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Old Comedy and Athenian Power

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Abstract

In this article, jumping off from Geoffrey de Ste. Croix's treatment of Aristophanes and the Megarian Decree, I argue that Old Comedy is an underutilised category of evidence for the study of the popular intellectual history of Athens. My particular focus here is the Athenian empire: how does Old Comedy present Athenian power and what does this comic presentation tell us about how at least some ordinary Athenians understood it? Can one popular Athenian imaginary of the empire be constructed through analysis of Aristophanes and his contemporaries? I will argue that Old Comedy, taken as a corpus, presents a very Athenian empire, that is to say one focused on Athens and its exploitation of others. The comic poets, therefore, likely assumed parochialism and myopia on the part of their audience, but also significant topical interest in the mechanisms of Athenian power, particularly those which brought revenue to Athens. This impression of highly topical engagement with the empire is corroborated by bringing Comedy into dialogue with other sources, in particular the epigraphic record.

Keywords

Aristophanes – Old Comedy – Athenian empire – popular intellectual history – Athenian inscriptions

Geoffrey de Ste. Croix's exploration of the origins of the Peloponnesian War contains a famously detailed analysis of the evidence for the Megarian decree

(or, in his view, decrees), an aggressive measure passed by the Athenians against their neighbour.[1] For my purposes, I need not delve into the intricacies of Croix's account here.[2] I will note, however, his conclusion regarding the utility or lack thereof of the comic plays of Aristophanes.[3] In his plays *Acharnians* (ll. 497–556) and *Peace* (ll. 603–614), Aristophanes connects the Megarian decree to the outbreak of the War. Thucydides (1.139.1–2) also mentions it as part of the diplomatic noise in the escalating hostilities of the late 430s BC. For Croix:

> It is vain to seek in Aristophanes' allusions to the Megarian decree any fresh light on its wording, its purpose or its effects … all we derive from Aristophanes is confirmation of what we can infer from Thucydides … that there were those who regarded the Peloponnesian War as having broken out "on account of the Megarians".[4]

Croix is attempting to reconstruct the origins of the Peloponnesian War, that is to say, a sequence of historical causation, hence his interest in the actual details of the Megarian decree. For his purposes, then, Aristophanic comedy is not especially helpful; although he treats Aristophanes' plays seriously and at some length, he repeatedly (and rightly) emphasises that historians cannot take them as straightforward repositories of historical fact.[5] However, he still hits on an important conclusion about the potential usefulness of Old Comedy (and given his Marxist outlook and concern with the perspective of non-elites in the Athenian empire, it is perhaps surprising that he is not more interested in it).[6] The Megarian decree would never be identified as a primary cause of the Peloponnesian War in a high-level historical analysis informed by hindsight, such as that of Thucydides. But, as Croix notes, Aristophanes

1 G.E.M. De Ste. Croix, *The Origins of the Peloponnesian War* (London: Duckworth, 1972), pp. 225–289.

2 C. Pelling, *Literary Texts and the Greek Historian* (London; New York: Routledge, 2000), pp. 103–111, 151–158, for example, provides a helpful re-evaluation of the sources, with explicit engagement with Croix's argument.

3 Croix, *Origins*, pp. 231–244 for focused discussion of Aristophanes.

4 Croix, *Origins*, p. 244.

5 Note Croix, *Origins*, pp. 232–233 for his summary of the dangers for the historian of using Aristophanes; and Appendix XXIX (pp. 383–386) for his influential take on the political outlook of Aristophanes.

6 For his famous examination of the popularity of the empire among the different social strata of allied communities, see G.E.M. De Ste. Croix, 'The Character of the Athenian Empire', *Historia: Zeitschrift Fur Alte Geschichte* 3 (1954), pp. 1–41; he returns to the topic in the Introduction of *Origins*. See the discussion of Canevaro and Lewis in this volume.

shows us that there were at least some people in Athens who thought that it was a cause. Their view was entirely parochial, focused on the point of crisis – their neighbour Megara – which impacted their everyday reality. In short, as Croix shows, the plays of Aristophanes are the closest we can get to one popular take on this moment of momentous geopolitical upheaval, a take that was widely shared in Athens.

Indeed, Athenian Old Comedy was a form of popular entertainment that generated humour through reflecting, distorting and exaggerating the shared knowledge, preoccupations and attitudes of its audience which, in Russell Meiggs' pithy turn of phrase, was 'the Assembly on holiday'.[7] This understanding of Comedy's relation to its audience's reality is now far from unfamiliar to most scholars.[8] It is commonly acknowledged that if due caution is exercised around the possibility of invention, the role of literary parody, the differing perspectives of different viewers, and perhaps the influence of the poets' own political predilections,[9] we can productively ask, in the words of Christopher Pelling, what audience members would need to know and to feel for a particular joke or scene to make sense.[10]

However, in my view, the implications of asking these questions for the study of the popular intellectual and social history of fifth-century Athens have not yet been fully explored, notwithstanding some important contributions in the years since Croix offered his thoughts on the Megarian decree.[11] My particular focus in this article will be the Athenian empire, a topic very much of concern to Croix. I wish to ask how (at least some) ordinary people in Athens understood their extra-*polis* power. Can one popular Athenian imaginary of the empire be reconstructed on the basis of the unique evidence provided by Old Comedy?

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7 R. Meiggs, *The Athenian Empire* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1972), p. 391.

8 The bibliography on this aspect of Comedy is unsurprisingly voluminous; a particularly elegant summary is provided, once again, by Pelling, *Literary Texts*, Chapter 7, pp. 123–140.

9 Croix's take on this issue (see again Croix, *Origins*, Appendix XXIX) responds to A. Gomme, 'Aristophanes and Politics', *The Classical Review* 53 (1938), pp. 97–109. Some of the many subsequent contributions to the debate are helpfully summarised in D. Olson, 'Comedy, Politics and Society', in G. Dobrov (ed.), *Brill's Companion to the Study of Greek Comedy* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2010), pp. 35–70.

10 Pelling, *Literary Texts*, p. 130, 134.

11 For example, two contributions which were influential for the conception of this article: B. Kowalzig, *Singing for the Gods: Performances of Myth and Ritual in Archaic and Classical Greece* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 110–118 and P. Thonemann, 'Lysimache and Lysistrata', *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 140 (2020), pp. 128–142. See also D.M. Pritchard, 'Aristophanes and de Ste. Croix: The Value of Old Comedy as Evidence for Athenian Popular Culture', *Antichthon* 46 (2012), pp. 14–51.

The two explicit contributions on the topic of Aristophanes and the Athenian empire of which I am aware, a more focused chapter by George Forrest and a few pages by Russell Meiggs, both contemporaries of Croix, contain valuable insights – more on which in due course – but, in line with Croix's preoccupations, focus more on the question of Aristophanes' own views on the empire than on those of his audience.[12] By contrast, I will argue that the Aristophanic plays, taken as a corpus along with other fragments of Old Comedy, reveal a consistent characterisation of the empire and allied communities on the part of the poets, and consequently assume a particular perception of the empire on the part of their viewers.

In the first half of this article, I will propose that the evidence of Comedy – both what it does and does not use to generate humour – implies that many Athenians' understanding of the diversity of their empire and its communities was limited. But this imperial myopia did not prevent close engagement on the part of the Athenian public with the mechanisms of empire, particularly those connected with revenue production. In the latter part of the paper, then, I will situate some comic plays of the 420s BC, as well as Aristophanes' *Birds* of 414 BC, in their particular historical contexts and read them alongside other contemporary sources (including the epigraphic record, a category of evidence rarely brought into dialogue with Comedy). On this basis, I will demonstrate that popular engagement with the empire could be highly topical, geared towards, in Peter Thonemann's words, 'the hottest political issue' of the day.[13] All in all, as I will contend, Croix's reading of Aristophanes' Megarian decree as reflecting a particular blend of both topical awareness and parochialism on the part of some Athenians can provide a useful starting point for a broader exploration of Old Comedy, its audience, and popular perceptions of Athenian power.

1 Subject Communities in the Plays of Aristophanes

How then does Old Comedy present Athenian power? The empire, as a key part of Athens' political landscape, unsurprisingly appears in all of Aristophanes' fifth-century plays. He uses Thucydides' favoured noun – *arche* – to refer to

12 W.G. Forrest, 'Aristophanes and the Athenian Empire', in B. Levick (ed.), *The Ancient Historian and His Materials. Essays in Honour of C.E. Stevens on His Seventieth Birthday* (Westmead, Farnborough: Gregg International, 1975), pp. 17–30; Meiggs, *The Athenian Empire,* pp. 391–396.

13 Thonemann, 'Lysimache and Lysistrata', p. 139.

Athenian power,[14] but more regularly mentions the constituent communities of the empire. In many passing references, subject cities appear as a collective designated by the simple terms 'cities' (*poleis*) or 'allies' (*symmachoi*),[15] sometimes but not always with further qualification.[16] For example, Dikaiopolis, the pacifistic protagonist of *Acharnians*, uses both terms (when tasting a wine-skin-cum-treaty offered by the Peloponnesians):

> ΑΜΦΙΘΕΟΣ: σὺ δ᾽ ἀλλὰ τασδὶ τὰς δεκέτεις γεῦσαι λαβών.
> ΔΙΚΑΙΟΠΟΛΙΣ: ὄζουσι χαὖται πρέσβεων ἐς τὰς πόλεις
> ὀξύτατον ὥσπερ διατριβῆς τῶν ξυμμάχων.
>
> Amphitheos: Well then, you take this ten-year [treaty] and taste it.
> Dikaiopolis: This one smells too – of embassies to the cities – a very acid smell, as if the allies were being ground down.[17]

In addition to these collective references, a few individual allied communities are also mentioned by Aristophanes. The prominent city of Chios, which was the only autonomous ally in the empire left by the time of Aristophanes' extant

14 For example, the protagonist, Bdelykleon, of *Wasps* (l. 672) tells his father that, as an ordinary Athenian, he is "content to nibble at the trotters of [his] own empire" (σὺ δὲ τῆς ἀρχῆς ἀγαπᾷς τῆς σῆς τοὺς ἀργελόφους περιτρώγων). Translation: A.H. Sommerstein, *Aristophanes Wasps* (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1983).

15 The rhetoric of allies and alliance is also maintained by Thucydides and some Athenian epigraphic documents: see P. Low, 'Looking for the Language of Athenian Imperialism', *The Journal of Hellenic Studies* 125 (2005), pp. 93–111. See also C. Constantakopoulou, *The Dance of the Islands: Insularity, Networks, the Athenian Empire and the Aegean World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 77–80, which notes the conceptual connection between allies and islands in the plays of Aristophanes and discusses the comic use of the terms 'island' and 'islander'.

16 For example, Hermes in *Peace* (l. 619) refers to "the cities which you rule" (αἱ πόλεις ὧν ἄρχετε). Other comic poets also use the term *poleis* to refer to subject communities in particular; see Telekleides fr. 45 which explicitly connects *poleis* to *phoros* (tribute). Note that the fragments of comic poets other than Aristophanes are accessibly presented with English translations in I. Storey, *Fragments of Old Comedy, Loeb Classical Library* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2011), which retains the numbering of the fragments from the definitive collection of C. Austin and R. Kassel, *Poetae Comici Graeci* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1983–2023).

17 Ar. *Ach*. 191–193. Adapted translation: A.H. Sommerstein, *Aristophanes Acharnians* (Warminster, Wilts., England: Aris & Phillips, 1980). For an explanation of how the pouring of a wine offering became a metonym for the treaty it solemnised, and how Aristophanes imagines this metonym literally, see H.-J., Newiger, 'War and Peace in the Comedy of Aristophanes', in E. Segal, *Oxford Readings in Aristophanes* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 144.

plays (in that it contributed ships rather than monetary tribute),[18] makes several appearances.[19] For example, in *Birds*, during the prayers solemnising the foundation of the new community of Cloudcuckooland, the Chians are added onto the end of an entreaty that health and security be granted to its residents:

> ΙΕΡΕΥΣ: διδόναι Νεφελοκοκκυγιεῦσιν ὑγιείαν καὶ σωτηρίαν αὐτοῖσι καὶ Χίοισι –
> ΠΙΣΘΕΤΑΙΡΟΣ: Χίοισιν ἥσθην πανταχοῦ προσκειμένοις.
>
> Priest: to grant to the Cloudcuckoovillians health and safety from all harm, both for themselves and for the Chians –
> Peisthetairos: I like the way the Chians get tacked on everywhere![20]

The humour of the protagonist Peisthetairos' aside about the Chians' ubiquity likely rests on their regular prominence in Athenian public life, although we cannot be sure, as some scholars have suggested, that the joke reflects the inclusion of a real prayer for the Chians at the Panathenaia.[21] Likewise, the island of Euboia, off the Attic coast, is referred to on multiple occasions.[22] Not only was it actually visible from much of eastern Attica, but it was also a key source of Athenian grain before its loss to the Peloponnesians in 411 BC,[23] and it was the location of several Athenian cleruchies (settlements outside of Attica where the landowners retained Athenian citizenship).[24] Aristophanes perhaps even nods at the Euboian cleruchs in the audience, when he jokes about a geometric instrument for measuring land (such as cleruchic allotments) in *Clouds*, followed soon after by a reference to the island (Ar. *Nub*. 202–213).

The city of Kyzikos (on the Propontic Sea in north-western Asia Minor) also appears, always in association with its famous and unusual electrum coinage, which – as we know from a large hoard found at the Piraeus, as well as many

18 See Thuc. 7.57.4 for the Chians contributing ships as late as 413 BC.

19 See also Ar. *Pax*. 170–172.

20 Ar. *Av*. 879–880. Translation: A.H. Sommerstein, *Aristophanes Birds* (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1987).

21 For example, J. Shear, *Serving Athena: The Festival of the Panathenaia and the Construction of Athenian Identities* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021), pp. 153, 288–289.

22 For instance, the Euboian city of Karystos is referred to in the peace negotiations at the end of *Lysistrata* (l. 1182).

23 Euboia is linked with grain at Ar. *Vesp*. 715–7; see also Thuc. 8.95.7–96.2.

24 For the importance of Euboian grain to Athens and the role of the cleruchies, see A. Moreno, *Feeding the Democracy: The Athenian Grain Supply in the Fifth and Fourth Centuries BC* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), pp. 77–143.

inscribed financial documents – circulated at Athens.[25] The chorus-leader of Aristophanes' *Peace* describes a cowardly commander going pale like the colour of the electrum coins:

> μᾶλλον ἢ θεοῖσιν ἐχθρὸν ταξίαρχον προσβλέπων
> τρεῖς λόφους ἔχοντα καὶ φοινικίδ᾽ ὀξεῖαν πάνυ,
> ἣν ἐκεῖνός φησιν εἶναι βάμμα Σαρδιανικόν:
> ἢν δέ που δέῃ μάχεσθ᾽ ἔχοντα τὴν φοινικίδα,
> τηνικαῦτ᾽ αὐτὸς βέβαπται βάμμα Κυζικηνικόν.
>
> Fatter than if I were staring at some god-detested taxiarch wearing three crests and a very bright crimson cloak, which he says is Sardian colour; though if by any chance he has to fight wearing that cloak, then he himself gets dyed Kyzikene colour.[26]

As Alan Sommerstein explains, the humour here is probably scatological: *kyzikenikon* puns on *khezein*, implying that the taxiarch soiled himself.[27] But knowledge of the 'Kyzikene colour' of the pale gold coinage is necessary for the joke to land. Tellingly, several fragments of Aristophanes' contemporary Eupolis also refer to the Kyzikene electrum staters (fr. 99 ll. 86–87; fr. 247). Other allied communities are similarly referred to vis-à-vis the products associated with them. We hear about Thasian wine on more than one occasion (Ar. *Eccl.* 1119; *Plut.* 1021), Thasian sauce (Ar. *Ach.* 672–673), as well as Chian wine (Ar. *Eccl.* 1139), and a now incomprehensible joke about Tenian garlic (Ar. *Plut.* 718). It seems that the Athenians' perception or knowledge of a particular place might be tied to the physical objects from that place which made their way to Athens.[28]

25 For the early fourth-century Piraeus hoard, see M. Thompson, O. Mørkholm, C.M. Kraay, and S. Noe (eds.), *An Inventory of Greek Coin Hoards* (New York: American Numismatic Society, 1973), no. 47. For Kyzikene staters in an Athenian financial document, see for example the end of the first tribute quota list: *IG* I^3 259 postscript ll. 10–12. Further references to Kyzikene staters in financial documents are provided by T.J. Figueira, *The Power of Money: Coinage and Politics in the Athenian Empire* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1998), p. 100.

26 Ar. *Pax.* 1172–1176. Adapted translation: A.H. Sommerstein, *Aristophanes Peace* (Warminster: Aris & Phillips, 1985).

27 Sommerstein, *Peace*, p. 189.

28 This observation is relevant to Croix's discussion of the Megarian decree (for example at *Origins*, pp. 259–260), as to whether Megarian export products would have been recognised as such.

Together, these references also contribute to a broader motif, that of diverse products flooding into the Piraeus.[29] Its most famous comic manifestation is a fragment of Hermippos' *Basket-bearers*, consisting of a Homeric-style catalogue of imports to Athens from all over the Mediterranean:

> ἔσπετε νῦν μοι Μοῦσαι Ὀλύμπια δώματ᾽ ἔχουσαι,
> ἐξ οὗ ναυκληρεῖ Διόνυσος ἐπ᾽ οἴνοπα πόντον,
> ὅσσ᾽ ἀγάθ᾽ ἀνθρώποις δεῦρ᾽ ἤγαγε νηὶ μελαίνῃ.
> ἐκ μὲν Κυρήνης καυλὸν καὶ δέρμα βόειον,
> ἐκ δ᾽ Ἑλλησπόντου σκόμβρους καὶ πάντα ταρίχη·
> ἐκ δ᾽ αὖ Ἰταλίας χόνδρον καὶ πλευρὰ βόεια.
>
> Tell now for me, Muses who have your home on Olympus, all the good things that Dionysus brought for people here, ever since he sailed as a trader over the wine-dark sea in his black ship. From Kyrene stalks of silphium and ox hides, from the Hellespont mackerel and salted fish of all sorts, from Italy grain and sides of beef.[30]

The chorus in Aristophanes' lost play *Merchant Ships* may actually have represented this plethora of luxuries from different places on stage (see fr. 428–433). The motif is not limited to Comedy; its use by Thucydides in Pericles' funeral oration demonstrates how it played a role in the creation of Athenian collective identity.[31] This image of prolific imports was perhaps more about Athens and its place in the world, its perceived centrality and naval dominance, than the particular origins of the different products.

To the best of my knowledge, with these few brief words, I have outlined all the kinds of references to *individual* allied communities in the surviving plays of Aristophanes. It should be emphasised that no character from a tribute-paying community appears on stage, like the Spartans,[32] or the various barbarians with their funny accents;[33] other peoples and communities beyond the empire are more prominent than those within it. There is the starving Megarian in *Acharnians* (ll. 729–835), very much illustrating the negative impact of Athenian power on another city (but one which did not pay tribute

29 See D. Braund, 'The Luxuries of Athenian Democracy', *Greece and Rome* 41 (1994), pp. 41–48.

30 Hermippos fr. 63 ll. 1–6. Translation: Storey, *Fragments of Old Comedy*.

31 Thuc. 2.38; see also [Xen.] *Ath.Pol.* 2.7.

32 For example, the Spartan woman Lampito in *Lysistrata* (ll. 78–253) accompanied by women from various other communities in the Peloponnese and mainland Greece.

33 For example, the Scythian archer at the end of *Thesmophoriazusae* (ll. 1001–1225).

and was therefore not within the limits of the empire, as commonly defined). Indeed, as is also evident in the quote from *Acharnians* with which I began this section, the limited presentation of individual allied identities did not prevent acknowledgement on Aristophanes' part of the possible adverse impact of both Athenian power and the Peloponnesian War on cities in the empire and beyond,[34] albeit without any explicit questioning of the empire's morality or existence.[35] *Peace*, on several occasions, hints at the heavy imposition of the empire on allies; in one example, the Chorus predicts that peace may allow the Athenians to treat their allies better:

> ὥστ' ἐσόμεθ' ἀλλήλοισιν ἀμνοὶ τοὺς τρόπους
> καὶ τοῖσι συμμάχοισι πρᾳότεροι πολύ.
>
> So that we will be like lambs in our behaviour towards each other, and much milder towards our allies.[36]

Meanwhile, *Birds* depicts the representatives of Athenian power who turn up at the new foundation as entirely troublesome;[37] and then shows how Cloudcuckooland's own power brought the gods to the brink of starvation (as I will discuss more below). But it is notable that even when Aristophanes composed a play largely concerned with the operation of Athenian power in a non-Athenian context, he did so through an imagined cognate of Athens, Cloudcuckooland, rather than through a depiction of an actual allied community. The focus is very much on the *Athenian* aspect of Athenian power, and its potentially negative effects for others are generalised.

2 The Empire of Eupolis' *Poleis*

In this discussion, however, I should also move beyond Aristophanes, as the most explicit evidence for Comedy's engagement with cities in the empire arguably comes from fragments of a play by his contemporary Eupolis. Eupolis' *Poleis*, perhaps performed in 422 BC, boasted a chorus formed of differentiated

34 It has been suggested that Aristophanes' lost play of 426, *Babylonians*, presented Athenian cruelty towards it allies; Forrest ('Aristophanes and the Athenian Empire', pp. 19–21) convincingly argues that this conclusion cannot be made on the basis of the extant fragments.

35 As noted by Forrest, 'Aristophanes and the Athenian Empire', p. 24.

36 Ar. *Pax.* 935–936. Translation: Sommerstein, *Aristophanes Peace*.

37 Ar. *Av.* 1035–1057 (decree-seller); 1021–1034 (*episkopos*); 1410–1469 (informer).

personifications of communities in the empire.[38] Three fuller fragments survive that relate to the entrance of the chorus onstage, and the introduction of three personified cities by the speaking actors.[39] The autonomous ally Chios, and its ships, unsurprisingly makes an appearance (although it should be noted that these fragments were preserved in Aristophanic scholia and tie in with some of the aforementioned references to particular allied communities made by Aristophanes, so the overlap is not coincidental):

> αὕτη Χίος, καλὴ πόλις ⟨ ⟩
> πέμπει γὰρ ὑμῖν ναῦς μακρὰς ἄνδρας θ᾽ ὅταν
> δεήσῃ,
> καὶ τἆλλα πειθαρχεῖ καλῶς, ἄπληκτος ὥσπερ
> ἵππος.
>
> She is Chios, a fine city, for she sends you warships and men whenever there is need, and the rest of the time she is nicely obedient, like a horse that does not need a whip.[40]

Kyzikos once again is characterised in connection with its electrum staters:

> {A.} ἡ δ᾽ ὑστάτη ποῦ ᾽σθ᾽;
> {B.} ἥδε Κύζικος πλέα
> στατήρων.
> {A.} ἐν τῇδε τοίνυν τῇ πόλει φρουρῶν ⟨ἐγώ⟩ ποτ᾽
> αὐτὸς
> γυναῖκ᾽ ἐκίνουν κολλύβου καὶ παῖδα καὶ γέροντα.
>
> A: Where is the last one?
> B: She is Kyzikos, full of staters.
> A: Indeed, on guard duty once in that city, I screwed a woman, a boy, and an old man, all for a dime.[41]

38 The chorus of Eupolis' play was perhaps not entirely unique: Aristophanes, Platon and Epicharmos wrote plays called *Islands*; and 'islands', as Constantakopoulou, *The Dance of the Islands*, pp. 77–80 argues, may have been a synonym for 'allies'.

39 Kowalzig, *Singing for the Gods*, p. 114 ingeniously (but perhaps not wholly persuasively) suggests that the personifications represent allied entrants in an Athenian choral competition such as that at Delos, due to the reference in fr. 239 to 'gentlemen, scrutineers of the choruses under review' (ἄνδρες λογισταὶ ὑπευθύνων χορῶν).

40 Fr. 246. Translation: Storey, *Fragments of Old Comedy*.

41 Fr. 247. Translation: Storey, *Fragments of Old Comedy*.

We are also introduced to the Cycladic island of Tenos:

> Τῆνος αὕτη, πολλοὺς ἔχουσα σκορπίους ἔχεις τε συκοφάντας.
>
> She is Tenos, with many scorpions and informers.[42]

It is undeniable that these three personifications show some level of individual characterisation of the different communities.[43] The use of costume and music may have made use of common associations, aiding the audience's recognition;[44] it is easy to imagine eastern-style music marking the entrance of Kyzikos, dressed in a glittering gold outfit reminiscent of the electrum coins. The comparison made between Chios and a horse could perhaps be a specific reference to Chios' oligarchic leadership,[45] as equine activities often had aristocratic associations.[46]

I wonder, however, the extent to which the personifications were strongly differentiated or heavily reliant on any pre-existing knowledge of the empire among the audience. The references to Tenian scorpions and informers could have had particular resonances vis-à-vis the island, resonances which we cannot now reconstruct. But they may also be all-purpose jokes. 'Scorpion' is used as a derogatory term for an informer in oratorical texts.[47] Here, moreover, the reference may be to Athenian rather than Tenian sycophants; after all the Athenians' litigiousness, including towards their allies, was a common comic trope, with informers appearing on stage in a number of comedies.[48] Further, both the sexual overtones of the Kyzikos fragment and the animalistic servility attributed to Chios could be read as entirely generic, and in this

42 Fr. 245. Translation: Storey, *Fragments of Old Comedy*.

43 Various North Aegean peoples are also referred to in fr. 241, and Amorgos in fr. 256; two other fragments (243 and 244) referring to females probably relate to additional members of the chorus.

44 See I. Storey, *Eupolis: Poet of Old Comedy* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 218. Different musical modes could have different geographic or ethnic connotations; for the variety of modes used in the Classical period, see M.L. West, *Ancient Greek Music* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992), pp. 177–184.

45 For Chios as oligarchic, see Thuc. 8.24.4 with M. Simonton, *Classical Greek Oligarchy: A Political History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2017) pp. 13–14; 193 n. 21.

46 See I.G. Spence, *The Cavalry of Classical Greece. A Social and Military History with Particular Reference to Athens* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993) pp. 193–210.

47 D. Sansone, 'Eupolis, fr. 245 K.-A. (*Poleis*)', *Rheinisches Museum Für Philologie* 154 (2011), p. 232.

48 *Birds* (ll. 1410–69) depicts an Athenian informer operating in the cities of the empire, while an informer targets Dikaiopolis' marketplace in *Acharnians* (ll. 818–828). An informer also appeared on stage in Eupolis' (now fragmentary) *Demes*; see fr. 99 ll. 85–87.

connection it is important to note that all the personifications are female.[49] The ending of Aristophanes' *Lysistrata* (ll. 1114–87) sees the reconciliation between the Athenians and the Spartans imagined as a personified female, upon which territories under discussion in the negotiation are mapped, with innuendos for different body parts. Extra-*polis* power imagined through the sexual objectification of the female body, then, was an established comic trope.

Perhaps most significantly, the fragments show *introductions*; the speaking actors needed to introduce the cities to the audience as they came on stage.[50] In this regard, we might compare evidence from another medium, document relief sculpture, a contemporary art form which, like Comedy, had a wide intended audience. Indeed, it is likely that the document reliefs topping inscribed *stelai* would be the parts of their respective monuments with which viewers would have most engaged. Moreover, both Comedy and document relief sculpture made use of personification, showing common conceptual ground: the personification of Demos in *Knights*, for example, parallels the personification of Demos on a number of fourth-century *stelai*.[51]

Document reliefs fall into several different iconographic types, the most common of which in the fifth century was the depiction of gods grasping hands, usually found at the top of treaty documents.[52] These divine figures are usually interpreted as symbolic representations of the communities entering into the treaty,[53] and Athena is immediately recognisable as representing Athens or the Athenians in many examples. But the non-Athenian figures are not always so obviously identified. Even those representing the Olympian gods can be generic: on the relief at the top of the *stele* recording several honorific decrees for the Samians, for example, the figure representing Samos – probably the island's most famous deity, Hera – looks exactly the same as a depiction of Demeter in an almost identical relief at the top of an Athenian account

49 Explored more fully by R. Rosen, 'The Gendered Polis in Eupolis' Cities', in G. Dobrov (ed.), *The City as Comedy. Society and Representation in Athenian Drama* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), pp. 149–176. Greek personifications of communities were more usually female but, as I will explore below, were not always so.

50 The chorus-members of Aristophanes' lost *Islands* may also have been introduced: see Ar. fr. 403.

51 As noted at P. Cartledge, *Aristophanes and His Theatre of the Absurd* (Bristol: Bristol Classical Press, 1990), p. 48.

52 C. Lawton, *Attic Document Reliefs: Art and Politics in Ancient Athens* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995) pp. 36–37.

53 Mack, however, argues that the actual theological resonance of the reliefs should not be neglected: W. Mack, 'Vox Populi, Vox Deorum? Athenian Document Reliefs and the Theologies of Public Inscription', *Annual of the British School at Athens* 113 (2018), pp. 365–398.

FIGURE 1
Document relief topping the lost Athenian decree for Kios, 406/5 BC. The relief depicts a male figure, labelled "Kios", joining hands with Athena. EM 6928
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document. Indeed, both are likely derived from the same iconographic type.[54] We can only deduce that the former is Hera from consultation of the document and additional knowledge of the Samians' worship of Hera.[55] A fragmentary fourth-century relief adorning a decree concerning relations between Athens and Chios likewise shows a generically attired female figure interacting with Athena, with no iconographic means of identification; viewers would have had to read the inscription to contexualise the image.[56] We cannot know, moreover, whether many viewers actually read the document. Their overriding impression upon viewing the *stele* may have been simply that Athens was interacting with a foreign deity, another community.

Moreover, in two late fifth-century reliefs, figures with identifying inscriptions are found in place of more prominent deities. An older male figure with a himation is labelled as "Kios" (on the Asiatic Propontis; see Figure 1), a female figure in a peplos is identified as "Mess-" in a fragmentary inscription (referring to either Messenia or Messana); both have no clearly identifiable attributes

54 Lawton, *Attic Document Reliefs* no. 12 for Samos, 403/2 BC (with *IG* I^3 127; *IG* II^2 1; *Attic Inscriptions Online* no. 796 for the decrees); Lawton no. 13 for accounts of treasurers of Athena and the other gods, 399/8 BC (with *IG* II^2 1374); A. Blanshard, 'The Problem with Honouring Samos: An Athenian Document Relief and Its Interpretation', in Z. Newby and R.E. Leader-Newby (eds.), *Art and Inscriptions in the Ancient World* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 27–28; J. Elsner, 'Visual Culture and Ancient History. Issues of Empiricism and Ideology in the Samos Stele at Athens', *Classical Antiquity* 34 (2015), p. 54.

55 Elsner, 'Visual Culture', p. 63.

56 Lawton, *Attic Document Reliefs*, no. 19, 384/3 BC (with *IG* II^2 34).

other than the accompanying inscriptions.[57] Some scholars take these to be personifications of the communities concerned,[58] while others see them as eponymous heroes.[59] Regardless, it is notable that these figures, in some way representing the communities in question, had to be distinguished with explicit labels. The artists, in constructing the images which would be the focus of audience interaction with the *stelai*, presumably did not have recourse to known iconographic types for these communities.

Returning to Eupolis, then, the differentiation of his chorus might not have relied on pre-existing, individuated knowledge on the part of the audience members; rather it may have been the overall assemblage of (servile, female) personifications and their relationship to Athens that mattered, superficially differentiated through their introductions and attributes. We might compare the first-century AD sculptural scheme at the Sebasteion at Aphrodisias in Western Anatolia depicting female personifications of peoples in the Roman Empire, all identified primarily through their inscriptions.[60] This was a collection of personifications intended to aggrandize the emperors.[61]

All in all, we might ask how developed the average Athenian spectator's sense of place or identity was when it came to different allied communities, at least according to the assumptions made by the comic poets (although any allied audience members may have responded differently).[62] At the very least, the comic poets did not regularly rely on the identities of particular allied communities for the production of humour, except in the case of particular, prominent cities. But this comic evidence can also be taken to imply that the subjects of the empire were perceived by at least some Athenians more through their relationship to Athens than as individual communities. They perhaps mattered due to their collectivity, whether as members of a chorus or producers of products that found their way to the Piraeus.

Although it is beyond the scope of this article to offer a full analysis, there is certainly evidence from other sources that corroborates this impression of the comic audience's imperial myopia and collective perception of allied

57 Lawton, *Attic Document Reliefs* no. 9 for Kios, 406/5 BC (with *IG* I^3 124); no. 66 for Messenia/Messana, exact date unknown (with *IG* I^3 148).

58 A. Smith, *Polis and Personification in Classical Athenian Art* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), p. 103.

59 Mack, 'Vox Populi', p. 373.

60 R.R.R Smith, 'Simulacra Gentium: The Ethne from the Sebasteion at Aphrodisias', *The Journal of Roman Studies* 78 (1988), pp. 50–77.

61 It must be noted, however, that this scheme was not necessarily representative of Roman imperial perceptions more generally.

62 Allied communities were required to deliver their tribute to the Dionysia, so some allied individuals were likely present in the theatre: see Ar. *Ach.* 505–6; Eupolis fr. 254.

communities. Thucydides (albeit rather disingenuously) emphasises the general populace's ignorance regarding far-flung communities and suggests that it voted measures through in the assembly due to the influence of more knowledgeable but unethical politicians.[63] Ordinary people's perceptions, moreover, may have been conditioned by representations of the empire promoted by the state. The tribute quota lists, the monumental inscriptions recording the part of each allied community's monetary tribute dedicated to the Athenians' goddess Athena, derived their visual power from their size coupled with their dense listing of different communities.[64] The names of some communities, such as those at the top of the first stone, which was over three and a half metres tall, would have been very difficult to read; but they were perhaps not intended to be read. Meanwhile, the reliefs of the Parthenon depicting a religious procession, likely that of the Panathenaia, show mostly generic Greek or Athenian participants bearing gifts for Athena, in contrast with the reliefs of the Apadana at Persepolis, for example, which emphasise the ethnic diversity of the subjects bringing offerings to the Persian King.[65] At least in later years, allied representatives would have certainly been part of the Panathenaic procession, but one would not know it from Athenian visual art.[66] We should perhaps question the extent to which the detailed inscribed decrees detailing Athenian relations with particular allied communities represented the shared knowledge of all those who voted them through. Rather, they were likely heavily dependent on individual negotiators or ambassadors with expert knowledge of the place in question.[67]

63 Thucydides' most explicit statement of the Athenians' ignorance is in connection with the Sicilian expedition in 415 BC (6.1.1), although he also tells us that the Athenians sent ships to the island in 427 BC (3.86).

64 *IG* I^3 259–290; for an evocative description of the monumental first stone and its symbolic function, see R. Stroud, *The Athenian Empire on Stone: David M. Lewis Memorial Lecture Oxford 2006* (Athens: Greek Epigraphic Society, 2006), pp. 12–13.

65 For the potential influence of the Apadana reliefs on the Parthenon, see M.C. Root, 'The Parthenon Frieze and the Apadana Reliefs at Persepolis: Reassessing a Programmatic Relationship', *American Journal of Archaeology* 89 (1985), pp. 103–120. For a summary of the debate around the identification of the procession in the Parthenon frieze, see Shear, *Serving Athena*, Appendix 2.

66 Allied participation in the procession is ordered by Thoudippos' decree of 425/4 BC (*IG* I^3 71 = R. Osborne and P.J. Rhodes, *Greek Historical Inscriptions, 478–404 BC* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017) no. 153 = *Attic Inscriptions Online* no. 959 ll. 55–58).

67 On the importance of personal connections and expertise in Athenian diplomacy, see L. Mitchell, *Greeks Bearing Gifts: The Public Use of Private Relationships in the Greek World, 435–323 BC* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), especially Chapter 5.

3 Tribute and Corruption from Aristophanes to Thoudippos

But this conclusion about the likely parochialism of some Athenians does not mean that the assembly or the audience of Aristophanes was entirely lacking interest in or even knowledge about the operation of Athenian power. Indeed, while the subjects of the empire might appear rather hazy in Comedy, the mechanisms of Athenian rule certainly do not. In particular, across the Aristophanic corpus and beyond, one of the most prominent preoccupations vis-à-vis the empire is its economic aspect.[68]

This observation has certainly been made before about Aristophanes' plays of the 420s BC, performed during the first phase of the Peloponnesian War and the ill-fated peace which followed it. The analyses of Aristophanes and the Athenian Empire by both Forrest and Meiggs demonstrate how *Wasps* and *Knights* show consistent concern with the proper use of Athenian imperial finances for the benefit of the Athenian *demos* as a whole and the improper, personal enrichment of prominent individuals through misappropriation of these finances.[69]

Certainly, Aristophanes paints a rich picture of the entanglement of Athenian imperial revenue production with the corruption of individuals. For instance, Paphlagon, the protagonist of *Knights* (424 BC) and a satirical representation of the demagogic politician Kleon, is accused of "watching like the tuna-fisher from the rocks above for shoals of tribute",[70] and illicitly extracting ten talents from the city of Poteidaia.[71] *Wasps* (422 BC), in which theft is a prominent theme,[72] contains a long description by the protagonist Bdelykleon of Athenian domestic and imperial revenue production, culminating in a demonstration of how none of it ends up enriching the *demos* as a whole, rather ending up in the pockets of a corrupt few (Ar. *Vesp.* 655–724).

68 L. Kallet-Marx, 'Money Talks: Rhetor, Demos and the Resources of the Athenian Empire', in R. Osborne and S. Hornblower (eds.), *Ritual, Finance, Politics: Athenian Democratic Accounts Presented to David Lewis* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994), p. 227 notes the prominence of tribute across Aristophanes' plays. Other aspects of Athenian power are also, of course, explored, such as its legislative and epigraphic authority (for example, in the decree-seller of *Birds*, ll. 1035–1057) or its control of certain legal processes in allied communities (for example, in the informer of *Birds*, ll. 1410–1469).

69 Forrest, 'Aristophanes and the Athenian Empire', p. 24; Meiggs, *The Athenian Empire*, p. 392.

70 Ar. *Eq.* 312: κἀπὸ τῶν πετρῶν ἄνωθεν τοὺς φόρους θυννοσκοπῶν.

71 Ar. *Eq.* 438. Paphlagon is also repeatedly accused of taking bribes from allied communities: see Ar. *Eq.* 801–802; 834–835; 1196–1197.

72 D. Konstan, 'The Politics of Aristophanes', *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 115 (1985), p. 33 notes twenty references to theft in the play.

A variation on this motif also occurs in *Peace* (421 BC), in Hermes' explanation of the disappearance of the goddess Peace. According to Hermes, first the allies, burdened by tribute, bribed the Spartans to enter the war (Ar. *Pax.* 819–822). Then Athenian orators, he says, threatened rich allied individuals with slander, and were bribed to stay quiet (Ar. *Pax.* 635–647). This thematic nexus was not only the preserve of Aristophanes: the plot of his older contemporary Kratinos' *Wealth Gods*, likely also performed in the 420s BC, appears to hinge on these deities coming to Athens to deal with those who have gained wealth unjustly.[73] One such individual is the general Hagnon, who is said to have acquired his wealth from the *arche* (fr. 171 ll. 69–71). Kratinos' word-play muddies the waters, as *arche* has multiple meanings: did Hagnon have hereditary wealth, possessing it from the *beginning*, or did he extract it from the proceeds of Athenian *power*?

Notably, Aristophanes links imperial financial corruption on the part of Athenian individuals with legal contexts, most prominently in the domestic trial which dominates the second half of *Wasps*.[74] Bdelykleon tries to stop his litigious father going to court by setting up mock legal proceedings at home (Ar. *Vesp.* 891–1008). The trial concerns the dog Labes (representing the politician Laches) eating cheese, that is to say revenues, from Sicily without sharing it.[75] The charge is brought by Kuon, a canine version of Kleon, who complains that Labes/Laches did not share the cheese (Ar. *Vesp.* 894–897). The scene generates humour from the sending up of specific elements of Athenian legal proceedings (for example, kitchen utensils act as witnesses), suggesting audience familiarity with court proceedings concerning corruption (Ar. *Vesp.* 936–940).[76]

All in all, these examples demonstrate a clear concern across a number of comic plays performed in the 420s BC around imperial revenues; extra-legal individual corruption in connection with these revenues on the part of Athenian politicians and, in *Peace*, allied notables; and the role of the Athenian legal system in attempting to regulate but ultimately facilitating such

73 I. Ruffell, 'The World Turned Upside down: Utopia and Utopianism', in D. Harvey and J. Wilkins (eds.), *The Rivals of Aristophanes. Studies in Athenian Old Comedy* (London; Swansea: Duckworth with The Classical Press of Wales, 2000), 475–481.

74 Paphlagon's (i.e. Kleon's) aggressive litigiousness is also a repeated motif in *Knights*: Ar. *Eq.* 258–260; 824–827.

75 This metaphor of corruption previously appeared in *Knights* (ll. 1030–1034), before literally being realised onstage in *Wasps*.

76 D. Olson, 'Politics and Poetry in Aristophanes' Wasps', *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 126 (1996), pp. 131–132 argues (perhaps correctly) that this scene refers to a particular trial.

corruption. It follows that this concern was likely familiar to members of the audience, that Aristophanes and his contemporaries could assume a popular preoccupation with the Athenian imperial fiscal system and its alleged abuse.

But this observation about widespread concern with the fiscal system can be pushed further.[77] This particular configuration of anxieties around Athenian imperial finances is precisely what emerges from the innovative epigraphic record contemporary to these plays. In the 420s BC, the Athenians took a number of measures in an attempt to increase revenues, when the financial pressures of the first stages of the Peloponnesian War began to bite.[78] Most notably, the assembly passed, inscribed and displayed three decrees in the mid-420s BC concerning the assessment and collection of tribute, proposed by Kleonymos,[79] Thoudippos,[80] and Kleinias respectively.[81] The decree of Thoudippos, best known for its record of new assessment of tribute, states that the tribute had become too little (*IG* I^3 71 ll. 16–17), and links imperial revenues with the waging of the war (l. 46). Meanwhile, the relief decorating the top of the *stele* on which the decree of Kleonymos is inscribed conveys its subject matter in the most direct way possible, for it depicts bags of money.[82]

It needs to be emphasised that the inscription of these decrees was highly innovative, at least judging by what we know of the Athenian epigraphic record. Before this time, all (likely bar one) of surviving inscribed Athenians decrees with imperial application concern *individual* allied communities.[83]

77 Here I am very much indebted to Thonemann, 'Lysimache and Lysistrata', which convincingly demonstrates how *Lysistrata* (411 BC) engages directly with the pressing issues of the day regarding public finance.

78 Including the imposition of a property tax in 428 BC (Thuc. 3.19.1) and the gathering of impromptu fiscal contributions (Thuc. 2.69.1, 3.19.1, 4.50.1, 4.75.1). See L.J. Samons, *Empire of the Owl: Athenian Imperial Finance* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2000), Chapter 2; L. Kallet and J.H. Kroll, *The Athenian Empire: Using Coins as Sources* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2020), pp. 108–109.

79 *IG* I^3 68 = Osborne and Rhodes, *Greek Historical Inscriptions*, no. 152, dated to 426/5 BC or slightly earlier.

80 *IG* I^3 71 = Osborne and Rhodes, *Greek Historical Inscriptions*, no. 153 = *Attic Inscriptions Online no.* 959, dated to 425/4 BC.

81 *IG* I^3 34 = Osborne and Rhodes, *Greek Historical Inscriptions*, no. 154 = *Attic Inscriptions in the United Kingdom* 4.2 no. 5, likely dated to 425/4 BC.

82 Lawton, *Attic Document Reliefs*, no. 1.

83 The empire-wide decree concerning offerings at Eleusis is dated by many scholars to *c.* 435 BC, but some prefer a date in the 420s BC in the same context as the three decrees under discussion here (*IG* I^3 78 = Osborne and Rhodes, *Greek Historical Inscriptions*, no. 141, with a summary of arguments on dating). For the fifth-century Athenian preference for decrees regarding individual communities, see P. Liddel, 'Epigraphy, Legislation and Power within the Athenian Empire', *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 53 (2010), pp. 102–103.

The impression is very much that the Athenians dealt with the affairs of their allies on a bilateral basis; or at least that it was these interactions they chose to record on stone. As I argued in the previous section, we cannot assume that all the details of the measures contained in these decrees represented the shared knowledge of the assembly which voted them through; they largely concerned specific affairs, far away from Athens. In the mid-420s BC, however, in a largely unprecedented use of public epigraphy, and likely also in the conception of the underlying legislation, the Athenians now chose to pass and monumentalise measures aimed at the entire empire, measures which would be visible at Athens itself.

The detail of these three decrees is also novel. They bring in new measures concerning tribute, including, in Thoudippos' decree, the setting up of a court for allies to contest their assessments (*IG* I^3 71 ll. 16–22). Most of the measures across the three decrees concern the individuals responsible for tribute assessment and collection, creating a number of new roles,[84] demarcating the activity of existing magistrates,[85] and bringing in new processes of publicity and scrutiny.[86] These measures are protected with unprecedented numbers of 'entrenchment clauses' (as defined by David Lewis),[87] that is to say clauses threatening legal and financial punishments for any individuals (mostly Athenians but, in the decree of Kleinias, also allies)[88] who contravene the decrees or do not fulfil their stated roles. For example, the decree proposed by Kleonymos states:

> ἐὰν δέ τις κακοτεχνêι [hόπος μὲ κύριον ἔστα]-
> ι τὸ φσέφισμα τὸ τô φόρο [ἒ hόπος μὲ ἀπαχθέσετ]-
> αι ho φόρος Ἀθέναζε, γρά[φεσθαι κατὰ τôν πρατ?]-
> τόντον ἐκ ταύτες τês πό[λεος τὸν βολόμενον π]-
> ρὸς τὸς ἐπιμελετάς.
>
> If anyone contrives wickedly that the decree about the tribute shall not be valid or that the tribute shall not be brought to Athens, those who do

84 For example, the decree of Kleinias (*IG* I^3 34 l. 22–25) orders for four men to be elected to provide receipts to the allies.

85 The decree of Thoudippos is focused on members of the prytany: *IG* I^3 71 ll. 28–40.

86 The decree of Kleinias (*IG* I^3 34 l. 11–18) devises a new system of tokens and sealed writing tablets with amounts of tribute to prevent individuals dipping in.

87 D. Lewis, 'Entrenchment-Clauses in Attic Decrees', in *Selected Papers in Greek and Near Eastern History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), pp. 136–149.

88 For example, *IG* I^3 34 l. 31 (probably, the text is fragmentary).

> this (?) shall be prosecuted by whoever wishes from this city, before the managers.[89]

The domestic trial of *Wasps* looks like it could have come directly out of an entrenchment clause such as this. As in Aristophanes' near contemporary comedies, then, the concern in these decrees is not just with the state level processes of tribute collection, but with the potential for corruption on the part of individuals and the role of the Athenian legal system in bringing individual agency under public scrutiny. As noted previously in connection with the bilateral decrees, we cannot assume that all members of the assembly would have engaged with the detailed and technical measures contained in these empire-wide measures. But the thematic overlap between Comedy and epigraphy, I believe, is noteworthy. The new legal contexts created by the prominent, empire-wide legislation would have perhaps increased the visibility of individual corruption, making it more obvious fodder for Comedy; while the public concern which fuelled the inclusion of this theme in Comedy may also have contributed to the pressure which resulted in the legislation. In sum, then, the comic plays and the unprecedented empire-wide inscriptions provide different evidence for the same phenomenon; they both demonstrate significant – and perhaps intensified – public preoccupation around imperial revenue production and the individuals who played a role in it.

4 Aristophanes' *Birds*, the End of Tribute and the Standards Decree

Aristophanes' *Birds* of 414 BC provides further evidence for a highly topical concern with the economic aspect of Athenian power on the part of the poet and presumably of his audience. The play revolves around the foundation of a new avine city in the sky by a discontented Athenian, Peisthetairos; but the new Cloudcuckooland immediately becomes an exaggerated cognate for its mother-city, pursuing Athenian imperial expansion to a comic extreme.[90]

89 *IG* I^3 68 = OR 152 ll. 42–46. Translation: Attic Inscriptions Online.

90 *Birds*, in my view, should not be viewed as a straightforward allegory of the Athenian expedition to Sicily, initiated in 415 BC, although it was surely on the minds of the audience members; as D. MacDowell, Aristophanes and Athens (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), p. 222 points out, there are no references to the island in the play. For an exploration of the tension between utopia and more generalised imperial power in *Birds*, see D. Konstan, 'The Greek Polis and Its Negations. Versions of Utopia in Aristophanes' Birds', in G. Dobrov (ed.), *The City as Comedy. Society and Representation in Athenian Drama* (Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina Press, 1996), pp. 3–22.

Athens is thus reimagined in terms of its imperial power, and one of the crucial facets of this power is its economic aspect.

The plot feature which bookends the play and the narrative of Cloud-cuckooland's foundation is Peisthetairos' attempt to divert humans' offerings for the gods to the birds. He first introduces this strategy early in the play:

> τοὺς δ' αὖ θεοὺς ἀπολεῖτε λιμῷ Μηλίῳ …
> ἐν μέσῳ δήπουθεν ἀήρ ἐστι γῆς.
> εἶθ' ὥσπερ ἡμεῖς, ἢν ἰέναι βουλώμεθα
> Πυθώδε, Βοιωτοὺς δίοδον αἰτούμεθα
> οὕτως, ὅταν θύσωσιν ἄνθρωποι θεοῖς
> ἢν μὴ **φόρον** φέρωσιν οἱ ὑμῖν οἱ θεοί,
> τῶν μηρίων τὴν κνῖσαν οὐ διαφρήσετε.
>
> As for the gods, you'll crush them by starvation like the Melians … Well, the air, surely is between them and the earth. So then, just as when we want to go to Delphi we have to ask the Boeotians for the right of transit, in the same way, when men sacrifice to the gods, you won't let the aroma of the thigh bones pass through unless the gods pay you **tribute**.[91]

Aristophanes here brings together two economic aspects of Athenian power: the blockade, like that imposed on Melos a few years before the play in 416 BC (see Thuc. 5.114) and the demand for tribute (which was made of Melos in reality, according to Thucydides, 5.111.4). The use of the term *tribute* in this programmatic passage in the play is, in my view, significant. We know from a laconic statement by Thucydides that in the following year, 413 BC, the Athenians would take the radical step of abolishing tribute in favour of a five-percent tax (*eikoste*) in allied harbours (Thuc. 7.28). This momentous decision must have required some preparation and forward planning, and it was thus likely a topic of concern in Athens at the time of the play's performance in 414 BC.[92] Aside from the huge financial implications, the introduction of the *eikoste* would have also impacted the Dionysia, the context of the play's

91 Ar. *Av.* 186–192. Translation: Sommerstein, *Aristophanes Birds*.

92 For the significance of the *eikoste*, see L. Kallet, *Money and the Corrosion of Power in Thucydides: The Sicilian Expedition and Its Aftermath* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), pp. 195–205; T.J. Figueira, 'The Imperial Commercial Tax and the Finances of the Athenian Hegemony', *Incidenza Dell' Antico* 3 (2005), pp. 83–134.

performance, as allies would no longer be obliged to come to the festival to deliver their tribute.[93]

The term "tribute" (*phoros*) does not appear again in *Birds*. However, Aristophanes continues to allude to it through references to the sacrifices being denied to the gods, such as in Peisthetairos' demand to the Chorus:

> τοῖς δ' ἀνθρώποις ὄρνιν ἕτερον πέμψαι κήρυκα κελεύω,
> ὡς ὀρνίθων βασιλευόντων θύειν ὄρνισι τὸ λοιπόν,
> κἄπειτα θεοῖς ὕστερον αὖθις.
>
> I order you to send another bird as herald to the human race, telling them that the birds are kings and so in future they should sacrifice to the birds and then afterwards, secondly, to the gods.[94]

The audience would have not only been familiar with the tribute itself, but also with the one-sixtieth portion taken from each allied community's payment and dedicated to Athena as first-fruits. Indeed, it was these dedications that the Athenians chose to record in monumental form in the tribute quota lists, while there are no surviving inscribed lists of actual tribute contributions.[95] The strong association between the monetary tribute and religious dedication is also evidenced in Thoudippos' decree, which demanded allied attendance at the Panathenaia alongside the increased levels of tribute contribution.[96] In *Birds*, then, this same association between religious dedication and financial obligation is visible. The theme bookends the play, returning strongly at the denouement, when the starving gods come to Cloudcuckooland to negotiate (Ar. *Av.* 1565–1692).

However, the theme is also maintained in the middle of the play in the parade of troublesome Athenians who immediately harass Cloudcuckooland upon its foundation. A decree-seller appears, offering a number of decrees for the new city:

> χρῆσθαι Νεφελοκοκκυγιᾶς τοῖσδε τοῖς μέτροισι καὶ
> σταθμοῖσι καὶ ψηφίσμασι καθάπερ Ὀλοφύξιοι.

93 The delivery of the tribute to the Dionysia is attested by Ar. *Ach.* 505–506; see also Eupolis fr. 254.

94 Ar. *Av.* 561–563. Translation: Sommerstein, *Aristophanes Birds*.

95 See again *IG* I^3 259–290.

96 *IG* I^3 71 ll. 55–58. For the conceptual overlap between religious and economic contributions on the part of allies, see Kowalzig, *Singing for the Gods*, pp. 110–118.

> The citizens of Cloudcuckooland shall use measures, weights and decrees, in like manner as the Olophyxians.[97]

Famously, this is a parody of the so-called Standards Decree,[98] another rare empire-wide measure which was widely disseminated, as it is known from fragments discovered in a number of locations beyond Athens.[99] It seemingly attempted to impose the use of Athenian coinage, weights and measures on allied communities:

> προσγράψαι δὲ καὶ πρὸς τὸν ὅρκον [τ]ὸν τῆς βολῆς τὸν γραμματέα τῆς βολῆς κ[αὶ τοῦ δήμου? τα]δί· ἐάν τις κόπτηι νόμισμα ἀργυρίο ἐν τῆσι πό[λεσι] καὶ μὴ χρῆται νομ[ίσμασιν τοῖς] Ἀθη[να]ίων ἢ σταθμοῖς ἢ μέτ[ροις ἀλλὰ ξενικοῖς νομίσμασι]ν καὶ σταθμοῖς καὶ [μ]έτροις …
>
> And the secretary of the Council [and People?] is to add the following to the oath of the Council: if anyone strikes silver coinage in the cities and does not use the coins of the Athenians or their weights or measures, but foreign coins and weights and measures …[100]

The decree has been a topic of much scholarly debate, its text, date and purpose all controversial (and it should be noted that some scholars prefer to place it in the 420s BC, in the same context as the decrees I discussed in the previous section).[101] For the most part, I follow Lisa Kallet, who argues that the decree makes best sense as a measure designed to facilitate the implementation of the *eikoste*, the five-percent tax, and should be dated to the years before 413 BC.[102] The reference in *Birds* would thus indicate the topicality of the decree at the time of the play's performance. I would add that if we take the Standards decree and the five-percent tax as components of the same fiscal strategy, namely the abolishment of tribute, and recognise the allusions to the tribute and first-fruits elsewhere in *Birds*, then it would follow that the reference to the Standards decree would be part of a broader thematic engagement

97 Ar. *Av.* 1040–1041. Translation: Sommerstein, *Aristophanes Birds*.

98 U. Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Aus Kydathen* (Berlin: Weidmann, 1880), p. 30 hypothesised the existence of the Standards decree on the basis of this joke, before the epigraphic copies were identified.

99 *IG* I^3 1453 = Osborne and Rhodes, *Greek Historical Inscriptions*, no. 155.

100 *IG* I^3 1453 l. 10. Translation: Attic Inscriptions Online.

101 See the summary by Osborne and Rhodes, *Greek Historical Inscriptions*, no. 155.

102 Kallet, *Money and the Corrosion of Power*, pp. 205–217; Kallet and Kroll, *The Athenian Empire*, pp. 111–119, 142–145.

in the play, very much rooted in the contemporary reconsideration of imperial revenue production.

As in the 420s BC, then, the evidence Aristophanes provides for popular preoccupations vis-à-vis the economic aspect of the empire is corroborated in the epigraphic record with the coincidence of these very same preoccupations in a rare empire-wide measure. Remarkably, in *Birds* he goes even further, making a joke reliant on knowledge about the particular wording of a decree. In the 420s BC, Aristophanes dealt with the tribute system working but not working well enough; in 414 BC, he engages with its ceasing to work at all. And I wonder, in this depiction of Athenian imperial fiscality being absurdly extended to the gods themselves, whether Aristophanes was questioning the empire and its existence to an unprecedented extent.[103]

5 Conclusion

If we take Old Comedy as evidence for perceptions of the Athenian empire on the part of some ordinary Athenians, or at least as evidence for what the poets assumed to be popular perceptions, then a picture emerges of a truly *Athenian* empire: that is to say, one focused on Athens itself, and its exploitation of others. The potentially negative impact of the empire is acknowledged to a limited extent, but generalised. Indeed, the diversity of allied communities was not utilised by Aristophanes to generate humour, even though the empire is a common topic in his plays; Eupolis may have gone further, but likely also did not rely on extensive knowledge in the audience. This evidence can be taken to imply a certain imperial myopia on the part of some members of the Athenian public. One wonders how spectators from allied communities would have reacted to this myopia.

But Aristophanes, likely along with some of his contemporaries, does assume significant public interest in the mechanisms of Athenian power and, further, engagement with the specific, contemporary issues impacting Athenian imperial revenue production at different times. The interesting (and largely under-utilised) overlap of Comedy, or lack thereof, with other kinds of source, particularly forms of material culture and the epigraphic record, perhaps indicates where, when and in what configuration there was popular concern about

103 Euripides was also subverting perceptions of empire at exactly this time through his depiction of the Trojan War: see D. Rosenbloom, 'Empire and Its Discontents: *Trojan Women, Birds*, and the Symbolic Economy of Athenian Imperialism', *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 49 (2006), pp. 245–271.

different issues. If the comic evidence is taken seriously, then there are implications for our understanding of democratic knowledge, how the Athenian democracy administered the empire and how popular preoccupations may have interacted with the expertise of officials or powerful individuals in the realisation of specific legislation.[104]

In this article, Croix's incisive observation provided me with a helpful starting point. I aim to have demonstrated how the simultaneous imperial myopia and topical domestic concern on the part of the Athenian audience which Croix detected in Aristophanes' Megarian decree can be seen in Old Comedy more broadly. I hope, moreover, that my engagement with Aristophanes in a study of ordinary people and the Athenian empire would have been of thematic interest to him, even if he disagreed with my approach.[105]

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104 For one contribution on the impact of Comedy on the Athenian political process, see C. Carey, 'Comic Ridicule and Democracy' in R. Osborne and S. Hornblower (eds.), *Ritual, Finance, Politics. Athenian Democratic Accounts Presented to David Lewis* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1994) pp. 69–83.

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