

“Religion and Poetry in the Epic of Nonnos of Panopolis”

Summary

The object of the present project is to work out and to describe part of the intellectual situation of the people in the eastern Greek cities of the Roman empire in late antiquity, which is characterized by the dissense between daily life and intellectual interests as well as by the clash between the official religion and the deeply admired ancient Greek way of life.

Therefore, the main task will be, by a close reading and a detailed commentary of certain passages of the epic work of Nonnos of Panopolis in Egypt, viz. the “Dionysiaca” and the “Paraphrasis” of the St. John’s gospel,

- to explore the strategies applied by the poet in coping with political and social change in the period of migration and struggle between pagans and Christians;
- to stress the cultural and intellectual background in a Greek city in the eastern Roman empire in late antiquity by exploring the education and the expectations of the audiences listening to the poet’s performance;
- to describe the worldview of that time as mirrored in the poems, because the form of the traditional Homeric epic actually is used to present contemporary discussions;
- to emphasize literary discourses among the educated and intellectually interested people in late antiquity in order to perceive the reception of Nonnos’ epic poetry.

People of the upper class in eastern Greek cities of the Roman empire in late antiquity, well educated and interested in classical literature and in the mythic past of ancient Athens, then nearly a century ago, are supposed to have been loosely organized in literary and intellectual cercles. Nonnos gave them what they wanted to hear: epic poetry in the old fashioned Homeric style, filled with new and phantastic versions of the old mythic tales, both pagan and Christian, and he also gave them the hope to meet the challenge of the profane by clinging to old myth. He also showed the possibility of uniting the old and the new when he ventured to narrate the “mythic” history of Jesus Christ, using the gospel of St. John as the source and the pattern for a new epic song.