

## Aristophanes and the Athenian *Archē*, to the Peace of Nicias

The traditional view of Aristophanes' "political" comedies – that they adopt a generally conservative viewpoint deployed against the radical democratic wing – has experienced a recovery in recent decades. Suffering for many years from the criticism leveled by Gomme (1938), this view is once again widely, though not universally, accepted. Although the revival of this school of thought has produced numerous productive debates on Aristophanes' plays and political stance(s), most scholars have focused their efforts on issues of domestic politics. To date no comprehensive study treats Aristophanes' views on, or depictions of, the Athenian empire and Athenian foreign policy.

This paper seeks to remedy this condition by assessing Aristophanes' early political comedies: *Acharnians*, *Knights*, *Wasps*, *Peace*, and the fragments of *Babylonians*. These five plays, spanning only six years, allow us to explore the empire's depiction during what may have been the most politically-focused period of Aristophanes' career. In so doing, it will contribute to the ongoing discussion of several issues of relevance to Aristophanes' early political comedies, specifically Athens' self-styled status as "tyrant city", Aristophanes' own political views, and the unity of his political plays in relation to these views.

Opinions on this question have tended to emerge from the periphery of related topics (Meiggs 1972, Kallet-Marx 1994, MacDowell 1995, Henderson 2003 and 2017), while the only work ostensibly dedicated to the question itself (Forrest 1975) is limited to *Acharnians* and the fragments of *Babylonians*. These scholars agree that Aristophanes' various allusions to the empire are in fact subordinated to his attacks on Cleon and other demagogues. Hence, they argue, these plays do not reveal any disapproval of the empire as such, but only of the mismanagement of imperial revenue by greedy politicians.

This paper challenges the prevailing view with a look at the most salient examples of apparent criticism of the empire in the early political plays. While Aristophanes does frequently attack the dishonest management of imperial profits, in the process he often expresses sympathy for the plight of Athens' subject states, irrespective of domestic politics. These expressions of sympathy for fearful and beleaguered allies are all the more striking due to their proximity to the contentious Mytilenian affair of 427 and the controversial raising of imperial tribute in 425. The paper ends with an interpretation of the transformation of Demos in *Knights* that explains, 1) the shift in the play's historical references from Themistocles (populist/"democratic") to Miltiades and Aristides (aristocratic/conservative) and, 2) the shift in its political vocabulary from "tyranny" to "monarchy." Departing from the rest of the play, the restored Demos represents Athens in a golden age that was not only more aristocratic, but also marked by a more just treatment of the allies, as exemplified by Aristides "the Just." Thus Aristophanes' early political comedies exhibit a consistent skepticism about the nature of Athens' imperial role, and a desire to return to a more equitable treatment of her subjects, eschewing the status of "tyrant city."

#### Bibliography

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