

**THE DAWNING OF A GOLDEN AGE**  
**IMAGES OF PEACE AND ABUNDANCE IN ALEXANDRIAN COURT POETRY IN**  
**THE CONTEXT OF PTOLEMAIC IMPERIAL IDEOLOGY**

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Paper read at the Tenth Hellenistic Poetry Workshop, Groningen, August 25-26, 2010.

To appear in M.A. Harder, R. Regtuit, and G. Wakker eds., *Hellenistic Poetry in Context*. Hellenistica Groningana 10 (Leuven: Peeters).

And all this violence  
And all this goes away

TV on the Radio: *Golden Age*

## **1. Introduction**

The aim of this paper is to elucidate how Golden Age imagery in Alexandrian poetry is connected with the Ptolemaic ideology of empire. I will first briefly review the motif of a Golden Age in court poetry and its connection to myth. Then I will relate these poetical images to a wider context of Ptolemaic monarchical and imperial representation, and finally try to show how that ideology in turn is related to the ideology of empire in general.

## 2. The Golden Age in Alexandrian poetry

Alexandrian court poetry often conveys images of a utopian world, a world that is both peaceful and prosperous. Thus, in bucolic poetry – a courtly genre *par excellence* (Strootman 2010a: 33) – the world is imagined as a timeless place of bounty and tranquility where the vicissitudes of love are the main worries of men and gods alike. In bucolic fantasy, the resting shepherd with all the time in the world at his disposal symbolizes the peaceful life. In Apollonius' *Argonautica*, too, herdsmen are associated with an idyllic world of abundance and peace. The pastoral communities that the Argonauts encounter during their travels are deliberately reminiscent of the mythic Golden Age as described by Hesiod (Bernsdorff 2001: 66-89).<sup>1</sup> These images are sometimes directly connected to Ptolemaic kingship. Thus, in the *Hymn to Zeus*, a poem with a strong panegyric character, Callimachus gives preference to a version of the birth myth of Zeus according to which the birthplace of the god was Arcadia rather than Crete. In Callimachus' rendering, Arcadia, until then a dry and inhospitable country, enjoys instant fertility when Zeus is born and transforms into the pastoral realm of poetic imagination.<sup>2</sup> Because in the opening lines of the hymn Zeus' heavenly rule is explicitly associated with the earthly rule of Ptolemy II Philadelphus, who is Zeus' 'chosen one', there is a strong suggestion that Ptolemy, too, will bring about an era of peace and prosperity. In Theocritus' encomium for Philadelphus images of abundance and good fortune likewise are combined with Ptolemy's rule and with Zeus' blessing of that rule:

Wealth and good fortune are his in abundance;  
vast is the land that he rules and vast the sea.  
Countless countries and countless races of men  
raise their crops thanks to the rain sent by Zeus,  
but none is so fruitful as Egypt's broad plains  
where the flooding Nile drenches and breaks up the soil.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> For instance *Argon.* 2.649-60 and 4.964-78. On Hesiod's Golden Age see further below. For the *Argonautica* as imperial poetry see Stephens (2000).

<sup>2</sup> Call., *Hymn* 1.18-35. Callimachus defends his preference for the Arcadian version by saying that the Cretans' claim that their country was Zeus' birthplace cannot be true because Cretans are liars (9-10).

<sup>3</sup> Theocr., *Id.* 17.77-83, transl. Verity.

In Theocritus' sixteenth *Idyll*, the causal connection between kingship and the prosperity of the land is made even more explicit. The poem is dedicated not to a Ptolemaic king but to Hieron of Syracuse (but of uncertain date); the image of Hellenistic kingship conveyed in this poem however is rather generic. Theocritus first describes a confused, violent world in which greed prevails over honor, war over peace, and the barbaric Carthaginians have the better of the civilized Greeks. The coming of Hieron, Theocritus prophesizes, will change all that. Hieron will restore peace and order to Sicily—see how the Carthaginians already tremble for fear as the heroic warrior Hieron girds himself for battle, “with a crest of horsehair shadowing his gleaming helmet.” Only a handful of barbarians will be left alive to return to Africa and spread Hieron’s fame “with tidings of the deaths of loved ones to mothers and wives.” When this work will be done, Theocritus beseeches the gods:

May the cities which enemy hands have cruelly razed be once again peopled by their former inhabitants. May rich harvests repay their toil, and may sheep in their countless thousands fatten in pastures, bleating across the plain; and may herds of cattle as they wander back to their folds quicken the evening traveler’s steps. May fallow land be ploughed again, ready for seed-time, at the season when the cicada, keeping watch over the shepherds in the noonday sun, sings loudly high up in the tree branches. May their armor be covered with spiders’ fine-spun webs, and even the name of the battle-cry be forgotten.<sup>4</sup>

### **3. The Golden Age in myth**

The idyllic world conjured up by Theocritus is deliberately reminiscent of the mythic Golden Age at the beginning of time, the motif of a lost earthly paradise which is also a crucial theme in Mesopotamian and Israelite mythology. The Greek Golden Age is today best known from Hesiod’s *Works and Days* (109-126) which describes a ‘golden *genos*’ of mortal men who lived “like gods” in the time of Cronus:

They lived without sorrow of heart, remote and free from toil and grief. ... With arms and legs never failing they made merry beyond the reach of all evils. ... And

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<sup>4</sup> Theocr., *Id.* 16.88-97, transl. Verity.

they had all good things, for the fruitful earth unforced bare them fruit abundantly and without stint. They dwelt in ease and peace upon their lands with many good things, rich in flocks and loved by the blessed gods.<sup>5</sup>

With the Silver Race and brutal Bronze Race, succeeding them after the downfall of Cronus, harsh agrarian labor and violence became part of human life, until Zeus finally created the fifth, iron *genos* of the present, “[who] never rest from labor and sorrow by day” (175). The iron people live in a world of bitter strife where injustice and deceitfulness are more highly esteemed than honesty and honor (180-195). However, Hesiod implies that a better time will follow by saying that he wished that he “had been born afterwards” (175), and proceeds to describe how peace and justice shall return if only people will be ruled by righteous men:

Peace is in their land and all-seeing Zeus never decrees cruel war against them. Neither famine nor disaster ever haunt men who do true justice; but light-heartedly they tend the fields [and] the earth bears them fruits in abundance [and] their woolly sheep are laden with fleeces. ... They flourish continually with good things and they do not travel on ships because the grain-giving earth provides them with crops.<sup>6</sup>

This last excerpt contains some markers of a utopian situation: the absence of sorrow and strife, and the fact that people hardly work—everything grows by itself. This is typical of utopian societies, it also characterizes life in the Garden of Eden in the book of *Genesis* (written some centuries after Hesiod but not directly connected) and the primordial utopia in that other *locus classicus* for the Classical Golden Age, Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (1.89-112), which clearly is modeled on the Greek version. Ovid describes the time of Saturn as a time of justice, “when no trumpets blared the alarm of war [and] the years went by in peace” (1.99-101).

This brief outline of the mythical Golden Age is not meant to suggest that the utopian images in the poetry of Callimachus and Theocritus are literary allusion to Hesiod’s *Theogony*. The notion that at the beginning of time there had been a utopian Golden Age without hardship or violence was a common element in the religions of the Greeks and other peoples of the Ancient Near East. What I do

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<sup>5</sup> Hes., *Op.* 110-120, transl. Evelyn-White.

<sup>6</sup> Hes., *Op.*, 225-235, transl. Evelyn-White with adjustments.

want to suggest, is that the utopian images in the poetry of Callimachus and Theocritus are rooted in these beliefs.

Concerning the popularity of the Golden Age myth, Fowler and Fowler (1996: 642) explained that the “the function of the myth was always to hold up a mirror to present malaises or to presage a future return to the idyll.” In what follows I hope to show how these allusions are connected with the ideology of the new and confident imperial order that Callimachus and Theocritus belonged to, being members of the social milieu of the royal *philoï*.

#### 4. The Golden Age and imperial ideology

About the same time that Ovid created a Roman version of the Hesiodic myth, Virgil in the *Eclogues* (4) proclaimed the coming of a *new* Golden Age:

Now the last age by Cumae's Sibyl sung has come and gone, and the majestic roll of circling centuries begins anew: justice returns, returns old Saturn's reign, with a new breed of men sent down from heaven.<sup>7</sup>

How the Golden Age motif was used in Augustan propaganda is fairly well understood.<sup>8</sup> After his victory over Antony and Cleopatra, Octavian presented himself as one who had restored order throughout the Mediterranean, so that with him a new, and final, period in history began: a time of peace and prosperity that would endure for all time. This message was conveyed also with iconographical means, particularly on the Ara Pacis, the victory monument full of iconographical references to the Golden Age of Saturn (Zanker 1988, 172-174; cf. Kähler 1954; Castriota 1995). The *Res Gestae* of the deified Augustus stresses the ‘restoration’ of order through victory, and the universality of the ensuing *pax augusta* (see *i.a.* 13, 25 and 26). Virgil even provides an outright claim that the primordial Golden Age will return because of Augustus when he has Anchises prophesize that that:

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<sup>7</sup> Verg., *Ecl.* 4.5-9, transl. Greenough.

<sup>8</sup> Consult esp. Zanker 1988; Castriota 1995; Evans 2008.

This is the man, this is he, whom you have often heard promised to you,  
Augustus Caesar, the child of a god, who will found the Golden  
Age again in Latium through the fields once ruled  
by Saturn, and over both the Garamantae and the Indies  
will he extend his power; land which lies beyond the stars,  
beyond the annual path of the sun where Atlas, holding the heavens,  
turns on his shoulder the axis studded with burning stars.<sup>9</sup>

Historians tend to isolate the Augustan complex of *pax romana*, relating it specifically to the foregoing era of civil wars, which indeed came to an end with the ascendancy of Augustus. The depiction of empire as a Golden Age however already existed in the ideology of Hellenistic kingship, and the *pax augusta*, I would suggest, was the Romanized version of an image Octavian had picked up in the East rather than specifically the product of the Roman civil wars. History began anew also under Nero, who propagated his Golden Age and the extent of his power in typical Hellenistic fashion using solar imagery (Champlin 2003), and under the Antonine emperors, who favored the image of the phoenix to express the advent of a new age (Evan 2008: 12-4).

The rulers of the Seleucid and Ptolemaic empires styled themselves semi-divine saviors who protected the divine order of the gods, bringing peace and prosperity for the benefit of humanity (Strootman 2005). These claims were elaborations of older ideologies of empire in the preceding Near Eastern empires, in particular the Achaemenid kingdom. In the Hellenistic Age, a Hellenized version of imperial ideology developed to funnel negotiations between the Macedonian dynasties and Greek or Hellenized cities.

In this ideological complex, war and peace were two sides of the same coin. In order to bring peace and prosperity, war must first be waged. Chaos has to be defeated to secure order. A common motif in Hellenistic royal ideology was the presentation of the king as a vanquisher of barbarians. In relation to *Idyll 16* we already noticed the causal connection between victory and the restoration of peace. In *Idyll 16* the Carthaginians are brought up as the barbaric foes of

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<sup>9</sup> Aen. 6.791-7, transl. Evans; cf. Evans 2008: 66-7.

civilization.<sup>10</sup> The archetypal enemies of the Hellenistic order however were the peoples the Greeks called the Celts.<sup>11</sup> Thus, Antigonus Gonatas capitalized on his victory over a Celtic war band near Lysimachia to legitimize his usurpation of the Macedonian throne in 276, and both Antiochus I and Attalus I styled themselves *sōtēres* after they had defeated the Asian Galatians in battle. Through the equation of barbarians with Giants (or Titans), most clearly in the Gigantomachy frieze on the Great Altar at Pergamon, a struggle of cosmic proportions between Order and Chaos was suggested and the divine status of the king accentuated. In the *Hymn to Delos*, Callimachus equates Ptolemy Philadelphus' defeat of mutinous Celtic mercenaries in Egypt with the saving of Delphi from a Celtic attack in 279 BCE, which was attributed to the intervention of Apollo,<sup>12</sup> and it may be no coincidence that in the hymn gold features so prominently. Both Apollo and Philadelphus were saviors who delivered the world from barbarians and restored order. In *Idyll 17*, Theocritus too connects the military foundation of Hellenistic kingship with the creation of peace and order, emphasizing Ptolemy's prowess as a heroic spear-fighter:

(...) His people can work their fields in peace,  
for no enemy crosses the teeming Nile by land  
to raise the battle cry in towns that are not his,  
no enemy jumps ashore from his swift ship  
to seize with weapons the cattle of Egypt.  
Too great a man is settled in those broad fields,  
golden-haired Ptolemaios, skilled with the spear.<sup>13</sup>

Hellenistic kings did more than merely protect the divinely ordained order against intruding barbarians. They claimed in addition to actively seek the expansion of civilization. The idea that the aim of conquest was to reach a final frontier had been an essential element in the propaganda of Near Eastern conquerors since time

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<sup>10</sup> For the anti-Carthaginian *topoi* in *Idyll 16* see Hans (1985); interestingly, Pindar, to whom Theocritus continually alludes in this poem, related an earlier Syracusean defeat of the Carthaginians to the myth of the Titans (*Pyth.* 1).

<sup>11</sup> For the problems regarding the ethnic identity of these and other 'Celts' see Džino (2008).

<sup>12</sup> Callim., *Hymn* 4.171-90.

<sup>13</sup> Theocr., *Id.* 17.97-103.

immemorial. The ideal of global empire was taken over by Alexander from the Achaemenids and kept alive by the Seleucids and Ptolemies, who in turn transmitted it to their successors, the Romans and the Parthians. To be sure, universalistic pretensions are typical for most pre-industrial empires, from the Americas to China, as is also the related belief that the principal goal of empire was to secure peace in the world.<sup>14</sup>

## 5. Conquest and the expansion of civilization

Universalistic ideology required of kings to try and expand their realm in actuality. Alexander's celebrated *pothos*, in particular his determination to reach the limits of the known world, *viz.* the Ocean, stood in an age-old Near Eastern tradition. To demarcate the progress of (Hellenic) civilization, the Macedonian conqueror ordered altars to be set up in India on the banks of the Beas, the river where the gods forbade him to go farther.<sup>15</sup> Alexander's establishment of altars in India is reminiscent of the Assyrian kings' routine of erecting statues and steles at the seashore and in the mountains, and neither did the tradition die out with him. Mere decades after Alexander's death, in the 280's, the Seleucids established sanctuaries of Apollo in the frontier zone between Baktria-Sogdia and the steppes of Inner Asia, allegedly on the very same location where Greek cults had previously been introduced by Herakles, Dionysus and Alexander (Plin., *NH* 6.49). About the

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<sup>14</sup> For the similarities and differences between preindustrial empires consult Sinopoli (1994), especially p. 159, where she defines empires as "politically expansive polities, composed of a diversity of localized communities and ethnic groups". Most definitions of empire include the elements of expansion and / or universality, see e.g. Pagden (2001: 7-11); Howe (2002: 13-15); and especially Morrison (2001: 5-6). For the universalistic ideology in the Hellenistic kingdoms and its Near Eastern antecedents see Strootman forthcoming.

<sup>15</sup> This was not the only time that Alexander offered sacrifice at the extremities of his empire in hostile, barbarian territory: in central Europe at the Danube in 335 (Arr., *Anab.* 1.4.5), in Central Asia at the Jaxartes in 329 (Plin., *NH* 6.18; Orosius 1.2.5) and at the Hydaspes in 326 (Arr., *Anab.* 5.29.1-2; Plut., *Alex.* 62.7-8; Curt. 9.3.19; Diod. 17.95.1-2). The erection of altars of course implied the creation of *temenai* and the establishment of (Greek) cults.



same time, a Seleucid fleet returned from an exploration mission on the Caspian Sea, claiming to have reached the northern Ocean (Memnon 227a).

The symbolic world frontier favored by the Ptolemies was the southern Nile and Ethiopia (and in the *Argonautica* Colchis). The Ptolemaic Empire in the third century was essentially a maritime hegemonial power active in the entire eastern Mediterranean and Aegean. The Ptolemies were particularly good at styling their capital as a symbolic microcosm – unlike the Seleucids who did not have a single capital. In Alexandria objects from, and knowledge of, the whole wide world came together in zoological and botanical gardens, the Museum and the Library.<sup>16</sup> Even after the demise of the Ptolemies it could still be maintained that Alexandria was situated “at the uniting centre of the whole earth, of even its most far away nations, as if the whole city is an *agora*, bringing together all men into one place [and] making them one people” (Dio. Chrys. 32.36).

It is hardly surprising, then, that a cardinal trait of much Alexandrian court literature is its emphasis on the progress and expansion of civilization. This is particularly the case with Callimachus’ *Aitia*. Among the poems included in this collection the poems about Heracles in particular concentrate on the hero’s role as a savior who defeats monsters and introduces culture to barbaric peoples; (cf. Harder 2003). In the *Argonautica*, too, Heracles appears as a typical culture hero who prepares for the expansion of the civilized world by removing monsters and establishing (Greek) cults; Susan Stephens has pointed out that these stories have ‘colonial’ overtones, too: “[T]he logic of the *aition* is to connect the new place with Greek myth, in a way that serves to efface the native and give the intruding Greek population continuous claims to the place, to create the illusion ... not of intrusion, but of return” (Stephens 2000: 163).

The use of utopian language in Alexandrian poetry draws a parallel between the Golden Age and Ptolemaic imperial rule. The allegory of course had its limits. The pre-cultural Age of Cronus, though peaceful, was also anarchic and, precisely because there was no evil, literally lawless. In contrast, the historical present of

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<sup>16</sup> Alexandria was also literally at the center of the Ptolemaic seaborne empire: under normal weather circumstance the Levant and the Aegean could be reached from its harbors relatively easily and quickly: it was for instance only 4-5 days sailing to Ephesos (Ach. Tat., 5.15.1) and less than 3 days to Cyprus (Lucian, *Nav.* 7). The province of Egypt neither was far away from Alexandria.

Hellenistic kingship needed law and order.<sup>17</sup> Here Zeus, the law-giver, rather than Cronus was needed. Just as Zeus strictly regulates all phenomena in the universe (a main theme in that celebrated Antigonid court poem, Aratus' *Phaenomena*) so the earthly order is in Zeus' name safeguarded by the king.

## 7. The king as *heros*

In order to bridge the gap between the precultural age of Cronus and the present age of Zeus, the king is presented as a mythic *heros*. It is especially the association of kings with Heracles (see Huttner 1997) that is of relevance here. The figure of Heracles not only presented a model for kingship because he was a culture hero and *sōtēr*, but also because he had saved the divinely ordained universal order of Zeus through his crucial help in defeating the lawless, chaotic Giants; as reward for this feat Heracles was elevated to the status of an Olympian god, thus providing a useful paradigm for the apotheosis of kings (Strootman 2005; cf. Stephens 2000: 161).

Homeric spear-fighters from the heroic age could be models for Hellenistic kings, too. Alexander wished to outdo Achilles. Theocritus in *Idyll* 16 promised to make Hieron of Syracuse, "the Achilles of our time", and in *Idyll* 17 likens Ptolemy Philadelphus to both Achilles and Diomedes (lines 53-56). In art, statues such as the so-called Terme Ruler portrayed rulers as naked *promachoi*, holding a spear as the only visible sign of royalty.<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> In his discussion of the Ara Pacis, Zanker (1988: 172) argued that Augustan regime, faced with the same ambiguity, attempted to reconcile the happy anarchism of Saturn with the austere but just order of Jupiter—for instance by arranging images of lush vegetation in a strictly symmetrical fashion; the way in which the Golden Age motif was reworked in the Hellenistic monarchies seems to have aimed at resolving the same problem.

<sup>18</sup> The image of the king as a fighter whose personal bravery brings victory even against overwhelming superior enemy numbers—the motif of 'the one against the many'—is a well-known element in pre-Hellenistic Mesopotamian and Egyptian royal ideology, cf. Liverani 1981. For the ethos of Hellenistic kings as heroic *promachoi* see Strootman (2007: 31-53) and Looijenga (this volume), emphasizing the connection with the ideological complex of *doriktētos chōra*, 'spear-won land'.

In Greek mythology, the age of the heroes, the fourth *genos* of Hesiodic history immediately preceding the present, had an exceptional status.<sup>19</sup> In this era there lived “a god-like race of heroic men who are called half-gods, the race before our own” (Hes., *Op.* 159-160). Although a time of war and violence, Hesiod associates the Heroic Age through utopian language with the Golden Age of Cronus: some of the heroes who fought valiantly at the gates of Thebes or before the walls of Troy were chosen by Zeus to dwell for all time in the islands of the blessed, “untouched by sorrow [while] the grain-giving earth bears them honey-sweet crops three times a year” (170-173) while Cronus, released from his bonds by Zeus, rules over them (169a-b).

## **8. The king as harbinger of good fortune**

As we have seen, kingship could be directly connected with the fertility of the land, as in Theocritus’ encomium for Ptolemy Philadelphus or Callimachus’ *Hymn to Delos*.<sup>20</sup> There was a strong martial aspect to this motif. The ruler secured peace through victory. This message was also conveyed through royal ritual. In particular in monarchical processions and ritualized royal entries into cities, Hellenistic rulers presented themselves as bringers of peace, prosperity and justice. The king

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<sup>19</sup> The distinction between history and myth is of course a modern convention, cf. Veyne (1988: 42), assuring that in the Ancient World “absolutely no one, Christians included, ever expressed the slightest doubt concerning the historicity of Aeneas, Romulus, Theseus, Heracles, Achilles, or even Dionysus”; cf. Segal (2000: 9): “The connection between myth and history is blurry”. In Hellenistic times the Greeks’ own notion of a Classical Age was not directed towards the Periclean age but the heroic era of epic, when men were stronger and more honorable (Visser 1976), a view expressed already by Homer (e.g. Il. 1.271-2; 5.303-4). Cf. Bassi (2003), demonstrating how already the literature of fifth century Athens looked back nostalgically to the Homeric world as a time of true manliness.

<sup>20</sup> Popular too in this period was the theme of royal control of the forces of nature, which enjoyed a strong revival in Roman panegyric (Hardie 1986: 205-256); compare for instance Alexander’s calming of the waves while crossing the Gulf of Pamphilia with Caesar’s calming of the Adriatic in Lucan, *De Bello Civile* 5.476-721; see further Weinstock (1971: 212); Fiedler (1931: 10); Kovács (2009).

was a harbinger of joyful tidings, bringing good fortune to the cities he entered (Versnel 1970: 371-396; Strootman 2007: 289-305).

In ritual contexts, the Ptolemies associated themselves especially with Dionysus. Dionysus, *der kommende Gott*, was the Greek epiphany deity *par excellence* (Burkert 1994: 162 with n. 6 on p. 412), and hence, like Heracles, a royal god *par excellence* (Tondriau 1953). Versnel (1970: 250-253) has argued that Dionysus became a model for Hellenistic kingship because he defeated mortal adversaries instead of supernatural opponents, and conquered *real* territory. Dionysus' triumphs in Asia were mythical and historical at the same time. He was the victorious god who triumphed over man and world. He was not the god *of* victory, but *qualitate qua* a victorious god, whose return from the east signaled the dawn of a new age of good fortune. In the version of the Dionysian myth favored by the Ptolemies, the starting-point of Dionysius' campaign was the island of Pharos in the harbor of Alexandria.<sup>21</sup> Dionysus was moreover like Heracles a civilizer and savior, a *Cosmocrator* who bestows civilization upon the *oikoumene* (López Monteagudo 1999: 40).

The most obvious presentation of royal rule as a Dionysian *parousia* was in the so-called Grand Procession of Ptolemy Philadelphus. This *pompē*, of uncertain date, was part of the Ptolemaia, a quadrennial pan-Hellenic festival of equal status as the Olympic Games (Hölbl 2000: 94) that was meant to make the Ptolemaic capital a center of Hellenic civilization. The Ptolemaia were celebrated in honor of Zeus and the deified Savior Gods Ptolemy and Berenice, Philadelphus' parents. Lengthy excerpts from a now lost report by Callixinus of Rhodes of the procession have been preserved in the fifth book of Athenaeus' *Deipnosophistae*.<sup>22</sup> Four characteristics of the *pompē* are relevant for the present discussion. First, the

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<sup>21</sup> El-Abbadi 2004. The image of Dionysos as the victorious conqueror of Asia predates Alexander's campaigns, but the conquest specifically of India became the central aspect of the conquest myth only *after* Alexander and presumably in Ptolemaic Egypt (Goukowsky 1978: II 11-15 and 79; cf. Köhler 1996: 111-112; Strootman 2007: 347 n. 316).

<sup>22</sup> Kallixeinos, *FHG* III 58 = *FGrH* 627 F 2 *ap.* Ath. 5.196-203; cf. Moevs 1993. The most extensive study of the procession Rice (1983), concentrating on political meanings of the procession's imagery and its relation with political reality, but underrating cultic and ideological aspects, for which see Versnel (1970: 250-4); Hazzard (2000: 59-79); and Strootman (2007: 314-325).

*pompē* conveyed *tryphē*, the ostentatious display of infinite wealth as an expression of the Ptolemies' infinite power (cf. Dunand 1981: 25-6; Heinen 1983), in particular through an abundance of shining *gold*. Second, the imagery of the Grand Procession attested how far-reaching the imperial claims of the Ptolemies at that time were: personifications of *poleis* presented the Ptolemies as the protectors of all the Greeks in Europe and Asia, and various exotic animals, objects and people from peripheral lands such as Ethiopia and India amounted to a symbolic claim to the entire world. Finally, the inclusion of an army of more than 80,000 men underlined the monarchies' ability to protect and conquer.

All the gods were present with their own processions, but the largest and richest of them all was the *pompē* of Dionysus. The Dionysian procession began at dawn and lasted until sunset; more than 10,000 people marched in it. After satyrs carrying torches had chased away the darkness of the night, the coming of Dionysus was heralded by 120 royal pages who burned incense on gold trenchers to indicate a divine epiphany. Dionysus appeared as the god of light returning from the East: the triumphant conqueror who had defeated the forces of darkness and thus had bestowed peace upon the *oikoumenē* (López Monteagudo 1999: 40; cf. Dunbabin 1971). He was accompanied by women with golden wings personifying his military victories. A woman carrying a palm branch personified the coming of the New Year, and another one, carrying a gold cornucopia, the New Era heralded by the coming of the god. They were followed by personifications of the seasons carrying the produce appropriate to each of them, thus promising the spectators a prosperous future.

The Dionysian procession moreover included many carts with tableaux vivant showing scenes from the life of the god and emphasizing the utopian abundance promised by the god. There was for instance a large cart, drawn by 600 men, carrying a replica of the cave in which Dionysus was raised by nymphs, which Athenaeus (Ath. 5.200c) citing Callixinus, describes as:

profusely overgrown with ivy and yew. Out of it pigeons, ring-doves and turtle-doves flew forth along the whole route, with ribbons tied to their feet so that the spectators could more easily catch them. And from it gushed forth two springs: one of milk, the other of wine.

The last cart of the Dionysian procession demonstratively carried huge statue of Ptolemy Philadelphus accompanied by personifications of his empire, linking Dionysus directly with the Ptolemaic monarchy. (Why however Dionysus does not feature prominently in court poetry of the same time is a question yet to be answered.)

Hazzard (2000: 18-46), has suggested that the Ptolemaia announced the *beginning* of a new age, a Ptolemaic counterpart of the Seleucid imperial era which he calls the Soter Era because of the posthumous deification of Ptolemy I as Savior God.<sup>23</sup> Unlike the Seleucid Era, however, the Golden Age of Philadelphus was not connected with a system of year reckoning and the Ptolemaia Festival rather seems to have celebrated a more timeless image of empire. There is unambiguous evidence, however, that some two centuries later a Ptolemaic Era including a new system of year reckoning was indeed established when Cleopatra VII revived the Golden Age imagery of her ancestors.

## **9. The Golden Age of Cleopatra VII**

Between 41-31 BCE, when Cleopatra was allied to Marc Antony and her influence in the eastern Mediterranean was at its peak, the announcement of the beginning of a new era in history, with 37/6 BCE as Year One, became the principal message in Ptolemaic imperial propaganda. It is ironic that this new era began less than a decade before the destruction of the Ptolemaic Empire.

The new era was first announced in a public ritual in 37/6 at Antioch, formerly one of the residences of the Seleucids, and was meant to substitute the Seleucid Era, which was still in use throughout the Middle East. Because the Seleucid dynasty had become extinct in the patriline, the basic thought behind Cleopatra's new era was her (justified) claim to be the official heir of the Seleucids'

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<sup>23</sup> The Seleucid Era, which starts in 312/1 BCE presumably was established by Antiochus I in honor of his deified father Seleucus I (281-261); it may have had Babylonian antecedents, in particular the failed Era of Nabopolassar (Hallo 1984/1985); the Seleucid Era also clearly draws on the Greek notion of a succession of ages, *viz.* (four) empires as found e.g. in Hesiod, Herodotos and especially the Hellenistic sections of the Book of *Daniel* (Gatz 1967, 106-8).

status as Great Kings in the matriline. Hence Cleopatra's title of Queen of Kings. The combined realms of Ptolemies and Seleucids amounted to a theoretical empire encompassing the eastern Mediterranean and Asia as far as Bactria and Sogdia – albeit under Roman suzerainty and in due time to be led by Ptolemy XV (Caesarion), the son of Caesar and adoptive son of Antony, aptly surnamed Philopator Philometor. Most of the former Seleucid empire had yet to be reconquered from the Parthians. It was essentially an attempt to incorporate republican Rome in the monarchical world of the Hellenistic east (Strootman 2010b).

The new era was propagated on Egyptian papyri, on Levantine inscriptions, and on coins found as far from Egypt as the Crimean (Volkman 1953: 116-122; Schrapel 1996: 209-223). It is best known however from descriptions of the so-called Donations of Alexandria, the modern designation for a second ritual taking place in 34 BCE. Relatively detailed accounts of this spectacular ceremony have survived in Plutarch's biography of Marc Antony (54.3-6) and Dio Cassius' *Roman History* (49.40.2-41.3; there are no extant sources describing the earlier ritual at Antioch).

The ceremonial began with the entry of Antony into Alexandria dressed as the victorious Dionysus presenting the spoils of the east (*i.e.* the booty and prisoners taken in his Armenian campaign of 31 BCE); the procession ended with offerings in the great temple of Sarapis, the Ptolemaic god of kingship who could be identified with both Dionysus and Osiris (Dio Cass. 49.40.2-3; Vell. Pat. 2.82; Plut., *Ant.* 50.4).<sup>24</sup> Thereafter Antony proclaimed Cleopatra and her infant children were proclaimed rulers of the entire east, from Cyrene and the Hellespont to India. Cleopatra and her eldest son Ptolemy XV Caesar ('Caesarion'), with whom she shared the throne, moreover received the titles of Queen of Kings and King of Kings

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<sup>24</sup> Hoping to pacify the Hellenistic world, Antony had long before styled himself a Hellenistic *basileus* in all but title. Already in 41 BCE he had entered Ephesus in a bacchanal procession as the incarnate Dionysus (Plut., *Ant.* 24.4) and earlier had received cultic honors as *Neos Dionysos* in Athens (Socrates of Rhodes, *FGrH* 192 F 2; Sen., *Suas.* 1.6.7; cf. Śnieżewski 1998; on the epithet see Tondriau 1953), crucial for his 'monarchical' representation was his hierogamous union with Cleopatra VII, *Thea Neōtera*, at Tarsus. When Antony and Kleopatra prepared for the war against Octavian on Samos, they held many celebrations in honor of Dionysus (Plut., *Ant.* 56.6-10).

respectively. Antony furthermore acknowledged paternity of Cleopatra's twins, Alexander and Cleopatra.

To emphasize the coming of an everlasting Golden Age, Antony and Cleopatra made abundant use of solar symbolism because in the Hellenistic east the sun was a symbol of the expectation of a Golden Age (Grant 1972: 171-175; Tarn 1932). The twins Alexander and Cleopatra received the epithets Helios and Selene as a reference to the eternal power exercised in the universe by the sun and the moon.<sup>25</sup>

## 10. Conclusion

I hope to have shown how the images of abundance and peace as they are so often found in Hellenistic panegyric poetry fit into the Ptolemaic ideology of empire, and how they were connected with the expressions of a golden age in the ritual representation of the monarchy.

The conceptualization of the entire (civilized) world was a single empire was continually propagated by Near Eastern monarchies from the Third Millennium onward. Undoubtedly it appealed to some common belief, a certain kind of faith in a legitimate high king whose presence had some connection with the divinely ordained order of the universe. The presence of a world ruler at the center of civilization was an essential condition for peace, order and prosperity. After Alexander, the doctrine that the entire *oikoumenē* should be a unity under the rule of a single king assuring peace and prosperity, continued to be a core element in the imperial ideologies of the Seleucids and Ptolemies.

Like the other Macedonian dynasties of the Hellenistic East, the rulers of the Ptolemaic Empire explained their imperialist activities in the eastern Mediterranean by claiming that Ptolemaic hegemony secured peace and prosperity. In this ideology, which is commonly found in Ancient empires, the creation of peace and the use of force are interrelated. The king was both victor and savior. He was a heroic spear-fighter who protected his people like a shepherd

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<sup>25</sup> For Cleopatra's solar propaganda in general see Grant (1972: 142-4) and Śnieżewski (1998: 135-138).



protects his flock. He was a 'culture hero' who expanded the limits of the civilized world through conquest, introducing civilization to barbaric peoples. This two-sided coin of war and peace legitimized the extraction of tribute from conquered territories, particularly Egypt, with which Ptolemaic naval power was financed. To be sure, most of the people actively involved in the Ptolemaic imperial system of the third century benefited directly or indirectly from warfare.

The typical Near Eastern image of a peaceful empire spanning the entire (civilized) world preceded Hellenistic imperial ideology by many centuries. After the Hellenistic Age it endured in the empires of the Parthians, Sassanians, Ummayyads, and various others. Brought to the west by Octavian, the introduction of this ideological complex in Rome by Augustan propaganda-makers marked the transition from Civil Wars to Principate, becoming in due time the eternal *pax romana*. The Roman imperial peace and its many later incarnations remained the principal legitimization of imperial expansion and rule in later European history until the collapse of the Ottoman empire in the First World War. In fact, just as universalism is typical for most empires, so is the idea of peace. From the *pax Mongolica* to the *pax Americana*, the claim of securing peace in the world through military force has been such a prominent and recurrent element in imperial legitimization that it cannot be explained simply in terms of continuity.<sup>26</sup>

How appealing such legitimization can be, even in the long run, was unwittingly expressed by that reviewer who found that from Nicholas Hammond's book *The Genius of Alexander the Great* (1997) "the picture of Alexander the peacemaker emerges, who brings prosperity."<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Howard 2000 argued that 'peace' is a modern concept; see however the essays collected in Raaflaub 2007

<sup>27</sup> C.A. La'da in *Mnemosyne* 52 (1999) 757-761, at 759. As regards the persistence of the idea: presumably with the present-day United States in mind, La'da considered that this "positive image of Alexander ... is favourable in a strikingly *modern* way" (my emphasis, RS). Concerning the enduring success of Ptolemaic propaganda it is worth quoting W.W. Tarn (1913: 216), who was convinced that Ptolemy I "[a]lone of the kings of his time ... was no warrior"; cf. Ager (2003: 37), to whom I owe this quotation.

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