All about Alcibiades?: The Importance of Topography in Aristophanes’ *Frogs*

Aristophanes’ *Frogs*, first performed in 405 BC, was unusual in its use of two completely independent choruses, namely, that of the frogs and that of the Initiates. The chorus of Initiates has been a source of much discussion, and scholars tend to favor an interpretation of this chorus as referring to the Greater, or Eleusinian, Mysteries (Lada-Richards 1999; MacDowell 1995; Dover 1993). Conversely, Hooker (1960) proposed that the Mysteries alluded to in the *Frogs* are rather the Lesser Mysteries, or the Mysteries at Agrai, basing this conclusion on his reconstruction of the topographical evidence present in both the chorus of the frogs and that of the Initiates. Although there have been many studies addressing the presence of the Initiates and their possible role in the *Frogs*, there has not been as much attention given to potential topographical references to the Eleusinian Mysteries in the choral ode of the Initiates, as well as on the broader political implications of the Eleusinian Mysteries in this play. This paper will demonstrate that there are at least two references (lines 324 and 399-400) to the procession leading out of the city to Eleusis. Not only do these lines give further support to the interpretation of the chorus as the Initiates of the Eleusinian Mysteries, but I will also show that such an interpretation has significant repercussions for the political context of the play, namely Alcibiades and his relationship with Athens.

Alcibiades was among those convicted of profaning the Mysteries and mutilating the Herms in 415 (Thuc. 6.28). Soon after Alcibiades returned from exile, he led the procession to Eleusis on land, an act which had not been possible for years on account of the war (Xen. Hell. 1.4.20). This would have been in 407/6, the year before the *Frogs* was produced. Such a gesture would have resonated with the Athenians who had called for his condemnation eight years earlier for parodying the very sacred rites to which he now led the procession. Both Pausanias (1.2.4) and Andocides (12.25) cite the house of Pulytion as the venue where the parody of the Mysteries in 415 had taken place. Pausanias identifies this house as having stood between the city gate and the Kerameikos where a stoa stands in his own day (1.2.4). Given that in Pausanias’ time, the term “Kerameikos” referred to the entire 5th century BC Agora (Camp 2001), the location of Pulytion’s house should be sought between the Dipylon gate and the Classical Agora. The location of the house means that the parody of the Mysteries would have taken place in the vicinity of the beginning of the procession to Eleusis on the way to the Sacred Gate and then out of the city. Thus, the route of the procession of the Eleusinian Mysteries and the suggested location of Pulytion’s house convey two topographical connections to the historical figure of Alcibiades and to his actions relating the Mysteries. These allusions, as well as Alcibiades’ associations with the places involved, assist the set-up of the climactic debate at the end of the play, in which Dionysus poses the question to Euripides and Aeschylus of what ought to be done with Alcibiades (1422). Previous scholarship has emphasized references to people and events within Aristophanic comedy, but I will argue that the Athenian audience of Aristophanes would have also drawn upon topographical references and their own social memory to appreciate further these very people and events.

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