

Michael E. Brumbaugh *The New Politics of Olympos: Kingship in Kallimachos' Hymns*

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In the past decades, an increasing interest has been devoted to the appearance of a certain number of divinities within the context of Hellenistic Poetry. Building on Feeney's work,¹ a flourishing secondary literature has sought to elucidate the specific reshaping of traditional goddesses and their peculiar role in the new milieu of Alexandrian climate under the supremacy of the Ptolemaic dynasty. In this socio-political setting, poets were engaged in the cultural politics promoted by the new royal court, with the aim of obtaining a swift and solid acknowledgement embedded in the traditional literary and more broadly cultural Greek heritage. Brumbaugh's (hereafter B.) new volume aims to distinguish the specific competence of the praise poetry as it appears in the collection of Kallimachos' *Hymns*, and, more specifically, the way in which Zeus is here represented and remoulded.

In the introduction (1-18), B. sets out the central ideas of the book, which aims at investigating the well-known connection between Hellenistic poetry and politics through the manner in which Kallimachos shapes Olympic gods within the poetic book of the *Hymns*.

¹ Feeney 1991.



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Through the lens of the gods celebrated, Kallimachos renders his contribution to the proliferating discourse on Hellenistic kingship with a particular hint at the emerging Ptolemaic dynasty. The political significance of the six hymns is enhanced by the educated audience targeted by Kallimachos, including the royal *philoi*, which constituted a certain bridge between the intellectual sphere and the Ptolemaic court, drawing them into “a larger discussion on power, authority, and just rule” (18).

In the first chapter (21-52), starting from a cautious approach to a fully identification between the Zeus praised in the first hymn and Ptolemy Philadelphos, the author envisages a more complex and ambiguous relationship between the lord of the gods and any Ptolemaic king; in fact, Kallimachos links the qualities of Zeus to those of Ptolemy in terms of paradigm and likeness, examining the rhetorical ways employed in the poetic text. An important strategy adopted by the poet is a subtle revision of the standard mythical tradition relating to Zeus. B. claims, for example, that Kallimachos decoupled the violence typical in the relationship between Zeus and his father Kronos, as well-attested in Hesiod’s *Theogony*, in order to fit this into a pacific and stable image of the new Greek dynasty. It is a fact that the succession in the Ptolemaic court constituted a very anxious moment since the power of Ptolemy Philadelphos would have been contested by other aspirants. Given the “loss of many of the works that he [i.e. Kallimachos] would have known frustrates our attempts to interpret and tempts us to overstate his engagement with those texts that have survived, particularly Homer and Hesiod”.² As a consequence, I agree with B. that the omission of Zeus’ primary weapon, the thunderbolt (*keranos*) responds to the necessity of avoiding any kind of allusion to his rival for the throne, his half-brother Ptolemy Keraunos. Nevertheless, the presentation of the antagonism between father and son seems here overestimated, as it is not at all erased (46) since Kronos and his threatening presence appears in a context where the poet gives much more importance to the dynamic relation between the mother Rhea and the son born as Zeus. In this sense, the alternating references to Zeus as father and son should be related to the very newly shaped figure of Rhea, that the author interprets following the traditional metapoetic reading of the episode. A political reading of the hymn should rather have insisted on the new localization of Zeus’ birth in Arcadia (and not in Crete according to the traditional version of the myth) as a kind of poetic response to Magas’ either obtained or threatened predominance in Kyrenaika, Kallimachos’ native region and traditionally linked with Arcadia.³ The pre-

² Stephens 2003, 76.

³ McLennan 1977, 29; Stephens 2015, 48.

sentation of a unified kingdom without any internal rupture would serve as a strong support to the Ptolemaic dynasty.

In the second chapter (53-89), Kallimachos' transformation of the traditional myth is further analysed. B. highlights Zeus' ascension and the success of his regime as the result of his strength and capacity, and not as the casual outcome of *tyche* as it appears to be in Homer (*Il.* 15.187-92). Thus, the succession is not deprived by any kind of power and violence, even though the traditional myth of Kronos seems to be mitigated. Nevertheless, Zeus' greatness also entails intellectual ability, and this is expected also for the ideal king Ptolemy so that he can exercise undeviating justice. Interesting is the contextualization, if quite cursory, of the imagery employed to praise Zeus' deeds within the former Greek reflection on kingship (69-73) which could be an important integration to the quite abused "double-seeing" view.⁴ The aim of the *Hymn to Zeus* is also to define the relationship between the *laudandus*, Zeus/Ptolemy, and the poet, who repeatedly emphasizes the reliable character of his poetry in respect to the rest of the Greek tradition, and, in demanding authority, highlights "the validity of his own poetic discourse as a means of mediating the king's speech" (86).

In the third chapter (90-124), B. builds upon the well-known meta-poetic interpretation of the opening Rhea episode, wherein the poet employs a wide range of images and rhetorical tropes, assembling a kind of "manifesto" comprising the prerogatives and the functions of his poetry within the political frame of the Ptolemaic dynasty; in particular, "Rhea's search for a stream provides a dramatic parallel for the search for excellent praise poetry in which the poet, like the goddess, is frustrated" (107). Compelled by the shortage of water necessary to bathe her son Zeus, who is being born, Rhea beseeches her mother Gaia to aid her in these crucial circumstances. After having struck the hillside, a stream gushes forth, spelling an end to the goddess' troubles and the poet's anxieties. Nevertheless, this triangular relationship remains yet not clearly explained. B. underscores the absence of water before the arrival of Rhea and the morphological transformation of the place with the creation of a stream, but the fact that Kallimachos claims that water flows beneath in abundance passes completely unnoticed. This is not a mere question of detail since it implies a more substantial comprehension of the links between the figures in the scene. Gaia may represent the rich and profound Greek literary tradition, since she keeps a treasure of water in her chthonic depths which the poet/Rhea is unable to levera-

⁴ On this, see the seminal volume of Stephens 2003. Nevertheless, it is necessary to give proper consideration to the Greek cultural legacy well known by Alexandrian poets and shared with their public. On this, see Männlein-Robert 2010, 160-86.

ge. Kallimachos dramatizes in this way his profound and insightful approach to the poetical tradition, and also his attempt to extrapolate something innovative, fresh, and current also in view of the new political context.⁵ Moreover, it is not Gaia but Rhea who determines the new spring – Rhea operates actively in striking the ground – only supported by her mother. In this way, Kallimachos asserts his creative talent, since he finds a solution to the impasse by generating new laudatory poetry for Zeus and Ptolemy alike.

The fourth chapter (127-61) deals with the political ideology behind the figure of Apollo. Building on the idea of Kallimachos' *Hymns* as a collection arranged by the poet himself, B. highlights its close proximity to the *Hymn to Zeus* and the resonances between in reference to the *paradigma* of good kingship. Apollo in fact appears to be as patron of kings and cities, emphasizing his role in the foundation of the poet's native place, Kyrene. The depiction of Apollo as benefactor of the city might be related not only to speculative thought on ideal kingship in the Hellenistic period (137), but also with the self-representation of the Ptolemies as *Euergetes*, an important Ptolemaic cult title which could aid in reading the hymn against the contest at that time.⁶ Nevertheless, Apollo is not only a benefactor, but also a vengeful god, ready to curtail any violation of the ruling *kosmos*, wherein he protects his clients, the Ptolemies, recalling the same portrayal of Zeus in the first hymn. The patronage of Apollo turns out to be broader, since he is "wide-ranging in skill" (v. 42), encompassing "archers, diviners, prophets, doctors, herdsman, and city-founder kings like Battos as well as poets and choruses" (150). In the last part of the chapter, B. identifies similarities between the *Hymn to Apollo* and the following *Hymn to Artemis*, wherein any transgressor against the gods is punished, as is demonstrated by a long series of mythical examples. On this, the two siblings, Apollo and Artemis, agree, even if a kind of rivalry among them is depicted in the third hymn. Nevertheless, the *eris* is innocuous, and might be read as a subtle attempt to replace the harmful anti-dynastic strife with "charming and harmless sibling rivalry" (159).

In the fifth chapter (162-90), the *Hymn to Delos* is placed within an ideological program conceived as celebrating the transformation of the Ptolemaic kingdom into an overseas empire. Although B. seeks to read each hymn as a part of a coherent collection, he failed to detect the corresponding and completing consonances between the

⁵ Actually, B. has fairly demonstrated the way as the poet impose the authority of his poetry taking distance or altering the mythic tradition (Chapter 1-2).

⁶ On the contrary, B. lends particular attention to other Ptolemaic epiclesis, such as *Soter* and *Philadelphos*. This could support the dating of this hymn under Ptolemy III Euergetes and Berenike II (see pp. 11 and 142).

first and the fourth hymns. For example, in the first *Hymn to Zeus*, the kingdom of the Ptolemies appears to be connotated in territorial terms, whereby the barren and dry Arcadia undergoes a transformation with the birth of Zeus and the establishment of his power. Moreover, from a gender perspective, the partnership of female goddesses (such as Rhea and Leto) in the foundation of the new cosmic order might have been further emphasized, since it represents a very new aspect within Hellenistic ideology on kingship.⁷ B. highlights the historical frame of the fourth hymn, considering “Apollo and Ptolemy as joint saviors for their victory over the Gauls” (179). Next to this positive model of king, Kallimachos serves to outline the negative profile of the negative king, the despot, as represented by Hera, Ares, and Iris, who are unable to cope with power and instead of protecting the cities became their dreadful oppressor.

The sixth chapter (191-238) is centered on the figures of the queens as it emerges from the depiction of the goddesses in the *Hymns*. Here, B. considers the traces of two competitive ideologies: the good and the bad queenship. The first figure analyzed is Artemis, who appears at first as the “mistress of beasts” and wild nature, but later becomes a queen with specific interests in civic matters within the third hymn. Even though the author recognizes a few quite superficial similarities between the first and the third hymns, i.e. between the kingship of Zeus and that of her daughter Artemis, the connection with the ancestor Rhea and Artemis are left unobserved. In an attempt to construct an image of continuity and stability, the same Arsinoë II encouraged the cult of her mother Berenike I. By pointing out the role of Rhea for the new civic order ruled by her son Zeus and the power exerted by Artemis in an urban context, B. might have pointed out a more profound politic of queenship. Further on, Athena and Demeter appear as arbiters of justice and benefactresses of the cities they protect. On the contrary, Hera displays a different set of qualities, since she is “vindictive, irrational, cruel, and obsessive” (236). Even if so depicted, and since she is not the *laudanda* of any of the extant hymns, Hera would also more ironically represent the peculiarities of each Hellenistic queen necessary to reach specific political goals. In any case, a broader study of the figure of the goddesses as they are depicted in several Hellenistic poets might furnish a better understanding of this central aspect of the *Kulturpolitik* of the Ptolemis. Thus, the conclusions of this book are a noteworthy contribution to the field of Hellenistic poetry representing an excellent starting point for further research.

⁷ See Depew 2004, 117-37; Caneva 2012, 75-101; Parodi 2018.

The book is well edited,⁸ and the analysis is generally sound. A flawed tendency within the argumentation is the recurrent attempt to detect plays of assonances between simple words and an alleged political implication. While the example of *keraios* seems plausible (47), this is hardly the case for *olizon* (64) and *ptoliarchos* (68), which are rather forced and overcomplex.

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8 I have identified only a few errors: false Greek accents (129, 135, 161, 232); a repetition (54: "over the second half the of the hymn"); a wrong syllabication (221 note 112: *περσέπτολις*); missing capital letter (238 nota 172); missing periods (162 at the end of the first sentence; 186-7 and 225 at the end of the citations).