



THE HIDDEN SOURCE OF THE NILE IN NEMESIANUS, *CYNEGETICA* 68*

ABSTRACT

This note suggests a new emendation for the spurious verb bibunt in Nemesianus, Cynegetica 68. The passage should read Nilique latentem in origine fontem.

Keywords: Nemesianus; *Cynegetica*; textual criticism; emendation; Nile

In close imitation of Virgil's pledge in *Georgics* 3, Nemesianus announces in the *Cynegetica* the future composition of a panegyric poem on the military exploits brought about by the current rulers, Carinus and Numerianus (lines 63–75). He promises to sing of the empire's outer boundaries and of the peoples subdued by the imperial brothers as illustrated by four landmark rivers:

mox uestros meliore lyra memorare triumphos
accingar, diui fortissima pignora Cari,
65 atque canam nostrum geminis sub finibus orbis
litus et edomitas fraterno numine gentes,
quae Rhenum Tigrimque bibunt Ararisque remotum
68 principium Nilique †bibunt† in origine fontem;

Soon I will gird myself with a better lyre to record your triumphs, you most valiant sons of deified Carus, and will sing of our shores at both boundaries of the world, and of the peoples—subjugated by the divine power of brothers—that drink the Rhine and the Tigris and the distant source of the Arar and †drink† the source of the Nile at its origin;

While the allusion to a people by reference to a river is a common trope among Greek and Roman writers from Homer onwards, it is specifically Virgil and Horace that serve as Nemesianus' literary models. The image of the vanquished peoples dwelling at remote corners of the empire and drinking from their respective local streams draws on Verg. *Ecl.* 1.62 *aut Ararim Parthus bibit aut Germania Tigrim* (cf. *Aen.* 7.715) and Hor. *Carm.* 4.14.45–8 *te fontium qui celat origines | Nilusque et Hister, te rapidus Tigris, | te beluosus qui remotis | obstrepit Oceanus Britannis*.¹ However, neither the Augustan poets nor any other author, for that matter, can account for the curious gemination of *bibunt* in the consecutive lines 67 and 68. Although the repetition in no way violates the metre, it is on stylistic grounds that the authenticity of the text has been questioned. Finding it 'impossible to believe that Nem. could have repeated himself in this way', H.J. Williams in her 1986 edition printed the second *bibunt* between

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¹ As noted by H.J. Williams, *The Eclogues and Cynegetica of Nemesianus, Edited with an Introduction and Commentary* (Leiden, 1986), 166; see also R. Jakobi, *Nemesian, Cynegetica. Edition und Kommentar* (Berlin, 2014), 84–5.

daggers.² She is followed by R. Jakobi in his more recent edition who, having dismissed the various suggestions put forth to replace either the first or—more often—the second *bibunt*, concludes that the case remains unclear.³ The emendations that have been suggested include *uident* or *colunt* (both Johnson), *habitant* (Heinsius), *metunt* (Stern), *libant* (Klein) and *potant* (Williams). What all these conjectural suggestions have in common is the repeated attempt to replace the spurious *bibunt* with another verb which seems to be supported by the presence of the coordinator *-que* in line 68 (to which I will return below). Yet an alternative verb in the third-person plural is by no means the only conceivable solution, if indeed an admissible emendation at all. With *bibunt* in line 67 fully satisfying the syntactical needs for a verb in the relative clause, an adjective in line 68 such as *latentem* ('hidden') that qualifies the source (*fontem*) of the Nile would appear to make for a better case, particularly considering the source's notorious obscurity. Even the elision of the final syllable of *latentem* in order to meet correct verse scansion perfectly concurs with Nemesianus' prosodic and metrical practice.⁴

Given that the obscurity of the Nile's origin is a common topos among Greek and Roman writers since Herodotus discussed the issue at 2.28–34, it is beyond question that a learned poet such as Nemesianus was familiar with this geographical mystery.⁵ In fact, his knowledge of the matter is indirectly confirmed by his undisputed adaptation of Hor. *Carm.* 4.14.45–6, where it is stated that the Nile 'conceals the origins of his sources' (*fontium qui celat origines*). Besides, Nemesianus' engagement with the opening lines of the first book of Lucan's *Bellum Civile* further buttresses the notion that he was aware of the issue. Having reworked Luc. 1.10–11 in *Cyn.* 73–4,⁶ Nemesianus surely also read Luc. 1.20 (*et gens si qua iacet nascenti conscia Nilo*, 'and any people dwelling on the Nile, privy to its inception'), a passage that implies the reader's close acquaintance with the matter at hand.⁷ Assuming that Nemesianus read Lucan's epic in its entirety, he will even have come across the passage where Julius Caesar enquires about the Nile's *causas per saecula tanta latentis | ignotumque caput* ('the causes, hidden for so many ages, and its unknown head', 10.190–1), a phrase that may well have exerted influence on Nemesianus' (assumed) wording of *Cyn.* 68.

Furthermore, a syntactical argument can be made for the adjective *latentem* as opposed to a verb. Not only is there no need for a second verb in lines 67–8, as noted above, but more importantly the arrangement of the connective coordinators (that is, the triple *-que*) strongly suggests the adoption of an adjective rather than a

² Williams (n. 1), 166 maintains that 'it is more probable that *bibunt* belongs in *u.* 67 than *u.* 68 according to Nem. appears in *u.* 67 to be echoing Virgil *Buc.* 1.62 ... and *Aen.* 7.715 ...'.

³ Jakobi (n. 1), 88.

⁴ According to A. Di Stefano, 'Su alcuni aspetti metrico-prosodici dei *Cynegetica* di Nemesiano', *BStudLat* 28 (1998), 57–77, at 58–9, the 325 extant lines of the poem include 52 cases of elision, 47 of which concern short final syllables.

⁵ For further examples of this literary topos, see the indexes in A. Merrills, *Roman Geographies of the Nile: From the Late Republic to the Early Empire* (Cambridge, 2017) and E. Manolaraki, *Noscedi Nilum cupido: Imagining Egypt from Lucan to Philostratus* (Berlin, 2012).

⁶ Jakobi (n. 1), 89: 'Unter Nutzung von Lucan. 1,10f. *cumque superba foret Babylon spolianda tropaeis | Ausoniis umbraque erraret Crassus inulta* wird Numerian als Vollender jahrhundertelanger römischer Persienpolitik gefeiert.'

⁷ In fact, Jakobi (n. 1), 147 in his note on Nemes. *Cyn.* 251 (*gens ampla iacet*) points precisely to said passage in Lucan as the likely model for Nemesianus' choice of words; cf. J. Küppers, 'Das Proömium der "Cynegetica" Nemesians', *Hermes* 115 (1987), 473–98, at 492 n. 75.

second verb. The first *-que* connects two direct objects, the Rhine and the Tigris (*Rhenum Tigrimque*). Similarly, the second *-que* (*Ararisque ... principium*) and the third *-que* (*Nilique ... fontem*) are attached to a river's name too, albeit in the genitive; the latter two *-que* seem to suggest a correlation with each other, when primarily they simply connect the third and the fourth direct objects (*principium* and *fontem*) with the earlier ones (*Rhenum Tigrimque*), all of which depend on *bibunt*, while at the same time leaving no coordinator left to connect *bibunt* with a hypothetical second verb in the following line.⁸ While there is thus no exclusive correlation between the second and the third *-que* in a strictly grammatical sense, the two coordinators nevertheless highlight the obvious parallel between the two respective units. What is brought to the fore here is the analogy between *principium* and *fontem*, including the spatial distance of each 'source'. While the Arar's source is merely described as *remotum*, the Nile's source is best understood to be so remote that its location is virtually unknown (*latentem*). As each of the three units pertaining to the four rivers increases in length, the mimetic effect of this reflects the increasing length of the rivers and, by extension, the vast extent of the Roman empire itself.⁹ In other words, the overall sentence structure not only calls for the adjective *latentem* but also rules out a second verb altogether.

When more than a century later the historian Ammianus Marcellinus discussed the issue of the origin of the Nile at 22.15.4—something he interestingly called *latentem notitiam* ('undisclosed knowledge')—he was convinced that it would never be resolved.¹⁰ Indeed, it was not until modern times that European explorers would eventually 'discover' the river's sources.¹¹ Should the proposed emendation of line 68 be correct, the long-concealed adjective of the Nile's source in Nemesianus may now be considered 'discovered' too.¹²

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⁸ Cf. J. Wills, *Repetition in Latin Poetry* (Oxford, 1996), 374 on the 'mutable function of the first *-que* in a pair: it can point forward in a pair as a "correlative" (*A-que B-que*) or backward as a "connective" in a longer sequence (*A B-que C-que*'. The connective pattern in Nemesianus is *A B-que C-que D-que*.

⁹ The units of the tricolon are structured in accordance with Behaghel's law of increasing members: *Rhenum Tigrimque* | ... | *Ararisque remotum principium* | *Nilique latentem in origine fontem*.

¹⁰ See also Claud. *Nilus* 11–12 on the Nile's secluded source (*secreto ... fonte*) 'that will forever remain hidden' (*qui semper ... latet*).

¹¹ Cf. R.O. Collins, *The Nile* (New Haven and London, 2002), 8.

¹² Since a scribal error hardly accounts for the textual corruption, a deliberate manipulation of the original wording seems more likely. Perhaps a semi-learned reader who was unfamiliar with the Nilotic question, and thus could make no sense of the fact that somebody would be drinking from a source said to be hidden, decided to substitute the 'odd' adjective with the metrically apposite *bibunt* from the line before.