

THE IDENTIFICATION OF BELUS WITH CRONUS IN NONNUS' DIONYSIACA 18.222–8

There is an instance of Belus being identified with Cronus in the *Dionysiaca* of Nonnus of Panopolis (5th c.), but it has not heretofore been recognized. In the eighteenth book Dionysus visits the Assyrian king, Staphylus, who encourages the god by telling him a story of the Titanomachy and the monsters sent against Zeus. 'Assyrian Belus'¹ is mentioned at the beginning of this story, though all modern editors, following Cunaeus² have rearranged the introductory lines in various ways, but consistently so as to make Belus the grandfather of Staphylus and the original narrator of the story³. The character of Belus is treated inconsistently in the rest of the epic, in book 3 Belus, referred to as 'the Libyan Zeus', is the son of Poseidon and Libya, and the grandfather of Cadmus⁴, but in book 40 Belus is treated as the Assyrian name for the Sun as a god⁵ (Cronus and Zeus are said to be other names of the Sun). Reference to these passages cannot, therefore, help us toward a proper reading of Belus in book 18, but does demonstrate that in Nonnus 'Belus' refers to no single character, neither human nor divine.

If we assume, however, that Nonnus in this passage identified the Assyrian god (/king - ?) Belus with the Cronus of traditional Hellenic myth, we are able to maintain the order of the lines as it is found in the manuscripts:

1) *Dionysiaca* 18.224.

2) P. Cunaeus, *Animadversiones in Nonni Dionysiacam* (beginning vol. ii of his edition; Hanover 1610).

3) Ludwich, 1909: 222-224-223-225, Keydell, 1959: 222-224-223-225-227-228-226-229, followed by Gerbeau and Vian, 1992. Hence Tümpel, 'Belos', *RE* III 263: "Nonnos Dion. XVIII 302 nennt B. einen Assyrer und προπάτωρ [sic] des Staphylos und lässt ihn den Kampf des Zeus mit Kronos erzählen". It is impossible to tell how Rouse, 1940, assigned line numbers in this passage, but his are inconsistent with those of the critical editions, nevertheless, he agrees with the common reading.

4) *Dion.* 3.291–298. Several sons of Belus who wandered in the East are mentioned here, but none is related to Staphylus.

5) *Dion.* 40.392–3.

μέμνημαί τινα μῦθον, ὃν ἡμετέρῳ γενετῆρι	222
πατροπάτωρ ἐμὸς εἶπεν, ἐγὼ δέ σοι αὐτὸς ἐνίψω	223
Ἄσσυρίος ποτε Βῆλος, ἐμῆς πολιοῦχος ἀρούρης ⁶ ,	224
κουφίζω ⁷ Κρόνος ὕγρὸς ἀμερσιγάμου γένυν ἄρρης,	225
Τιτήνων προκέλευθος, ἐμάρνατο σεῖο τοκῆι,	226
ἢ πότε μητρῶησιν ἐπεσσυμένοι χαμεύναις	227
τάμην ἀνυμφεύτων στάχυν ἄρσενα πατρὸς ἀρότρων ⁸	228

I remember a story, which my grandfather told to my father, and I will tell to you: “Once Assyrian Belus, protector⁹ of my country, wet¹⁰ Cronus lifted up the blade of his marriage-robbing sickle (with which he once cut off the manly scion of the ‘plow’, which [thenceforth] knew no union, of his father as he reclined on his mother’s earth-bed), and, as leader of the Titans, fought against your father.

The ποτε of line 224 is appropriate to the beginning of a story¹¹; in two other instances, Nonnus signals a story told by one of his characters by ending the last line of the introduction with ἐνίψω (somewhat like the Homeric ὡς φάτο, etc., at the end of a quotation), and including ποτε early in the next line, that is, the first line of the story itself¹². The ποτε serves no function, however, in a phrase identifying the original narrator. The phrase ἐμῆς πολιοῦχος ἀρούρης, moreover, would be an unnecessary description if Belus were supposed to be the grandfather of Staphylus, the present king, and not a god or ruler of the remote past.

The identification of Belus with Cronus is not without warrant, even if, like many of the mythological details in Nonnus, it is rarely and obscurely attested otherwise. Sometime before the first century BC Ps.-Eupolemus equated Cronus with the Belus of the Babylonians in very simple and straightforward terms, as if the identification required no defense or explanation¹³. Castor of

6) Nonnus may use the word ἀρούρα here to associate Belus with the Titanic enemies of Zeus, since he often refers to Typhon (Dion. 1.483; 2.631; 13.482) and the Giants (Dion. 25.206; 45.174,180,195,215; 48.393) as sons of Ἄρουρα (Earth).

7) Cf. Nonnus’ use of κουφίζω for Perseus lifting or raising the sickle (Dion. 47.557) and Medusa’s head (Dion. 47.586) as weapons.

8) Dion. 18.222–8.

9) Πολιοῦχος is mostly used as an epithet of the guardian deity of a city, indicating that Nonnus has in mind Belus, the god of Babylon. Cf. its use of Athena, Dion. 47.96.

10) Still wet, perhaps, with the gore of Uranus’ castration, implying that Cronus’ domination of heaven was brief. But ὕγρὸς may also refer to the shafts of ice which Cronus uses as missiles, as opposed to the fiery weapons of Zeus, in the lines immediately following (Dion. 18.229–234).

11) Homer often uses ποτε to introduce narrative digressions on past events (Iliad 1.260; 2.547; 3.205; 4.106, Odyssey 1.430; 3.84; 4.342; 7.162; 8.9,59; 9.76, etc.).

12) Dion. 11.369–70; 45.104–5; cf. Dion. 38.107–11; 42.208–9.

13) Eusebius, Praeparatio Evangelica, 9.17.9; FGrHist 724 F 1: Βαβυλωνίους γὰρ λέγειν πρῶτον γενέσθαι Βῆλον, ὃν εἶναι Κρόνον. Belus was either the first astrologer, or the first of mankind. I do not concur with the efforts of R. Doran, in: J. Charlesworth, ed., The Old Testament Pseudepigrapha (New York 1985), vol. ii, 878, 881, to emend the text to make Cronus the father of Belus, since, contrary to what Doran says, the identification of Belus with Cronus is attested elsewhere.

Rhodes¹⁴ (1st c. BC) and Thallus¹⁵ (c. 100 AD) might have depended on this association of Belus and Cronus (without accepting the identification) when they wrote that the Assyrian king Belus was allied to Cronus and the Titans against Zeus and the gods. These two accounts are consistent with Nonnus inasmuch as ‘Assyrian Belus’ is coeval with the Titanomachy and a participant in that war¹⁶. In an explanatory note on Thallus’ report of the Titanomachy, perhaps taken from Thallus himself, Theophilus of Antioch (c. 180 AD) says that because Cronus and Belus were contemporaries most people confuse the two, especially in the regions of the east, where Cronus is worshipped as Bel and Bal¹⁷. The ‘eastern regions’, where Belus is identified with Cronus, would surely include Assyria. And in the fourth-century ‘Picus-Zeus narrative’, which was still being read and exploited in the sixth century (and so might have influenced Nonnus), Cronus is said to have been an Assyrian king¹⁸ (although he is not identified with Belus).

The present reading allows us to retain the order of lines found in the manuscripts (always desirable in the reading of ancient texts) instead of transposing lines and so adjusting the sense of Nonnus’ words, and to note one more erudite mythological detail in the *Dionysiaca*: the identification of Belus with Cronus.

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14) Eusebius, Chron.; FGGrHist 250 F 1.

15) Theophilus of Antioch, Ad Aut. 3.29; FGGrHist 256 F 2.

16) See B. Garstad, The Titanomachy of Thallus and its Reception by the Latin Church Fathers (St Andrews: unpublished Ph.D. dissertation, 2000) 33–37.

17) Ad Aut. 3.29: Τοῦ δὲ Κρόνου καὶ τοῦ Βήλου συνακμασάντων ὁμοσε, οἱ πλείους οὐκ ἐπίστανται τίς ἐστὶν ὁ Κρόνος ἢ τίς ὁ Βῆλος. ἔνιοι μὲν σέβονται τὸν Κρόνον καὶ τοῦτον αὐτὸν ὀνομάζουσι Βῆλ καὶ Βάλ, μάλιστα οἱ οἰκοῦντες τὰ ἀνατολικά κλίματα, μὴ γινώσκοντες μήτε τίς ἐστὶν ὁ Κρόνος μήτε τίς ἐστὶν ὁ Βῆλος. παρὰ δὲ Ῥωμαίοις Σατοῦρνος ὀνομάζεται· οὐδὲ γὰρ αὐτοὶ γινώσκουσιν τίς ἐστὶν αὐτῶν, πότερον ὁ Κρόνος ἢ ὁ Βῆλος. Cf. Servius, Aen. 1.729.

18) J. Malalas, Chronographia, 1.8–9; cf. C. Frick, Chronica Minora (Leipzig 1892) 234–40.

ISSN 0035-449 X

Schriftleiterin: Dr. Sandra Zajonz, Institut für Altertumskunde
der Universität zu Köln, D-50923 Köln
Druckerei: Laupp & Göbel, Nehren

Verlag: J. D. Sauerländer, Frankfurt am Main

Manuskripte werden an die Adresse von Prof. Dr. Bernd Manuwald, Institut für
Altertumskunde der Universität zu Köln, D-50923 Köln, erbeten.

Printed in Germany · © J. D. Sauerländer's Verlag, Frankfurt a. M. 2003