

Political and Martial Fantasy in Aristophanes' *Babylonians*  
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Aristophanes' second play, produced in 426, does not survive, with the exception of only thirty-four fragments and testimonia.<sup>1</sup> Almost nothing is known about the plot – in brief, that the chorus must consist of Babylonians, that the god Dionysus makes an appearance, and that something about the play seems to have moved Cleon to bring a lawsuit against the playwright.<sup>2</sup> Very little work has been done on *Babylonians*,<sup>3</sup> largely because so little remains for us to assess, yet scholars have on occasion been too eager to assume knowledge of the play that we don't actually have, specifically in light of the tantalizing references made in one of Aristophanes' better known plays, *Acharnians* (produced in 425).

I begin here with the fundamental question of why Aristophanes may have selected Babylonians for his chorus, rather than a more commonly mentioned ethnicity. I follow Welsh in finding a Persian connection but diverge from his explanation of the plot based on the arrival in Athens of a Persian refugee with ancestral Babylonian connections. Rather, I suggest a context of more immediate and more momentous historical events – e.g. the naval engagements of Phormio in the Gulf of Corinth (429/8), the fall of Plataea and Mytilene (427), the return of the plague (427) – and attempt to locate a purpose for Dionysus in such a context. Comparison with the rowing scenes of *Frogs* and Eupolis' lost *Taxiarchs*, as well as the probable similarity in characterization of Dionysus and Babylonians in terms of eastern stereotype and the fact that approximately a third of the remaining fragments seem to refer to naval or other military activity, lead me to speculate that *Babylonians* may have possessed such a scene, or theme, of its own. My reconstruction of the plot involves a typically Aristophanic game of “what if” in which the Athenians, short on troops due to the plague and various battles, request aid from Persia (as may have actually happened<sup>4</sup>). The great king responds by sending a mercenary unit (i.e. the Babylonian chorus), which the Athenians attempt to train, perhaps in company with Dionysus and with predictably ludicrous results. While the play may well have offended Cleon in its mockery of Athenian leadership and foreign policy, its real impact would have lain in its exposure of Athens as unequal to a fight with Sparta. To make a laughingstock of Athenian naval capabilities (which were crucial to the preservation of her maritime empire) in the presence of allied ambassadors at the Dionysia may have stirred that ever-present fear of revolt among Athens' allies and compelled Cleon to react severely out of a sense of duty and national security as much as personal umbrage.

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<sup>1</sup> As in Kassel and Austin, *Poetae Comici Graeci (PCG)*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 1984.

<sup>2</sup> Alan Sommerstein, “Harassing the Satirist: The Alleged Attempts to Prosecute Aristophanes.” *Free Speech in Classical Antiquity*. Eds. Ineke Sluiter and Ralph M. Rosen. Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2004.

<sup>3</sup> Three articles: W. G. Forest, “Aristophanes and the Athenian Empire.” *The Ancient Historian and his Materials: Essays in Honour of C. E. Stevens on his Seventieth Birthday*. Ed. Barbara Levick Farnborough, Hants.: Gregg, 1975; Gilbert Norwood, “The Babylonians of Aristophanes.” *CP* 25 (1930) 1-10; David Welsh, “The Chorus of Aristophanes' *Babylonians*.” *GRBS* (1983) 137-150. Only the latter two attempt any sort of reconstruction.

<sup>4</sup> See Thucydides 2.7.