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DIONYSIUS: THE EPIC FRAGMENTS

DIONYSIUS
THE EPIC FRAGMENTS
EDITED WITH INTRODUCTION,
TRANSLATION,
AND COMMENTARY

BY

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CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

Cambridge University Press
978-1-107-17897-7 — Dionysius: The Epic Fragments
Edited and translated by Amin Benaissa
Frontmatter
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CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

One Liberty Plaza, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10006, USA

477 Williamstown Road, Port Melbourne, VIC 3207, Australia

314–321, 3rd Floor, Plot 3, Splendor Forum, Jasola District Centre,
New Delhi - 110025, India

79 Anson Road, #06-04/06, Singapore 079906

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It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of
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www.cambridge.org

Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107178977

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First published 2018

Printed in the United Kingdom by Clays, St Ives plc in 2017

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library.

ISBN 978-1-107-17897-7 Hardback

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VIRO POLITISSIMO P. J. PARSONS OCTOGENARIO

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PREFACE

Dionysius stands at an interesting juncture in the history of Greek hexameter epic, with lines taking us back to the learned poetry of the Hellenistic age and forward to the monumental epic poets of the Roman Imperial period. He is the only Greek writer of mythological epic poetry between Apollonius of Rhodes (third century BCE) and Quintus of Smyrna (third century CE) for whom we have relatively substantial fragments, and his work belongs to a period from which very little Greek poetry survives besides epigram. Two of his poems are known: a *Gigantias* in at least three books relating the battle of the Giants against the Olympian gods and its prehistory, and a *Bassarica* in at least eighteen books on Dionysus' campaign against the Indian king Deriades. These works did not survive to medieval times, but sizeable fragments have been preserved in some papyri and in citations in the geographical dictionary of Stephanus of Byzantium. The *Bassarica*, the better preserved of the two poems, is the earliest known poetic account of Dionysus' Indian war and an important literary precursor of the fullest elaboration of this legend, Nonnus' *Dionysiaca* of the fifth century. Partly modelled on Alexander's eastern conquests, the legend was to prove enduringly popular in the Imperial and Late Antique periods, and Dionysius' epic poem no doubt contributed to its growing vogue.

The last edition of Dionysius' fragments was that of Enrico Livrea in 1973. This edition is fundamental in many respects, and it will be obvious throughout how much I am indebted to it. There are nevertheless several compelling reasons now for undertaking at least a re-edition of the *Bassarica*. Livrea omitted a number of entries from Stephanus of Byzantium which are almost certainly attributable to the poem, despite the fact that they do not cite Dionysius or the *Bassarica* explicitly. These entries, together with two new papyrus fragments from Oxyrhynchus, need to be incorporated in a more comprehensive

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edition of the poem. Close re-examination of the main papyrus of the *Bassarica*, P.Lond.Lit. 40, has also resulted in a significant number of corrections and new readings. Finally, several studies in the intervening decades have cast new light on some of the fragments. The question of the relationship between Dionysius and Nonnus, in particular, which was not treated extensively in Livrea's book, has received renewed impetus from the recently completed Belles Lettres edition of the *Dionysiaca* directed by Francis Vian and Pierre Chuvin's magisterial work on the mythological geography of Nonnus' poem.

The primary goal of this edition is to supply a more accurate, comprehensive, and up-to-date text of the fragments of the *Bassarica*. The introduction offers an overview of the sources of the fragments and their editorial history, a discussion of the relationship between the *Bassarica* and Nonnus' *Dionysiaca*, a brief prehistory of the theme of the poem, and a summary of Dionysius' stylistic and metrical profile. The commentary focuses on the interpretation of individual fragments, their linguistic and literary aspects, and *loci similes*.

It has not seemed useful to re-edit fully and write a continuous commentary on the fragments of the *Gigantias*, which are preserved in a much more mutilated state.¹ In contrast to the fragments of the *Bassarica*, they have aroused little critical or literary comment since Livrea's edition. No new fragments of the poem from Stephanus or the papyri need to be added to Livrea's fragments. The most extensive papyrus of the poem, P.Oxy. xxxvii 2815, has already been carefully edited by Lobel, while few significant corrections have been made to the remaining fragments of the poem in P.Lond.Lit. 40.² Nevertheless, for

¹ Whitby (1994) 124 has noted that '[t]he condition of the *Gigantias* is so fragmentary that little attempt can be made to reconstruct the narrative sequence'.

² See Marcotte (1988) for some suggestions on *Gig.* fr. 45v and most recently Meliadò (2014) for improvements to *Gig.* fr. 6–8, 47–8. These are incorporated in the text given in the Appendix together with some new readings and supplements by Ben Henry and myself.

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the reader's convenience, I include a revised text of the fragments in an appendix with a translation and some contextual notes to facilitate consultation and complement the edition of the *Bassarica*.

The bulk of the work on this book was carried out during the tenure of a Leverhulme Early Career Fellowship in 2008–10 at the Faculty of Classics of the University of Oxford. It then had to be laid partially aside as my attention was occupied by unrelated projects and duties, first as a British Academy Post-doctoral Fellow (2010–12) and then as a Fellow and Tutor at Lady Margaret Hall. I have nevertheless managed to return to it intermittently in this period and completed the manuscript during a one-term sabbatical granted by Lady Margaret Hall in 2015. I am deeply beholden to the Leverhulme Trust, the British Academy, Lady Margaret Hall, and the Faculty of Classics for their invaluable support of my research and for making work on this project possible over the years.

I have also incurred a debt to several individuals in the writing of this book. I am grateful to the Editors for accepting the work in their series and in particular to James Diggle and Michael Reeve for some helpful comments and corrections. I would also like to thank Michael Sharp of Cambridge University Press and my copy-editor Gill Cloke for their unfailing and efficient assistance throughout. A number of scholars made useful suggestions to me, either orally during seminars and conferences or afterwards in writing: Giambattista D'Alessio, Michael Grone-wald, Ian Rutherford, and the late Martin West among others. Ben Henry kindly read the entire final draft with characteristic acuity and contributed a number of improvements and interesting suggestions. Needless to say, I take sole responsibility for all interpretations and remaining errors.

Oxford, 30 June 2016