

Babylon is Athens by Any Other Name

There is general agreement that Aristophanes' description of the gates and walls of Cloudcuckooland in the *Birds* is a parody of Herodotus' description of the walls and gates of Babylon (Fornara 1971; Dunbar 1995; Hornblower 2006). However, there has been no investigation into what prompted Aristophanes to re-use and make fun of Herodotus' imagery and what political or ideological themes might lay behind this decision. Scholars have simply focused on the two passages and argued over how similar they are to one another without consideration given to larger questions.

I believe that Herodotus' Babylonian *logos* is intended to be an allegorical warning to Athens about its imperial pretensions and ideology. Leslie Kurke and Johannes Haubold have already argued that small parts of the ethnographic description of the Babylonians responds to contemporary Athenian intellectual concerns and so partly functions as a mirror for Athens (Kurke 1999; Haubold 2013). However, they have not made larger claims as to the whole of the Babylonian *logos*.

Scholars have also recently argued that Cloudcuckooland functions as a fantastical, mirror image of Athens (Anderson/Dix 2007; Ambler 2012). Despite these recent arguments coming to light, the reuse of imagery from Herodotus' Babylonian *logos* to describe the gates of Cloudcuckooland has not factored into the discussion. Therefore, Aristophanes' reuse of the imagery of Babylon's walls from Herodotus could point to the comedian's understanding of the Babylonian *logos* as commentary on Athens. The focus on the walls of Babylon by Herodotus must of course evoke the Periclean strategy of staying behind Athens' walls. Moreover, Herodotus surely uses Babylon as a mirror for Athens since an important part of Babylonian imperial propaganda was to bring all nations "into the shadow of the walls of Babylon"

(Vanderhooft 1999). Similarly, Athens during Herodotus' and Aristophanes' times had pretensions to a universalizing empire over the East Mediterranean. Moreover, Aristophanes' lost play the *Babylonians* would seem to confirm my view that Babylon was being used to critique Athenian imperial practices. We are told that the play made fun of Athens' imperial tax-collecting practices and that Aristophanes made special use of the fact that the non-Athenian tribute-bearers would be present in Athens during the performance of the play.

My goal with this paper then is to bring these two threads together. I will argue that Herodotus recognized the similarity of Athenian imperial rhetoric to Babylon's and so used Babylon as a warning for Athens. Aristophanes then reused Herodotus' imagery for his anti-Athens, Cloudcuckooland, and inserted it into the middle of his discussion of the universalizing tendencies of the Athenian empire and the possible return of tyranny to the city.

Bibliography

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