

In none of the known examples the narrated or enacted situation is completely parallel to the situation in *Iliad* 3. All are in some way or another 'εἰκόνες [...] ἐκ τοῦ ἐναντίου' or creative adaptations of the Homeric blueprint. All are situated on the city-walls (or a comparable high observation point) of a city under siege, where people are watching the enemy troops on the battle scene. Generally speaking the action consists of a conversation between these people: the enemy troops and their leaders are identified by someone who is better informed than his/her interlocutor(s).

2. Looking from the walls

The list of well-known teichoscopic scenes cited above does not include the name of Nonnus. In his *Dionysiaca* at least two passages can however be found playing with the literary *topos* of a teichoscopy. The first, in book 35 (11-16) is mentioned as such both by Gianfranco Agosti (2004, 560) and Helene Frangoulis (2006, 4). The second (39, 14-23) is the subject of this paper. In the first lines of book 39, the arrival of the Dionysian

battleships in India is described. In line 14 the viewing point shifts from the ships to the Indians watching the ships on the walls of their capital city.

‘Δηριάδης δ’ ἀπέλεθρος ὑπέρτερος ὑψόθι πύργων
ἔσσυμένων νεφεληδὸν ἐδέρκετο λαίφεα νηῶν
ὀφθαλμῷ κοτέοντι, καὶ ὡς ὑπέροπλος ἀκούων,
ἐγρεμόθους ὅτι νῆας Ἀραψ τορνῶσατο τέκτων,
ᾧμοσεν ὑλοτόμοισιν ἄγειν Ἀράβεσσιν ἐννύ
καὶ πόλιν ἠπέιλησεν αἰστώσαι Λυκοόργου,
ἀμήσας Ραδαμᾶνας ἀλοιητῆρι σιδήρῳ.
καὶ στόλον ἀθρήσαντες ἀταρβέες ἔτρεμον Ἴνδοί,
ἄρεα παπταίνοντες ἀλίκτυπον, ἄχρι καὶ αὐτοῦ
γούνατα τολμήεντος ἐλύετο Δηριαδῆος.’ (txt. Simon)

“But gigantic Deriades high on his battlements saw with angry eye the sails of the ships like a cloud; and in his overweening pride, as he heard that an Arabian shipwright had built battle-rousing ships, he swore to make war on the woodcutting Arabs, and threatened to mow down the Rhadamanes with destroying steel and to devastate the city of Lycurgos. The fearless Indians trembled at sight of the fleet, when they surveyed the seabeaten armada, until even the knees of daring Deriades gave way.” (tr. Rouse)

Both compared to the previously cited teichoscopies in other authors and to the enormous proportions of the *Dionysiaca* as a whole, this passage is exceptionally brief, but the primary conditions for speaking of a teichoscopy are certainly present. The setting is on the city walls (14: ‘ὑψόθι πύργων’) of an Indian city under siege, wherefrom Deriades and the other ‘Ἴνδοί’ can see (15: ‘ἐδέρκετο’; 21: ‘ἀθρήσαντες’) the naval troops of Dionysus. They see a fleet sailing in and not, as in most examples, a threatening army on land. This is not an obstacle for our interpretation but rather a signal that Nonnus introduces a variation.

The brevity of the passage seems however to coincide with the absence of a conversation – the main action that is expected in a teichoscopic scene. Exactly the same remark can be made for Nonnus’ teichoscopy in book 35, where the literary *topos* is evoked in even fewer lines. But is this aspect in book 39 entirely absent? No dialogue in direct speech is inserted, but the participle ‘ἀκούων’ (16) suggests nevertheless that there is a conversation going on. Lines 17 till 20 can be read as a paraphrase of a traditional teichoscopic dialogue between Deriades and an unknown person (one of the ‘Ἴνδοί’ in line 21?), giving Deriades information on the troops. This results in the following dialogue scheme:

- (a) His interlocutor informs Deriades that the ships have been built by Arabian ship makers (17)
- (b) Deriades gives a threefold reaction (18-20): he swears (18: 'ῶμοσεν'), threatens with destruction (19: 'ἠπείλησεν ἀιστῶσαι') and threatens with murderous revenge (20: 'ἀμήσας').

An even more dynamic reading of these lines is in my opinion possible. The threefold reaction of Deriades who is raging successively against the builders of the ships, their city of origin and the people of the Rhadamanes, suggests a dialogue situation with three moments of speech for the interlocutor and three reactions of Deriades:

- (a) Int.: "The ships are built by Arabian ship makers." (17)
- (b) D. listens with an air of arrogance and declares war to them. (16-18)
- (c) Int.: "They are built in the city of Lycurgus." (19)
- (d) D. threatens this city with destruction. (19)
- (e) Int.: "The Rhadamanes are behind this" (20)
- (f) D. wants to kill them all. (20)

With this interpretation of lines 17-20 the conversation so characteristic for a teichoscopy seems to be present after all; not explicitly, but hidden in a short but much revealing paraphrase.

3. Correcting Homer?

While interpreting a poet like Nonnus who is constantly dialoguing with his literary forbears, reading this passage as a teichoscopic scene implies reading it as an allusion to the literary tradition and most of all to Homer, whom Nonnus exhaustively imitates in his *Dionysiaca*.³

A closer comparison of this passage (39, 14-22) with the Iliadic teichoscopy (*Il.* 3, 161-242) gives little result if the scope of the comparison is limited to the passages themselves. The context and framing of both passages has to be taken into account. In the narrative of the *Dionysiaca* the passage in book 39 is explicitly situated in the last year of the Indian war. The intention of focusing on the last year of war in close imitation of Homer is mentioned by Nonnus in his second prologue (25, 8b-9a: 'τελέσας δὲ τύπον μιμηλὸν Ὀμήρου / ὕστατον ὑμνήσω πτολέμων ἔτος'). The start of this last year is indicated in book 38 (38, 15: 'ἀλλ' ὅτε δὴ πολέμων ἔτος ἔβδομον ἤγαγον Ὡραι'). Finally, in book 39 (39, 6: 'τόφρα δὲ νῆες ἱκανὸν ἐς ἄρεα ναύμαχον Ἰνδῶν') the ships that will soon be viewed from the walls, arrive.

This context brings to mind the paradoxical situation of the Iliadic teichoscopy. Whereas Priamus is still asking for information on troops that have been besieging his city for nine years, Deriades also receives information on enemy troops in the last year

of war, but these are newly arrived troops he certainly has not seen before. Nonnus implicitly seems to correct Homer by adopting the temporal framework (with explicit references to Homer) but providing new troops to be seen from the walls in this allusive scene. If accepted that Nonnus here plays with the motif of a teichoscopy, this implicit correction of the Iliadic situation can count as a supporting argument. Bearing in mind Nonnus' predilection for subtle literary play and his intention to surpass Homer, it seems plausible that Nonnus would have wanted to correct Homer on this particular issue.

As the idea of giving information on enemy troops is entirely absent from the teichoscopic passage in book 35, the logical counter-argument that our passage is not the only evocation of the Homeric teichoscopy in Nonnus, is not an obstruction for this interpretation. Both passages are alluding to different aspects of the Homeric model. The passage in book 35 we could call an inverse teichoscopy ('ἐκ τοῦ ἐναντίου'): the old Indian men and young Indian women on the walls are looking *into* their city, where young female warriors of Dionysos are slaughtered *within* the city walls.⁴

4. Troubling inconsistencies

The embedding and context in the main narrative of the *Dionysiaca* is also a crucial point for the scholarly discussion of our passage. Paul Collart and Rudolf Keydell, the most influential Nonnus scholars of the first half of the twentieth century, made the observation that this passage is not entirely compatible with an earlier scene in book 36 (422-475). There, the future arrival of the ships of the Rhadamanes was already announced to Deriades who accepted to start a sea battle, trusting in the Indian seafaring capacities.⁵ Collart and Keydell describe the reaction of Deriades in book 39 as 'surprised' and thus in contradiction with the fact that he was correctly informed in book 36.⁶

Before I can develop any further arguments on this observation, it is important to know that both scholars were fervent supporters of the theory, long time widely accepted, that Nonnus left his work highly unfinished. According to them, Nonnus reworked an older version of his *Dionysiaca* by inserting a whole range of new passages. Nonnus however never fully integrated the new passages and storylines into the whole, or at least this is their explanation for the lacunas and inconsistencies they observe in the poem. The *ναυμαχία* in book 39 is in this respect the most problematic and most discussed part of the *Dionysiaca*. Our passage, however, comes from the first part of the book, where the narrative is coherent and clear, in contrast with the '*membra disjecta*' (Vian 1976, xxxix)⁷ of the second half.

Book 39 is for Keydell "*das dritte Stück der großen Einlage*" (1927, 430). According to him the duels of Deriades and Dionysus in books 36 and 40 were originally one, in a later stage of composition interrupted by three new books (37-39) that were never fully revised by the author. The small inconsistency of the 'surprised' reaction (39) of an

actually well-informed Deriades (36) fits this theory very well. Collart (1930, 223) adds to this that two plotlines might have accidentally merged in these books.

“Nonnos semble avoir conçu deux projets pour présenter la bataille navale. Ces deux projets devaient s'exclure l'un l'autre, mais, sans qu'on puisse dire pourquoi, ils ont été maintenus tous les deux. Le premier, celui du chant XXXVI, consiste à préparer les Indiens à la nécessité de ce combat. [...] Dans le deuxième projet, celui du chant XXXIX, le secret de Bacchos n'a pas été connu. La flotte se présente à l'improviste devant les murs de la capitale indienne.”

More recent scholarship on Nonnus gives an entirely different view on the composition of the *Dionysiaca* (Vian 1994; Chuvin 2009). The comprehensive analysis of the narrative coherence of book 39 by Bernadette Simon (2003, 67-95) aims at understanding the text as it is passed down to us and explains the for Collart and Keydell problematic coherence of the epic poem as an element of Nonnus' late antique style of juxtaposition. Concerning this specific passage both Bernadette Simon (2003, 71) and Gianfranco Agosti (204, 838) disagree with Collart and Keydell. They doubt that the reaction of Deriades in this passage should be interpreted as one of 'surprise' and see no contradiction of the situation in book 36. Deriades is in their opinion simply 'furious' when he sees the enemies sailing in.

Now turning to the actual text of our passage, one has to agree with Simon and Agosti that it is never strictly mentioned that the fleet comes as a surprise for Deriades. What however is mentioned and explains why both Collart and Keydell in their search for inconsistencies speak of surprise, is that Deriades gives his furious reaction not only because of what he sees, but also as an answer to the things he hears (39.16: ἀκούων). This seems to suggest that new information is provided, while the information in lines 17-20 was already known to Deriades from book 36 on.

If there is no inconsistency, we still lack an explanation why Nonnus would have chosen to give Deriades the same information twice. In spite of the fact that repetition is part of Nonnos' epic style, it is very often possible to offer an additional explanation when Nonnos strikingly repeats himself. The interpretation of lines 17-20 as a teichoscopic dialogue might offer this explanation. A dialogue concerning the identity of the enemy troops is an essential part of a teichoscopy. If my interpretation is correct, the conventional insertion of such a dialogue in a scene ὑψόθι πύργων might explain this strictly unnecessary repetition of information.

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¹ Schol. Eur. *Phoen.* 88: 'ἡ δὲ ἔξοδος τοῦ παρθένου εἰκὼν ἐστὶ τῆς Ὀμηρικῆς τειχοσκοπίας τῆς Ἑλένης ἐκ τοῦ ἐναντίου· ἐκεῖ γὰρ γυνὴ τῷ γέροντι δείκνυσιν.' Txt. Schwartz. Discussion of the passage in Euripides: Mastronarde 1994, 167-206.

² Examples from epic poetry: Stat. *Theb.* 7, 243-373; V. Flaccus *Argon.* 6.490-506, 576-601, 657-89, 717-24, 752-60; Quint. Smyrn., *Posthomerica* 1.403-76. Examples from tragedy: Eur. *Phoen.* 1090-199, *Supp.* 838-908; Sen. *Phoen.* 363-442. This list is based on lists of teichoscopies provided by Smolenaars (1994, 120-1) and De Jong (2011, unpublished). I follow the latter in excluding eye-witness-accounts of battles and troops from a non-panoramic viewing point. The passage from Quint. Smyrn. is her addition. She furthermore also mentions teichoscopic passages in historiography (Hdt. *Hist.* 8.90; App. *Pun.* 71, 103, 130).

³ On Homeric references in the *Dionysiaca*: Vian 1991; Hopkinson 1994; Shorrock 2001 & 2011; Agosti 2009. Vian (1991, 9) gives a non-exhaustive list of thirteen important Homeric motifs that are reworked in the *Dionysiaca*. After doing this, he also stresses that still some of the best known motifs are left out. He lists five of which 'la Teicoscopia' is one. "Come si può vedere da questo elenco, Nonno compie solamente una scelta attraverso i grandi motivi dell'Iliade: trascura la Teicoscopia, l'Ambasciata da Achille, la Dolonia, la Patrocleide e naturalmente il riscatto del cadavere d'Ettore." By now it is clear that Nonnus did not fail to insert this important Iliadic motif.

⁴ 35, 6; 11-16: "Ὡς αἱ μὲν κλονέοντο κατὰ πτόλιν ἔνδοθι πύργων / [...] / Ἀκλινέες δὲ γέροντες ἀερσιλόφων ἐπὶ πύργων / φύλοπιν ἐσκοπίαζον· ὑπὲρ τεγέων δὲ καὶ αὐταὶ / θυρσοφόρον στίχα πᾶσαν ἐθήησαντο γυναιῖκες· / καὶ τις ὑπὲρ μέγαροιο περικλινθεῖσα τιθήνη / παρθένος ἑλκεσίπεπλος ἐδέρκετο θῆλυν ἐννῶ / καὶ κταμένη βαρύδακρυς ἐπέστενεν ἥλικι κούρη." Txt. Frangoulis.

⁵ His son-in-law Morrheus speaks to Deriades in the assembly of Indians (36, 430-69; cited: 443-5): 'Ἀλλὰ πάλιν ναέτησιν ἀρείονα μῆτιν ὑφαίνω· / εἰσαῖω Παδαμᾶνας, ὅτι δρυτόμῳ τινὶ τέχνῃ / νῆας ἐτεχνήσαντο φυγοπτολέμῳ Διονύσῳ.' The reaction of Deriades (not in direct speech) follows in lines 474-5: 'Ἀὔσε δ' ἄναξ ἀγορήν. Βρομίῳ δ' ἐστέλλετο κῆρυξ / πόντιον ὑσμίνην ἐνέπων πειθήμονι Βάκχῳ.' Txt. Frangoulis.

⁶ The passages from books 36 and 39 are discussed by Keydell (1927, 427-30) and by Collart (1930, 212-13; 223-4). Keydell 1927, 430: "Denn obwohl dort Morrheus von dem Schiffsbau der Rhadamanen gesprochen hatte, ist hier Deriades von der Ankunft der Schiffe überrascht und erfährt erst jetzt, daß die Rhadamanen sie gebaut haben (39, 14ff.)." Collart 1930, 224: "La flotte se présente à l'improviste devant les murs de la capitale indienne."

⁷ By quoting the verdict of previous editors Vian indicates his acceptance of this reading of the second half of book 39, whereas he thoroughly revises the conclusions of his predecessors for other passages. His introduction to the first volume of the Budé

edition gives a clear overview of the scholarly discussion (till 1976) on the (un)finished state of the poem.

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