

The Dutch Iron Age: Colonial Ambivalence in Two Latin Poems by Caspar Barlaeus

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Abstract

This article analyses two thus far unstudied Latin poems by the prominent humanist scholar Caspar Barlaeus (1584-1648): *Argo Batava* (1629), which celebrates the Dutch capture of the Spanish treasure fleet in 1628; and *Triumphus super capta Olinda* (1630), on the conquest of the Portuguese settlement Olinda in Brazil in 1630. These two poems, we argue, give significant clues regarding the ambivalence that characterised Barlaeus's views regarding the Dutch pursuit of empire. By discussing these poems together within the contexts of the early modern reception of the classics and the development of Dutch empire in the Atlantic world, we show how Barlaeus's

baroque poetry mixed triumphalism with pessimism and celebrated as well as criticised Dutch colonialism as a project of laudable yet dangerous ambition. In creatively appropriating the classical narratives of the Argonauts, Aeneas's arrival on Italian soil, and the imperial contest between Rome and Carthage, Barlaeus hinted that the Dutch Republic could succeed in outdoing the Spanish monarchy and in establishing settlements overseas but, blinded by the lust for gold and profit, would not be able to escape the perils of living in an Iron Age.

Keywords: Dutch empire, classical reception, poetry, Caspar Barlaeus, war, profit, Argonauts, Aeneas, settler colonialism

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Traditional scholarship on early modern Dutch colonial history has generally prioritised a socio-economic approach that underlined the supposedly pragmatic and business-oriented nature of Dutch colonialism. More recent studies in cultural and intellectual history have problematised these earlier accounts by revealing the extent to which Dutch colonial endeavours were motivated by – and in turn motivated – abstract discussions on the politics, morality, and justice of Dutch empire-building. Following the foundational studies by Benjamin Schmidt on the Dutch imagination of the Americas and by Martine van Ittersum on the colonial involvement of Hugo Grotius, the past decade has seen a steady rise of new scholarship on the ideas and imagery of empire that developed in tandem with the development of Dutch empire from the late sixteenth century onwards.¹ This article contributes to this new trend in the intellectual history of early modern Dutch colonialism by examining two important – but thus far unstudied – Latin poems written in 1629 and 1630 by the prominent humanist scholar Caspar Barlaeus (1584–1648). These two celebratory poems, written on the occasion of, respectively, the capture of the Spanish treasure fleet in 1628 and the capture of the Portuguese settlement Olinda in Brazil in 1630, give significant clues regarding the ambivalence that characterized Barlaeus's views regarding the Dutch pursuit of empire. As we will show by discussing the contents of these poems, Barlaeus's poetry represented an ambiguous humanist attitude that celebrated as well as criticised Dutch colonial endeavours, weaponizing classical references and tropes to paint a picture of Dutch empire as a project of laudable yet dangerous ambition, chasing after glory and gold in an Iron Age.

Caspar van Baerle, who Latinised his name as Barlaeus, is no stranger to scholars of Dutch colonial history. His history of the eight-year-reign of Johan Maurits of Nassau as governor-general of Brazil, *Rerum per octennium in Brasilia historia* (1647), has received ample attention as one of the crucial seventeenth-century publications on Dutch empire

¹ Schmidt, *Innocence Abroad*; Van Ittersum, *Profit and Principle*. Typical of traditional modes of scholarship are the authoritative overview studies by Gaastra, *Geschiedenis van de VOC* and Den Heijer, *Geschiedenis van de WIC*. For the recent intellectual turn, see Koekkoek, Richard, and Weststeijn (eds.), *The Dutch Empire*. See also, most recently, Pieterse and Stegeman, *Uitverkoren*.

in the Atlantic world.² Barlaeus is, moreover, widely known as one of the first professors, together with Gerard Vossius, of the Amsterdam Athenaeum Illustre, where he gave his famous speech at the opening of the school in 1632 on the ideal of the *mercator sapiens*: the educated merchant who combines theoretical knowledge with business acumen.³ What is less known is that Barlaeus's involvement in the promotion of knowledge to sustain the fledgling Dutch colonial empire begun already a decade before, shortly after the foundation of the Dutch West India Company (wic) in 1621. The following year, he translated a number of texts describing the New World into Latin with the clear intent of assisting and legitimising Dutch incursions into Spanish America.⁴

Barlaeus was especially active, and widely praised, as a prolific Latin poet, who versified for money and patronage with a view to improving his social status. Having been dismissed from his first academic position at Leiden in 1619 due to his Arminian sympathies, Barlaeus anxiously sought for intellectual rehabilitation during the 1620s. This had severe consequences for his mental health (his suffering from 'melancholy' could be called an early modern variety of a burnout) but also met with eventual success: thanks to his friendship with Constantijn Huygens, he gained direct access to the Orange court of Stadholder Frederick Henry.⁵ While he was steadily writing his way up the ladder in the inner circles of Dutch republican politics, Barlaeus responded to the news that the Dutch had captured the Spanish treasure fleet by composing an epic poem in dactylic hexameters dedicated to Piet Hein: *Argo Batava*, 'The Dutch Argo', published in Leiden with the printer Govert Basson in 1629.⁶ A year later, Barlaeus seized the occasion of the wic campaign in Brazil to revisit the colonial world in a second epic poem, *Triumphus super capta Olinda*, 'Triumph over the captured Olinda', published with the same printer.⁷ The two poems were subsequently included in a collection of Barlaeus' poetry in 1630 and frequently republished in later anthologies.⁸

Leaning into the typical grandiloquence of epic and laudatory poetry, Barlaeus's two colonial poems from 1629 and 1630 offer an expression of baroque imperial thinking that is at the same time pragmatic and grandiose, both triumphalist and pessimist. This

² See for example Harmsen, 'Barlaeus's Description'; Phaf-Rheinberger, 'Myths of Early Modernity'; Dams, 'Production, Communication, and Comprehension'; Sutton, 'Possessing Brazil'; Van Groesen, *Amsterdam's Atlantic*, 161-165; Vanhaelen, 'The Plantation Worldscape'.

³ Barlaeus, *Wise Merchant*; Van Miert, *Illuster Onderwijs*.

⁴ De Herrera, *Novus orbis*.

⁵ The most extensive biographical study of Barlaeus is still Worp, 'Barlaeus'. For his mental illness, see Blok, *Barlaeus*; and Kooijmans, *Melancholie*.

⁶ Barlaeus, *Argo Batava*.

⁷ Barlaeus, *Triumphus*.

⁸ Barlaeus, *Poematum liber novus*, 30-42 (*Argo Batava*) and 111-117 (*Triumphus*). The two poems feature prominently in the 1631 anthology of Barlaeus's poetry published by Elsevier, *Poematum editio nova* (see note 60 below) and they are also included in later anthologies from 1645-1646 and 1655. The 1645-1646 anthology is available online at <https://www.let.leidenuniv.nl/Dutch/Latijn/Barlaeus01.html> (accessed on 19 October 2025). While there are minor differences between the various editions to be found in a handful of individual words, none significantly changes the meaning of the text. All references in this article are to the first editions of the poems, both published by Govert Basson.

ambiguity regarding the Dutch pursuit of empire, which in many ways foreshadows the ambivalence in Barlaeus's later treatise on Johan Maurits of Nassau,⁹ pivots on a distinct adaptation of two classical narratives commonly used to legitimise the Spanish and Portuguese empires. The first narrative is that of the voyage of the Argonauts. Whereas Spanish authors compared their famous explorers to modern-day Argonauts, they neglected the pessimistic outlook of their classical references; Barlaeus revisits the original implication that the voyage of the Argonauts ended a Golden Age. The second narrative is that of Aeneas's arrival and settlement on the Italian peninsula. Barlaeus uses this reference to Aeneas as a literary comment on Dutch exploits in the Americas, but in doing so, he surprisingly compares the new Dutch colony of Olinda to Carthage, not to Rome, thus by implication raising doubts about the prospects of imperial competition with the Spanish monarchy.

Exploring these two poems and narratives in detail, the analysis presented here will lay bare the moral ambivalence of Barlaeus's baroque Latin epic about the Dutch pursuit of empire, specifically regarding the role of colonial riches. His work suggests that Dutch moral unease regarding sudden material abundance, famously described by Simon Schama as an 'embarrassment of riches', extended into the realm of colonial thought.¹⁰ Barlaeus' poetry thus offers a window into the intellectual tensions that underpinned Dutch colonial ambitions in the seventeenth century.

Imperial competition and colonial riches

The starting point of Barlaeus's two colonial poems is a narrative of Dutch colonial warfare and expansion as motivated by the necessity of self-defence and the justice of revenge against the Spanish monarchy. He relates how, caught in a stalemate after decades of war in their own territories, the Dutch made the bold move of taking the war to the Spanish territories. Spain appears invincible because of its colonial riches, and nothing will stop the Spanish if they are able to monopolise the sources of that wealth. For Barlaeus, the Dutch therefore have no choice but to follow in Spain's colonial footsteps. Moreover, they also have the right to do so, because Spanish claims to exclusive dominion over the Americas are essentially unfounded. As it is phrased in *Argo Batava*:

Whatever the ingenuity of Vespucci found in this world,
know, Dutchman, that it was discovered for you.
The kingdoms that Columbus revealed are now open to your people.
The battles fought by the Spaniard have been turned to our use.¹¹

⁹ See Weststeijn, 'Republican Empire'; and Weststeijn, 'Machiavelli in Dutch Colonial Ideology'.

¹⁰ Schama, *Embarrassment of Riches*; Schama's lack of attention to the Dutch colonial world, specifically to slavery, has been critically addressed by Buck-Morss, 'Hegel and Haiti'.

¹¹ Barlaeus, *Argo Batava*, 13. 'Quicquid in hoc reperit Vespucci industria mundo, / Inventum tibi, Belga, scias. quae regna Columbo, / Iam populo patuere tuo. quae praelia gessit / Cantaber, haec nostros etiam confecit in usus.' Unless otherwise noted, all translations are by the authors.

Revisiting Grotius's influential defence of Dutch interloping in Spanish and Portuguese colonial waters and territories, Barlaeus similarly states in *Triumphus super capta Olinda* that the land and the sea are to be shared also with 'us', the Dutch:

[We] believe the land and the sea are held in common
with us, and we trade gold within the same borders.¹²

Grotius and Barlaeus were close acquaintances who were in frequent correspondence, and Barlaeus also sent Grotius copies of his publications – including the anthology in which his colonial poems were first published together.¹³ Clearly inspired by the argument of *Mare liberum* that the high seas cannot be claimed for exclusive use, Barlaeus poetically adopts Grotius's legal scholarship to underline the legitimacy of Dutch incursions in the Atlantic world.¹⁴

Barlaeus models these incursions – and the overarching theme of imperial competition with the Spanish monarchy – after the famous rivalry between Rome and Carthage. The Romans drove Hannibal out of Italy by starting a war on Carthaginian land. Likewise, the Dutch, when attacked by the Spanish in their own lands, chose to take the offensive by targeting the basis of Spain's financial might, its colonies.¹⁵ *Argo Batava* thus compares the admiral Piet Hein to the Roman general Scipio Africanus:

Like that, our very own Jason, our Aesonides departs.
Just as Scipio bravely departed for Africa,
threatening the gates of Carthage with fire
after Hannibal had raged against the cities of Latium,
and the Romans had suffered from wars being waged
in the bosom of their homeland,
and after the infamous victories at the Trebia and Cannae.¹⁶

The poem about Olinda specifies the challenge to the Spanish monarchy. War is no longer waged in the Dutch heartland, but is removed to a distant world:

After the destruction of the walls of Den Bosch
and so many strongholds along the appalled Rhine,

¹² Barlaeus, *Triumphus*, 3. 'Et commune solum nobis, commune profundum / Credimus, et paribus mercamur finibus aurum.'

¹³ Worp, 'Barlaeus' (1886), 250.

¹⁴ On Grotius's *Mare liberum* in its wider European and colonial context, see Weststeijn, 'The Right of Navigation'. See also, in this journal, Van Kessel, 'Invisible Loot'.

¹⁵ That the poem presents the colonies' riches as Spain's power base is, for instance, attested by the following lines: 'Indus erat. qui castra Tago transfudit in Arcton, / Instravitque suis Neptunia regna carinis, / Ille fuit. quae mansuetum tot caedibus Albim / Imbuit, et Nemetum conspersit sanguine terras, / Pars mundi postrema fuit. si cessimus, auro / Cessimus, Hispanae nunquam vicere sarissae; / Quae vicit, dis gleba fuit.' ('It was the Indies that transferred the military camps from the Tagus to the north and spread their ships out over Neptune's realms. The one to stain the gentle Elbe with so many slaughters, and sprinkle the lands of the Germans with blood, was the farthest part of the world. Where we had to yield, we have yielded to gold, because the Spanish spears have never triumphed. What won was the rich clay.'). Barlaeus, *Argo Batava*, 6.

¹⁶ Barlaeus, *Argo Batava*, 8. '(...) velut acer in Afros / Ibat, Agenoreis minitans incendia portis, / Scipiades; postquam Latias saevisset in urbes / Hannibal, inque suis doluissent bella Quirites / Visceribus gremioque geri, victaeque fuissent / Post Trebiam infames Cannae.'

war now rages in a distant world.
 Neither land nor sea grants you, great king, a moment's rest.
 We have dedicated all the space of the earth to battles,
 and we prepare wars under every star in heaven.¹⁷

On the surface, Barlaeus thus represents the colonial pursuits of the Dutch Republic as a clear-cut case of Rome-inspired imperial competition in a Grotian vein. Also following Grotius, he adopts a Ciceronian perspective of the merger between self-interest and the common good to argue that war and gain go hand in hand.¹⁸ This perspective is clearly voiced in an imagined speech in *Argo Batava*, given by Piet Hein before the decisive confrontation with the Spanish treasure fleet. Hein, turned by Barlaeus into a loquacious Latin orator, presents two motivations towards battle: the preservation of the fatherland, and personal gain.

When we die, we die for the fatherland.
 If this crime can only be stopped with blood,
 we owe our blood to the fatherland.
 We live and we fight, and we owe it to the fatherland.
 We and you both belong to the other.
 And remember that it is no fleeting glory
 that we seek with such daring.
 Self-benefit goes hand in hand with honour.
 Rich spoils will make the hated poverty of home
 a thing of the past for all of you.
 The Indies will comfort those long condemned to meagre indigence.¹⁹

The message is that successful warfare and the wellbeing of the fatherland depend on both individuals and the state being motivated by a desire for gain. The specific wording Barlaeus uses ('socio comes ibit honori utilitas') betrays his indebtedness to Cicero's discussion in *De officiis* of the relation between *honestum*, or what is morally good, and *utile*, or what is advantageous. For Cicero, the *utilitas* of society is the *utilitas* of its parts – in other words, what benefits society should also benefit individuals and vice versa.²⁰ This is because the greatest moral good (*honestum*) is that what is to the advantage (*utilitas*) of the community, the *salus reipublicae*. Barlaeus's use of this Ciceronian framework is even more explicit in the later poem on Olinda, where he explicitly opposes *utilitas* and *honestum* (see below).²¹

17 Barlaeus, *Triumphus*, 4. 'post subruta Sylvae / Moenia, et attoniti tot propugnacula Rhēni, / Externo Mars orbe furit. nec terra, nec aequor / Otia dant, Rex magne, tibi. devovimus omne / Terrarum pugnis spatium, cunctisque paramus / Praelia sideribus.'

18 This Ciceronian perspective permeates Grotius, *De iure praedae*, especially chapters xiv and xv. On Grotius's reading of Cicero, see Straumann, *Roman Law*.

19 Barlaeus, *Argo Batava*, 11. 'Si morimur, patriae morimur. si sanguine tantum / Constiterit facinus, patriae debemus et illum. / Vivimus; hoc etiam patriae est. pugnamus; et illud. / Alterius vos nosque sumus. nec talibus ausis / Fama levis petitur. socio comes ibit honori / Utilitas. raptō cunctis mactabitur aere / Paupertas invisa domi. solabitur Indus, / Quos inopes dudum gracilis damnavit egestas.'

20 Cicero, *De officiis*, III.26. For a useful analysis of Renaissance readings of *De officiis*, see Colish, 'Cicero's *De Officiis*'.

21 Barlaeus, *Triumphus*, 3.

Gloria Vivenza has noted how in the commentaries of early modern scholars, the meaning of *utilitas* began to shift from purely political to economic terms, namely the idea that ‘most of self-interested behavior has a positive return for others’.²² This conceptual shift in turn corresponded to the increased popularity in humanist circles of Thucydides, who, in his history of the Peloponnesian War, put three motivations for building an empire in the mouths of the Athenians: fear, honour, and profit.²³ We suggest that Barlaeus’s assertion that virtue should not be its own recompense but that ‘benefit will go hand in hand with honour’ employs the Ciceronian-Thucydidian conceptual framework to make sense of and justify the Dutch pursuit of colonial riches.

To recapitulate: the ideological thrust of Barlaeus’s poems seems straightforward at this point, uniting patriotism, personal economic gain, and political advantage. For Barlaeus, the Dutch Republic must imitate the Spanish monarchy by building an empire and dominating global trade to save itself, but victory is not a matter of selfless sacrifice for the glory of the fatherland. Dutch citizens do not have to choose between *honestum* and *utile*: by partaking in belligerent naval excursions, or financially supporting the West and East India Companies, they will defend their country and perhaps even make a handsome profit. This attitude ostensibly reflects the change in the rhetoric used by the West India Company in the mid-1620s to attract investors, as pointed out by Benjamin Schmidt. Confronted with hesitant stockholders who doubted the political goals of the company, the WIC directors shifted the stress from political themes to profitability, making ‘the pursuit of profit [...] the mainstay of the WIC’s program’.²⁴ At first glance, Barlaeus seems to echo this straightforward narrative of Dutch commercial imperialism.²⁵ However, the classical themes in his poems reveal a darker undertone undercutting this narrative of imperial success without moral cost.

The Argonauts and the lost Golden Age

As the title reveals, the poem *Argo Batava* honours the crew that captured the Spanish treasure fleet in the Bay of Matanzas in 1628 as modern-day Argonauts, and Piet Hein himself as a new Tiphys, the helmsman of the ship *Argo*. The myth of the Argonauts was elaborated in literary sources from Antiquity such as Apollonius of Rhodes’s *Argonautica*, Ovid’s *Heroides* (letters 6 and 12) and *Metamorphoses* 7.1–424, and Flaccus’s *Argonautica*. These texts tell the story of Jason, who journeys on the ship *Argo* with a group of heroes to steal the Golden Fleece and reclaim his throne. Tasked by King Pelias, Jason and his Argonauts face numerous challenges, including the clashing Symplegades rocks, harpies, and the deadly trials set by King Aeëtes of Colchis, where the fleece is guarded. With the help of Aeëtes’s daughter, Medea – who falls in love with Jason and uses her magic to help

²² Vivenza, ‘Cicero on Economic Subjects’, 403.

²³ Thucydides, *Peloponnesian War*, 1.76.2. On seventeenth-century readings of Thucydides, see Hoekstra, ‘Thucydides’.

²⁴ Schmidt, *Innocence Abroad*, 197.

²⁵ See Weststeijn, ‘Empire of Riches’.

him – they succeed in stealing the fleece and fleeing Colchis unharmed. Their journey back is equally perilous, filled with more obstacles and betrayals.

The myth of the Argonauts had already become an ‘iconic example of a heroic mission to civilize wild lands and foreign cultures’ in antiquity itself.²⁶ It also symbolised scientific progress, as, according to tradition, the Argonauts were the first people to ever undertake a major sea voyage. As early as the fifth and fourth centuries BCE, the myth was used as a model for Greek colonisation in Italy. Furthermore, it was the depiction of the Crusaders as Argonauts during the Middle Ages that inspired Duke Philip the Good in 1430 to found the chivalric Order of the Golden Fleece.²⁷

In lauding the Dutch expedition as new Argonauts, Barlaeus gives a fresh spin to the ancient myth. The comparison of Piet Hein’s crew to the Argonauts is not just a *topos*, but a direct challenge to the imperial hegemony of Spain. Not only does Barlaeus compare Hein to Tiphys, he also prefaces his poem with five lines from Seneca’s tragedy *Medea*:

There will come an epoch late in time
when Ocean will loosen the bonds of the world
and a vast land open itself up,
when Tiphys will disclose new worlds
and Thule not be the farthest of lands.²⁸

These lines had become famous after the first European explorations of the Americas. Columbus had read them as a prophecy of his own voyage (in his *Libro de las Profecias*), and had compared himself to Tiphys.²⁹ Spanish writers who described these explorations prefaced their poems or books with the same lines.³⁰ Pietro Martire d’Anghiera or Peter Martyr, in his *De orbe novo*, compared Magellan to the Argonauts, stressing how tiny the stretch of sea that the Argonauts crossed was in comparison to a circumnavigation of the earth. Now Barlaeus claimed that the Spanish explorers faced competition from another Tiphys and another set of Argonauts for the prize of fulfilling this newly forged prophecy.

However, there is a remarkable difference between the Spanish use of the prophecy and that of Barlaeus. Spanish writers paired these lines with biblical prophecies, and their interpretations were guided by eschatological optimism about the reunion of East and West and the conquest of Jerusalem. Later writers who mythicised the voyages of Columbus drew a parallel between the ‘second coming’ of Tiphys in the guise of Columbus and the Second Coming of Christ.³¹ Accordingly, they ignored the fact that Seneca’s verses are set in a deeply pessimistic context. The choir in *Medea* who sing these verses consider the Argonauts’ daring voyage as an act of trespass which led to the end of a Golden or Silver

²⁶ Brunetti, ‘Myth of the Argonauts’, 36.

²⁷ Brunetti, ‘Myth of the Argonauts’, 62.

²⁸ Barlaeus, *Argo Batava*, 2. ‘Venient annis secula seris,/ Quibus Oceanus vincula rerum / Laxet, et ingens pateat tellus, / Tiphysque novos detegat orbes; / Nec sit terris ultima Thule.’ Note that modern editions of Seneca do not have ‘Tiphysque’ but ‘Tethysque’. Barlaeus’s reading, originating from a certain branch of manuscripts, was particularly popular or maybe even originated with early modern authors writing about European empire. See Clay, ‘Columbus’ Senecan Prophecy’.

²⁹ Columbus, *Libro de Las Profecias*, 224–225.

³⁰ Romm, ‘New World and “Novos Orbes”’.

³¹ Romm, ‘New World and “Novos Orbes”’, 84.

Age and the beginning of an Age of Iron. In fact, they sing sarcastically about the prize won by the Argonauts:

What was the prize gained by this voyage?
The Golden Fleece
and Medea, an evil worse than the sea,
fit merchandise for the first vessel.³²

The Age of Iron is an age of war and commerce, money and poverty, gain and deceit. This description contrasts with that of a happier time, when people had no riches but lived contentedly with little:

Our forefathers saw bright eras
with crime and deceit far distant.
Homely, touching no shores but their own,
they grew to old age on their fathers' land,
and, rich with little,
beyond what their native soil had yielded
they knew no wealth.³³

The Spanish writers not only disregarded this pessimistic view of the Argonauts' exploration, they also neglected an otherwise very famous classical text that referenced future Argonauts, namely Virgil's fourth eclogue. This eclogue, prophesying the birth of a child who will inaugurate a new Golden Age, was often read in parallel with Christian prophecies. This poem, too, speaks of a 'second Tiphys, and a second Argo to carry chosen heroes' ('Alter erit tum Tiphys et altera quae uehat Argo / delectos heroas').³⁴ However, it depicts these as a temporary setback on the way to a new Golden Age, while the child is still young. During this time, there will still be 'a few traces of ancient wrong' ('Pauca tamen suberunt priscae vestigia fraudis'),³⁵ which means that people will still sail the sea, build fortified cities, devote themselves to agriculture, and wage war.³⁶ However, after the child will have grown into a man, overseas trade will come to a halt, as every land will produce everything needed to the local population in abundance.

As much as these classical prophecies seemed to refer to the early modern discovery of new continents, their original context was difficult to reconcile with messianic expectations and an optimistic conception of history. Rather, these verses testify to a pessimistic outlook on human technologies, in a cyclical conception of history where Golden Ages without technology give way to Iron Ages of continuous competition, rivalry, and warfare.

32 Seneca, *Tragedies*, 348-349. 'Quod fuit huius pretium cursus? / aurea pellis / maiusque mari Medea malum, / merces prima digna carina.'

33 Seneca, *Tragedies*, 344-345. 'Candida nostri saecula patres / videre, procul fraude remota. / sua quisque piger litora tangens / patrioque senex factus in arvo, / parvo dives, / nisi quas tulerat natale solum / non norat opes.'

34 Vergilius, *Ecloga* 4, ll. 34-35 (p. 10-11).

35 Vergilius, *Ecloga* 4, ll. 31 (p. 10).

36 Vergilius, *Ecloga* 4, ll. 32-33 (p. 10).

The lust for profit in the Iron Age

Although Barlaeus praises the Dutch maritime triumphs in the highest tones, his poems incorporate much more of the ambivalence of these classical references, accentuating not the coming of a Golden Age but rather the harsh conditions of the Iron Age.³⁷ In the classical narrative, the tragedy of the Iron Age is that only the first Argonauts enter it by free choice; as soon as one people begins to sail the seas, steal, and wage war, the others have no choice but to follow suit. In his depiction of the imperial competition between the Dutch Republic and the Spanish monarchy, Barlaeus adopts this perspective. The Spanish have installed a system of war and extraction of natural resources that will give them the upper hand in any future confrontation, unless their adversaries imitate their *modus operandi* and start looking equally hard for colonial riches. Yet that desire for gain, however necessary it may be as the driving force behind Dutch maritime warfare, is morally ambiguous. This is the implication of a crucial passage in *Triumphus super capta Olinda*:

The thirst for profit opens up kingdoms.
Everyone fights with this same hope.
Self-interest tests the limits of what is honourable.³⁸

These lines follow upon a description of how the Spanish king, 'drunk with power', proclaims according to his motto that he will go *plus ultra*, and how the people of the north then rise up to stand in his way, cutting through the seas, burning palaces and looting the riches of Mexico. While doing so, however, they seem to approach a dangerous moral precipice. For the phrase 'Laxat regna sitis lucri' is ambiguous: 'laxat regna' could mean either that the thirst for gain opens the borders of the Spanish empire to others, namely to the Dutch, but it could also mean that it weakens empires from the inside out. The Spanish thirst for gain has allowed them an empire, and the Dutch thirst for gain now enables them to pierce the walls of that empire and take some of the booty for themselves. At the same time, this profit-seeking could weaken empires from the inside. In that case, the impulse that allowed the Spanish and the Portuguese to build their empires was also what made them vulnerable. And that should be a warning to the Dutch.

This moral undertone can be glimpsed in the phrase 'utilitas fines metitur honesti' ('Self-interest tests the limits of what is honourable.'). It seems that self-interest indeed balances a fine moral boundary: it can function as an impetus to do the right thing, namely to tear down the monopoly of evil empires, but it also comes dangerously close to moral corruption of the new, emerging empire. Here, *utilitas* or benefit in terms of self-interest is no longer the happy companion of what is morally right, but challenges ethical principles. Also, it is now defined purely economically as the thirst for profit ('sitis lucri'). This mercantile twist may be linked to the ambivalence that the Ciceronian concept of *utilitas* held towards the moral value of trade. To Cicero, trade was of so little consequence that he only gave it a short mention in his chapter on *utilitas*; in general, he thought it difficult

³⁷ On ideas and representations of the Golden Age in Dutch history, literature, and art, see Blanc (ed.), *Dutch Golden Age(s)*.

³⁸ Barlaeus, *Triumphus*, 3. 'Laxat regna sitis lucri. spe militat ista / Quilibet. Utilitas fines metitur honesti.'

to reconcile with *honestum*. While some early modern commentators criticised this view, at least with regard to rich and powerful merchants who were considered pillars of society, Barlaeus shared Cicero's doubts regarding mercantile activity.³⁹ Indeed, despite the compliments Barlaeus paid to the Amsterdam merchants in his speech on the *mercator sapiens* in 1632, he essentially sought to rein in the commercial urges of profit-seeking, trying 'to please his audience while simultaneously warning it against the risks of the commercialization of society'.⁴⁰ Thus, his exemplary wise merchant should seek philosophical knowledge less to increase his gains than to learn to temper his desire for profit and keep in mind the common good.

This moral ambivalence about the necessity of pursuing profit is foreshadowed in the colonial poems written a few years before Barlaeus' speech on the *mercator sapiens*, most distinctly when the poems talk about the extraction of gold from mines, Spain's main source of colonial revenues. *Argo Batava* describes gold as the thing that the Dutch most desire, but also as something that was hidden away deep in the earth for a reason. In the poem, Barlaeus presents an imagined speech given by Frederick Henry motivating the Dutch to combine trade with warfare, in which he lets the Stadholder speak about the American treasures as a wonderful opportunity, there for the taking by those who are brave enough:

The opposite side of the world remains.
The gold-bearing Indus, and the arctic sea
remain to be plundered for trophies,
and the land endowed with beautiful metal.⁴¹

However, when Frederick Henry then turns to the Spanish quest for gold, the tone changes:

There one goes into the bowels of the earth,
and the miner disturbs the hidden recesses of Vesta,
and the digger himself takes on the colour of the gold.
Why should I mention mighty Cusco, Quito, and the precious towns of Chile,
Lima, presiding over peaceful waters, and illustrious Peru?
From there, madness finds the arguments for evil deeds.
Pride and its companion luxury find a breeding ground
for their desire and reasons to cause harm.
Here foreign money inspires dire Mars,
kindles deadly torches, inflames the Furies of war,
and has armed Iberia so many times for our destruction.
This vein spews out so many shields,
forges so many swords, overturns law and trust,
and criminally drags from the deep the ruins of kings,
destroys so many cities, so many peoples, this fatal mud.⁴²

³⁹ On early modern readings of Cicero, see Vivenza, 'Cicero on Economic Subjects.'

⁴⁰ Post in Barlaeus, *Wise Merchant*, 16.

⁴¹ Barlaeus, *Argo Batava*, 5. 'Oppositum mundi restat latus. aurifer Indus, / Ultimaque Arctoï Tethys, spolianda trophaeis / Linquitur, et pulchro tellus donata metallo.'

⁴² Barlaeus, *Argo Batava*, 5. '(...) illic in viscera terrae / Itur, et abstrusae turbat penetralia Vestae / Fossor, et ipse suo scrutator concolor auro. / Quid Cuscum, Quitumque potens, preciosaque Chiles / Oppida, quid placidis Limam quae praesidet undis, / Commemorem, claramque Peru? capit inde malorum / Argumenta furor,

Triumphus super capta Olinda echoes this sentiment:

Through dense swarms of misfortune,
through changing fates, through rocks and waves,
we explore where in the world gold teems,
which is harmful to mortals,
and where legends indicate hidden riches,
and where the wise creator has hidden
this material that kindles crimes.⁴³

Both of these sections echo Ovid's description of the Iron Age in the first book of the *Metamorphoses*, which starts with the creation of the world and humans. Four human ages have passed: a Golden Age of plenty without labour, a Silver Age where winters forced people to hide in houses and practice agriculture, a Bronze Age with war but without crime, and finally an Iron Age that sees the beginning of crime, deceit, and greed. This was the time when people began to sail the seas, divide the land into private plots, and mine the earth for precious metals. These metals then incite new crimes:

Men scoured the land's rich soil not just for food,
But, diving through the bowels of the earth,
From out the Stygian gloom where they lay hid
They gouged its treasures – stimulants of sin:
Vile iron appeared, and gold, far viler still;
And so came war, which battles with them both
And clangs its clashing arms with bloody hands.⁴⁴

Appropriating this Ovidian language, Barlaeus presents the Dutch as following on the heels of the Spanish and Portuguese in entering a new phase of the Iron Age, one in which mining on a larger scale than ever seen before fuels warfare on a grander scale than before. In this new age, everyone who falls behind will be trampled.

This is not only a much more pessimistic interpretation of the classical prophecies about the Argonauts as they were used in the Spanish monarchy by people such as Columbus and Bartolomé de las Casas,⁴⁵ it also departs from the self-representation of Dutch colonial interloping that developed at the end of the sixteenth century. As Schmidt has shown, this self-representation imagined the Dutch as standing side by side with the native Americans in resisting the tyranny of the Iberians.⁴⁶ Dutch colonial enterprise was pictured as the

socioque superbia luxu / Ingenii fomenta sui, causasque nocendi / Invenit. hic dirum peregrina pecunia Martem,
/ Pestiferasque faces, bellicque accendit Erinnyin, / Inque neces nostras toties armavit Iberum. / Haec clypeos tot
vena vomit, tot fabricat enses, / Invertit fas atque fidem, regumque ruinas / Ex alto scelerata trahit, tot subruit
urbes, / Tot populos, fatale lutum.'

43 Barlaeus, *Triumphus*, 3. "(...) per densa malorum / Agmina, per varios casus, per saxa, per undas / Scrutamur, qua parte nocens mortalibus aurum / Pullulet, et dites designet fama recessus, / Ac scelerum prudens abdat fomenta Creator.'

44 Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 1, ll. 137-143, trans. Soucy, 43. 'Nec tantum segetes alimentaue debita dives / poscebatur humus, sed itum est in viscera terrae, / quasque reconciderat Stygiisque admoverat umbris, / effodiuntur opes, inritamenta malorum. / iamque nocens ferrum ferroque nocentius aurum / prodierat, prodit bellum, quod pugnat utroque, / sanguineaue manu crepitantia concutit arma.'

45 Romm, 'New World and "Novos Orbes"', 86.

46 Schmidt, *Innocence Abroad*.

liberation of native peoples from the Spanish monarchy, for which they required something in return (such as a monopoly contract on spice trade). This narrative still held sway in 1630, as exemplified by a celebratory epigram on the capture of Olinda published by the minister and poet Samuel Ampzing. The epigram, rendered both in Latin and Dutch, directly addresses the 'West Indians' and tells them that God has taken revenge for the Spanish cruelty against them by sending the Dutch. 'God now sees your misery and the injustices you suffer / and opens a door to freedom for you.'⁴⁷ Ampzing then calls on them to trade and enter into treaties with the Dutch, and to present a united front against the Spanish monarchy.

Similar sentiments can be detected in another celebratory poem closely related to *Argo Batava*, also published in 1629 in honour of the capture of the silver fleet: *Argo-nauta Batavus*.⁴⁸ Written by Franciscus Martinus, who was at the time an eighteen-year-old pupil of the Latin School in Kampen, this poem shares Barlaeus's idea that the Spanish monarchy has to be attacked in the colonies, and that colonial conquest is a matter of self-defence. However, like Ampzing's epigram, it speaks about the uniting of forces between indigenous people and the Dutch and ignores any thought of material benefit accruing to the soldiers, who are promised only honourable victory or an honorable death.⁴⁹ The poem does not make any allusions to the Iron Age and it calls Hein a new Iason, not a new Tiphys, which weakens a possible connection to Seneca's lines.⁵⁰

In contrast, any trace of the idea that the Dutch and the native Americans are allies is absent from Barlaeus's two poems. For Barlaeus, successful resistance to the Spanish monarchy comes down to the imitation of Spain's methods – and entails the moral dangers of such methods. As his poems sing the praise of the Republic's conquests and triumphs, they do not necessarily frame this show of power in morally positive terms, let alone as a liberation of suppressed natives, and instead explicitly call for a project of colonization.

Settling in the New World

As Schmidt has shown, the idea of establishing settler colonies in the Americas, as initially advocated by the colonial ideologue Willem Usselinx, gradually disappeared to the background in wic literature in the 1620s.⁵¹ Yet the prospect of settler colonialism is clearly present as a future horizon in Barlaeus's poems, which suggest that the Dutch should imitate the Spanish model not only by combining commerce with mining and warfare, but also by planting colonial settlements, following the traces of Ancient Rome. In *Argo Batava*, as the Dutch land in Cuba, it is not as the Argonauts led by Jason that they descend from the ships, but as the Trojan migrants headed by Aeneas:

⁴⁷ Ampzing, *Fasciculus Epigrammatum*, 7. The Latin version has: 'adspirat Numinis aura, / Et libertatis ianua certa patet.' The Dutch version has: 'God siet uw ongeluck en ongelijk nu aen / En doet u eene deur ter Vrijheyd open staen.'

⁴⁸ Martinus, *Argo-nauta Batavus*. We thank Lukas Reddemann for pointing us to this poem.

⁴⁹ Martinus, *Argo-nauta Batavus*, 12–13.

⁵⁰ Martinus, *Argo-nauta Batavus*, title page.

⁵¹ See Schmidt, *Innocence Abroad*, 176–183, 196–197, 212–213.

On the shore stand the ships of the House of Orange,
and the unhappy West laments the losses of its people.
A world once unknown is conquered,
and would now desire only to temper the Dutch.⁵²

‘Stant littore puppes’ (‘The ships (...) stand on the shore’) are Virgil’s words to describe Aeneas’s landing in Gaeta at the end of the *Aeneid* book vi. This reference is remarkable, because Aeneas landed in Italy with a very different purpose to that with which the Argonauts landed in Colchis. So, what exactly is it that the Dutch are going to do in America, according to Barlaeus? Will they merely snatch Spanish silver and take it home, or do they also have the intention of establishing a permanent settlement? In the poem on Olinda, this intention is explicitly expressed through another comparison with Aeneas but also, strikingly, by alluding to Rome’s rival Carthage.

At the end of *Triumphus super capta Olinda*, Hendrick Lonck, the commander of the Dutch fleet, gives a speech to motivate his soldiers before their assault of the fortified city of Olinda, again emphasizing both the eternal glory they will win for the fatherland and the rewards that await them. One of these rewards refers to the Roman practice of turning occupied territory into colonies and distributing houses and land among the veterans. No longer is the prize for those who fight for the fatherland the mere alleviation of poverty at home but a new and more prosperous existence abroad:

Here is your home, here your country.
Here are houses and a homeland for all of us.
Houses that the Spaniard built but that a brief moment
will hand over to us. Victory makes the victor a rightful heir.
What he takes from the enemy, he may consider his deserved reward.
The task of the soldier is not that of unrighteous stealing.
It was an ancient law of war that settlers migrated to new territories.
So did the Romans do and the famous lineage of Aeneas.⁵³

The Dutch, in short, did not come to Brazil to steal all the gold and be gone, but to establish a permanent Dutch settlement overseas. Barlaeus clearly thinks of this colony in Roman terms: conquered land that is given to veterans as a reward. It seems as if in this way he seeks to resolve the double-sidedness of the desire for gain as both a good motivation and a moral danger. The Dutch do not just take the golden fleece and depart, they do not come as thieves, but as settlers, as what Barlaeus alleges to be rightful inheritors of Portuguese dominion over indigenous land. Such a colony, in turn, serves as a bulwark against retaliation or further expansion by the Spanish monarchy. Here, Barlaeus makes a surprising move and compares Olinda to Carthage:

⁵² Barlaeus, *Argo Batava*, 4. ‘(...) stant littore puppes / Auriacae, queriturque suae dispendia gentis / Infelix Vesper, nec quondam cognitus orbis / Vincitur, et solum vellet mitescere Belgam.’

⁵³ Barlaeus, *Triumphus*, 7. ‘Hic domus, hic cunctis patria est. quos struxit Iberus / Transcribet brevis hora lares. victoria iustis / Nuncupat haeredem titulis. quae surripit hosti, / Praemiae justa putat. non hoc raptoris iniqui; / Militis officium est. veteres migrare colonos / Bellonae lex prisca fuit. fecere Quirites, / Et clarum genus Aeneadam.’

This shall be another Carthage,
 rising far off against Hesperia and the Tartessian shores.⁵⁴

While this comparison between Olinda and Carthage makes sense if the Spanish monarchy is considered as the successor to the Roman Empire, and the Dutch Republic as the opponent who stands in the way of total imperial control, it is also an unsettling comparison because Carthage's fate – complete destruction – does not bode well for Olinda. The irony of history may be that a year later, Olinda would be abandoned and burned down by the Dutch in favour of a different location for their colonial capital in nearby Recife. But more interesting is the question whether we see here another expression of a pessimistic, cyclical view of history that also surfaces in Barlaeus's use of the narrative of the Argonauts. Alternatively, one could consider that after the destruction of Carthage, the surrounding lands became the first Roman colony outside of Italy, in the new province of *Africa proconsularis*. In this interpretation, the conquest of Olinda is, in Barlaeus's poetic rendering, the first of many Dutch colonies.

While Barlaeus does not make any explicit references to other examples of Dutch colonial settlement in the 1620s, either in Southeast Asia (Batavia, Banda) or New Netherland, the final lines of the poem may point to that second reading as they adopt a prophetic tone, contemplating the future and mixing military triumphalism with a civilizing mission for the native peoples which ultimately converges on economic gain.

Already I foresee that towns dedicated to saints
 will be plundered, many rivers subdued,
 and the Rio de la Plata will fade with trembling banks,
 Rio de Janeiro⁵⁵ will be subdued with camps,
 the Marañón will obey, and the homes of the Patagonians,
 and their barbarian bodies, shaped by a rough way of life,
 will slowly accustom themselves to civilised life,
 and tall cane plants will yield annual sugar crops.⁵⁶

Throughout Barlaeus's two poems, there are but few mentions of Amerindians fearfully looking on as the Dutch rage, burn, and plunder. Here, having introduced the Roman theme of permanent colonies with veteran settlers, Barlaeus ends with alluding to the equally Roman discourse of civilising 'barbaric' people, people whose labour will presumably be exploited to guarantee the annual harvests of sugar – the prime produce of the New World.⁵⁷

⁵⁴ Barlaeus, *Triumphus*, 8. '(...) haec altera surget / Carthago, Hesperiam contrà et Tartessia longe / Ostia.'

⁵⁵ We are not sure of this translation for "Ienerum".

⁵⁶ Barlaeus, *Triumphus*, 8. 'Iamque oppida Sanctis / Nominibus devota rapi, tot flumina subdi / Auguror, et pavidis Platam pallescere ripis, / Compesci castris Ienerum, servire Maragnon, / Patagonumque domos, et crudo barbara victu / Corpora civili sensim mansuescere cultu, / Annuaque excelsis extundi sacchara cannis.'

⁵⁷ Whereas indigenous peoples are mostly absent in these two poems, except as frightened onlookers and in this passage as colonial labourers, Barlaeus talks about them extensively and in mostly negative terms in his 1647 treatise on Dutch Brazil. In the dedication to that work, for instance, he adopts the trope of Amerindian cannibalism when he speaks about 'a wild, ferocious people that shuns any form of humanity, and considers devouring one's fellow man as honorable', and: 'bloodthirsty natives who do not know pity'. Barlaeus, *History of Brazil*, 2.

In the narrative that connects colonial settlement with a civilising mission, settler colonies function essentially as a safety valve for domestic decadence, as they propel citizens' ambitions elsewhere and thus alleviate social pressures at home by creating new opportunities abroad. As recent scholarship in the burgeoning field of settler colonial studies emphasises, settler colonialism can hence be characterised an ideological phenomenon that directly links the perceived problems of the metropole with the prospect of an alternative life overseas, aiming to solve social ills by moving them to another faraway place.⁵⁸ Hypothetically, a comparable line of thought may be discerned in Barlaeus's poetry: as the lust for colonial gain threatens to unsettle the domestic moral balance, the project of establishing permanent colonies overseas offers an escape route which, while increasing colonial profits through the sugar industry, potentially harnesses settlers and indigenous peoples alike against the disruptions of the Iron Age.⁵⁹

On a more concrete level, Barlaeus's poems clearly connect metropole and colony by linking the ongoing struggle for Dutch independence at home with the pursuit of colonisation abroad. Indeed, the nexus between the metropolitan and colonial contexts is made evident in the anthology of Barlaeus's poetry published in 1631.⁶⁰ In the second book of this anthology, *Argo Batava* and *Triumphus super capta Olinda* bookend a series of six epic poems. The book opens with *Argo Batava* and the capture of the Spanish treasure fleet, which provided the funds for the subsequent sieges of Wesel (*Vesalia capta*) and Den Bosch. It includes three poems about Den Bosch: a panegyric on prince Frederick Henry, a poem describing the siege, and a fictitious poetic letter from Frederick Henry's wife Amalia of Solms to her husband on the battlefield, in the style of Ovid's *Heroides*. At the end, the scene again moves across the ocean to the capture of Olinda in Brazil. The anthology thus illustrates how Barlaeus's poetry could be used as a frame in which Dutch metropolitan history was inextricably connected to military campaigns in the Americas.

Conclusion: a Golden Age made of Iron?

Barlaeus's two poems from 1629 and 1630 are both implicitly pessimistic and at the same time ostentatiously triumphalist by expressing praise for Dutch heroes and their military exploits, befitting the genre of the panegyric epic poem. This ambivalence revolves around the evaluation of profit as a motivating passion and motor that drives imperial success – but also as a device that carries the seeds of moral failure. For Barlaeus, the lust for gain explains the dynamic of imperial competition, as citizens and soldiers, motivated by the desire for glory but mostly by self-interest, engage in colonial warfare, piracy, trade, and colonization. They chase after vast quantities of bullion that had to be mined in order to wage such wars and also after opportunities to seize enemies' ships, open up new trading routes, and establish overseas settlements to outcompete their imperial rivals.

⁵⁸ Veracini, *World Turned Inside Out*.

⁵⁹ In the poem on Olinda, Barlaeus does not mention the use of African enslaved labour in the sugar industry in Brazil. He briefly refers to it – again in ambiguous terms – in *History of Brazil*, 179–181. See Phaf-Rheinberger, 'Von Sklavenhandel'.

⁶⁰ Barlaeus, *Poematum editio nova*.

Appropriating the classical narratives of the Argonauts and the contest between Rome and Carthage, Barlaeus hints that the Dutch can succeed in outdoing the Spanish monarchy but – blinded by the lust for gold – may not be able to escape the concomitant moral decline.

Steeped in the classical models from Antiquity, Barlaeus's ambivalent rendering of the interplay between glory and self-interest would take centre stage in his treatise on Dutch Brazil from 1647, in which he claims that the Dutch 'differ from the Greeks and Romans in this aspect: for the latter their main goal was glory, for the former it was utility; for us the striving for glory is combined with the striving for profit'.⁶¹ This tentative approval of profit-seeking evidently aimed to overcome the Ciceronian moral challenge of recruiting economic self-interest to the side of the common good, separating it from the moral connotations of the sin of greed. Barlaeus hesitantly moves towards the idea that the pursuit of economic self-interest can serve as a counterbalance to destructive passions, which in Albert Hirschman's classic analysis in *The Passions and the Interests* involves a crucial component of the intellectual justification of capitalism in the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.⁶² Yet Barlaeus, still influenced by classical and Christian models of thought that were suspicious of trade, does not fully embrace mercantile activity: after referring to the Romans and the Greeks, he also makes a comparison with the ancient Germanic people, who in contrast to the Romans never succumbed to decadence, 'for they admitted no traders at all, while in our country, merchants make up the ruling class and much of the populace. The German tribes feared that so many luxury goods and so much affluence in general would lead to weakness and moral decline.'⁶³

It is important to note that the moral problem in Barlaeus's classically inspired humanist worldview does not concern those who fall victim to Dutch violence, but the corrupting influence of luxury on the Dutch themselves. His hesitant solution to this problem amounts to a form of Christian self-identification, suggesting that the Dutch may avoid the fate of the ancients because, as stated in his treatise from 1647, 'perhaps our religious beliefs or sense of righteousness strengthen us to resist wrongdoing'.⁶⁴ In the poems from 1629 and 1630, however, there are no traces of this possibility of redemption. Instead, we catch Barlaeus in the middle of the shift where the Dutch turned from self-proclaimed victims of Spanish tyranny into colonial aggressors and slave-traders. Barlaeus only partially engages with this shift, connecting the victim narrative, in which everything the Dutch Republic does is motivated by the necessity of self-defence and revenge, with an implicit acknowledgment that the Dutch are fighting evil with evil, and that their desire for gain may have disastrous consequences.

Why did Barlaeus infuse his epideictic poetry with this ambivalent message? What did he want to achieve? The available evidence does not offer any definite answers to these

⁶¹ Barlaeus, *History of Brazil*, 11 (translation modified by authors); Barlaeus, *Rerum per octennium*, 8. See the broader analysis of this passage in Weststeijn, 'Machiavelli in Dutch Colonial Ideology', 17–18.

⁶² Hirschman, *The Passions and the Interests*. For important studies that further developed and qualified Hirschman's hypothesis, see Force, *Self-Interest*; Hont, *Jealousy of Trade*; Reinert, *Translating Empire*; and Wootton, *Power, Pleasure, and Profit*.

⁶³ Barlaeus, *History of Brazil*, 11.

⁶⁴ Barlaeus, *History of Brazil*, 11–12.

questions, as Barlaeus remained silent about his intentions in writing – and the intended audience of – his two poems on Dutch colonial enterprise. What his poetry betrays, however, is that Barlaeus couched this enterprise in a classicizing language as a quest for gold and settlement – a project of mining natural resources through colonization that had little to do with the actual policies developed by the WIC in the 1620s. It could be argued that Barlaeus deliberately sought to steer the WIC towards a more openly imperial policy while warning for its possible consequences. Yet it is more likely, considering Barlaeus's position as an outsider with no direct connections to concrete discussions in the WIC boardroom, that his writing merely reflected his intense indebtedness to the classics and the resulting unease about what he saw happening in his own day. Barlaeus evidently employed his formidable knowledge of the classics to gain the attention and patronage of the upper echelons of Dutch society – a strategy that served him well, given his success at the court of Frederick Henry and his eventual appointment at the Amsterdam Athenaeum Illustre. The poems he wrote on Dutch colonial enterprise can be regarded simply as elements of this strategy. Still, as in the case of his opening lecture for the Athenaeum a few years later, Barlaeus – ever a true humanist – could not help but obliquely inserting elements of classically inspired caution in his text to alert his audience of the possible threats that modernity could have in store.

Indeed, while references to classical narratives might often serve a purely ornamental purpose, here they carry profound significance. It is these narratives that enable two distinct interpretations of Barlaeus's colonial poems of 1629 and 1630: as either imperialist propaganda or as a cautionary warning. The references to Aeneas and Roman settler colonialism may appear as clear-cut allusions to the Roman model of imperial success, but they become unsettled when Olinda suddenly prefigures Carthage and not Rome, thus signalling the possibility of imperial defeat. Similarly, the Argonauts and Seneca's prophecy about future new Argonauts could be used to celebrate naval heroes, and even to herald the last phase in salvation history, but this required the suppression of much of the classical context of deep pessimism about progress in history. By reinserting references to this context, Barlaeus hints that the Dutch Golden Age might turn out to be an Age of Iron.

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