This closely argued and well-referenced monograph is a ‘big idea’ book. As such books do, it rejects some earlier theories, in this case those surrounding Ptolemaic kingship and queenship. The actions of members of the Ptolemy family do not articulate an ideology of kingship, R.A. Hazzard argues in the concluding Summary (158), though contemporaries may have wanted to sell such an ideology to kings. Ptolemy I used to read philosophical treatises about kingship (103, 157), thus succeeding (so Demetrius of Phalerum said) in coming across things people would not have said to his face. Descendants, except perhaps Ptolemy VIII Euergetes, were less assiduous readers.

With no set ideology of kingship subscribed to in the palace of Alexandria, Hazzard can argue (against Grace Macurdy and more recent feminist scholars) that Cleopatra II did not establish a principle of Equal Rights for Queens (158) and (inferentially) probably would not have cared a fig for any such principle. All she wanted between 145 and 124 was to get the better of her brother and husband Euergetes. ‘Monarchy’, Hazzard generalizes (156), ‘... depends on the resolve and intelligence of each ruler, whose range of powers can expand or contract regardless of legal niceties and formal arrangements.’

So what, in among all this Realpolitik, is the ‘big idea’? Half of it is that while Ptolemy II’s move to marry and heap honours on his full sister Arsinoe II did not, on the one hand, mean that she became an active partner in governing Egypt and the empire, or a powerful figure at court (81-100), it did, on the other hand, create something that looked (to members of the family in the two succeeding centuries) like a precedent in such a direction. ‘Arsinoe was the model for other Ptolemaic queens’ (115). Cleopatra I in her regency, then her daughter and granddaughter Cleopatra II and Cleopatra III, began to translate into real power the aura which surrounded the great goddess Arsinoe Philadelphus.
‘Peace and queenly rule went hand in hand’, Hazzard generalizes (127), too quickly, discussing why Cleopatra I did not go to war to recover Coele-Syria from the Seleucids. Here is the second half of the ‘big idea’. But if, impossibly, she had known how Antiochus IV would treat her children Ptolemy VI and Cleopatra II in and after 170, might Cleopatra I have avoided the mistaken assumption that her birth-family and her husband’s family need not come into conflict again? Hazzard, however, argues that non-martial monarchy was a recurrent theme in Ptolemaic self-presentation (so far, so uncontroversial), and even Ptolemaic policy. Hence the importance of Dionysus in the Grand Procession of Ptolemy II (on 25 January 262, marking the commencement of the Soter era, Hazzard argues): ‘the King, by including the least martial of Greek gods among his ancestors, justified his absence from the field of conflict’ (70, cf. 107 and 115). In due course Ptolemy III had ‘civilian monarchy’ thrust upon him after his early invasion of the Seleucid empire (111), and Ptolemy IV ‘assumed the character of Dionysos’ when he came to the throne in 222 (115-6); and finally Cleopatra VII, another ‘civilian monarch’ (152), cast herself as one divine consort or another to Mark Antony’s Dionysus.

The ‘Dionysus equals non-martial monarchy’ equation is not quite as simple as Hazzard wishes it to be. Alexander the Great may have adopted a Dionysus pose in Carmania, though Ptolemy’s History did not record this (Arrian Anabasis 6.28.1-2); and he seems to have been interested in the story of Dionysus’ expedition to India (Arrian Anabasis 5.2.1-7). Therefore, I would argue, the Dionysiac theme in the Grand Procession was probably more about ‘Ptolemy II, true inheritor of the mantle of Alexander’ than ‘Ptolemy II, peaceful monarch’.

The overall Hazzard metanarrative is not made more persuasive by a tendency to be cavalier about separating the focus proposed in the book’s title (the monarchy, and the way it was imagined) from other factors bearing on events. ‘The Alexandrians’, for instance, are routinely referred to with little or no discussion of who they were. ‘The Alexandrians invested Euergetes with sovereign powers’ (127) after Antiochus IV defeated and captured Philometor (this from Polybius), and ‘the Alexandrians’ called Euergetes ‘Kakergetes’ (this from Athenaeus), in contrast to disgruntled intellectuals who called him
‘Physcon’ (134). The same Alexandrians? Surely courtiers were ‘the Alexandrians’ behind making Euergetes king (names could be given, viz Comanus and Cineas [cf. Polybius 28.19.1]: see C. Habicht at Cambridge Ancient History VIII², 344), but someone nearer the level of marketplace gossip and street graffiti was behind substituting Kak- for Eu-?

More seriously, Hazzard appears to underrate the impact of Rome on the politics of second- and first-century Egypt. Philometor’s return to Alexandria passes (127) without a hint of C. Popillius Laenas and the Day of Eleusis. But from then on, any dispute arising in the Ptolemy family could be submitted to Romans for adjudication. So in 139 Scipio Aemilianus, Spurius Mummius and Lucius Metellus told Ptolemy Euergetes to let Cleopatra II stay on as queen, although her and Galaistes’ revolt had failed (cf. 133-5). The powers of monarchs ‘can expand or contract’ (156), yes; but in (let’s say) the second half of the Ptolemaic period, Romans called the shots, ‘regardless of legal niceties’, when they wished to take the trouble; by then, surely, the dead hand of Philadelphus had little to do with the way policy developed?

Hazzard is convincing on the Marmor Parium and the Soter era, but his explanation of the Grand Procession (and his dating of it to 262) poses a paradox: why no apparent reference to Arsinoe II? The explanation (81) that Arsinoe’s role at the Ptolemaic court was so controversial that her cult could not, in 262, feature in the design of the procession, seems odd and puzzling in view of the way she continued to feature in coins, statues, temples, namings of cities, streets, the whole Fayum (cf. 99-100). No sign there that Ptolemy II was embarrassed about having married his full sister. Perhaps the last word on this question has not yet been said. In general this excellent and ingenious book is perhaps better for its discussion of detailed points than for the theory it offers as the key to interpreting the Ptolemaic kingdom as a whole.

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