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Aristophanes *Knights* 600: Spartan or Athenian Drinking Cup?

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In the parabasis of Aristophanes’ *Knights*, the choréutai praise themselves as they recall their adventure at sea (599–610). On this occasion, they bought some sort of drinking cups before sailing away to Corinth (600). This note will discuss the nature of this cup, a κώθων, and why Aristophanes makes his chorus sing of such drinking vessels at this particular point. In this epirrhematic part (595–610), the chorus of Athenian horsemen continue to recite the past of the hippic force in a manner heavily loaded with ideology, turning their praise from their fathers (565) to their steeds (595). All this is done through the use of diegetic space, which is generated through the reciting voice of the chorus (or the coryphaios alone), a voice that is particularly unstable throughout the parabasis, from the voice of ‘Aristophanes’ and the choral voice to the voice of a speaking horse to a Corinthian crab’s utterance in the mouth of Theorus. Visually, however, nothing has

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3 For the complexity of the ‘voice’ in Aristophanes see e.g. G. W. Dobrov, *Figures of Play* (Oxford 2001) 35: “The Aristophanic character … is entirely on display to the point where the spectators are aware of more about him and the meaning of his words than is the character himself.”

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changed. The chorus is still dressed as horsemen, and just as the choreutai make-believe to be their fathers, so they make-believe to become their horses. In the second parabasis (1300–1315), they will indeed make-believe to be women and, finally, female triremes. Thus, the diegetic space is visually framed by the chorus of horsemen, and so the audience process this passage with a constant eye to the cavalry for good and evil.

It is quite likely that the κώθων was a simple cup of some sort. This seems to be the common denominator of most of the descriptions of it, but it was nevertheless invested with a strong symbolic meaning. Most scholars tend to look to the description of it by Plato’s infamous uncle Critias, who describes it as a soldier’s cup from Laconia—a symbol of Spartan simplicity. But does a hoplite cup from Sparta have any relevance in the context of the antepirrheme of Knights? Neil, for discussion and sources on attitudes toward the cavalry see I. Spence, The Cavalry of Classical Greece (Oxford 1993) 180–216, esp. 191–210; it may perhaps have been the case as Spence argues “that the climate of opinion was generally favourable to the cavalry” (212). I nonetheless argue that the cavalry is among the objects of satire in this play: M. L. Lech, The Dance of Fiction: Cognition and Choral Performance in Aristophanes’ Knight 247–610 (diss. U. Copenhagen 2011). As a synthesis of Spence’s and my own argument, it could be argued that the cavalry is made fun of because of their growing popularity. See D. M. Pritchard, Sport, Democracy and War in Classical Athens (Cambridge 2013) 154–136, for a splendid discussion of the Athenian view on the cavalry’s usefulness and vices. Nonetheless, a playwright of Old Attic comedy would of course focus on the vices of his artistic creations.

For an account of the vessel see B. A. Sparkes, “Illustrating Aristophanes,” JHS 95 (1975) 122–135, esp. 128–129.

This is not the only cup in Knights that needs interpretation, see Ruffel, Politics and Anti-Realism 67–68.


Critias’ work is probably a decade or two later than the Knights, see D. Nails, The People of Plato: A Prosopography of Plato and Other Socratics (Indian-
following Athenaeus’ account,\textsuperscript{10} connected the Laconian cup with the sea through a famous passage of Archilochus (fr.4.6–9 West):

\begin{quote}
\textgreek{ἀλλ’ ἂγε σὺν κώπην θοῆς διὰ σέλματα νηὸς

φοίτα καὶ κοῖλων πώματ’ ἀφελκε κάδων,

ἄγρει δ’ οἶνον ἑρυθρὸν ἀπὸ τρυγός· οὔδὲ γὰρ ἥμεῖς

νηφέμεν ἐν φυλακῇ τῆδε δυνησόμεθα.}
\end{quote}

But come, make many a trip with a cup through the thwarts of the swift ship, pull off the covers of the hollow casks, and draw the red wine from the lees; we won’t be able to stay sober on this watch.\textsuperscript{11}

Neil does not venture to go beyond the martial frame of Critias’ explanation. But as William Slater persuasively has shown, the symposiac/Dionysiac imagery is so closely connected to the imagery of the sea that “[t]hose poems of Archilochus apparently written at sea are no more likely to have been written at sea than paraclausithyra on doorsteps, but they would make sense if one spliced the mainbrace in one’s own triclinium [sc. at a symposium], while claiming the sea as dramatic background.”\textsuperscript{12} Thus, Archilochus is employing a conceptual metaphor DRINKING IS SAILING\textsuperscript{13} suitably structur-
ing his symposiac poetry, and consequently the κώθων has nothing to do in the hands of a sailor (whether enacted by a horse or horseman or a chorus), any more than an oar in a cavalryman’s hand (Ar. Eq. 546). The Archilochean cup, however, stresses the role of the cup in symposiac settings of Archaic Greece, a meaning that influenced its symbolic and ideological meaning in fifth-century Athens. James Davidson argues convincingly that the κώθων “may have started as a military cup, but it seems to have found its way into the symposium at an early date,” and that it “comes to stand par excellence for deep drinking at Athens.” Thus, in his splendid dictionary, Montanari ought to expand his description of the cup as a Spartan military cup with the extended meaning as symposiac vessel.

For ancient discussions of the κώθων in a Spartan context are regularly framed by Critias’ text whether Critias was right or wrong, whereas all other passages on a κώθων refer to drinking in some manner, to the extent that κώθων may in fact be used as metonymic for heavy drinking. Consequently, in the context of fifth-century Athens, a κώθων had specific connotations, as is clearly shown by Athenaeus’ collection of evi-

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16 E.g. Plut. Lyc. 9.4; Ath. 483B–C, who however clearly sees the cup in a festive context, see below. Xenophon mentions the cup in a Persian context with no martial connotation, Cyr. 1.2.8. I have found no occurrence of the κάθων as a Spartan cup outside of references to Critias.
17 E.g. Ath. 477Ε τοῦ κώθωνος εὖ μέλα προβεβηκότος, 547D περὶ συμβολικοῦ κώθωνος; Machon fr.18.442 ἐπὶ κώθωνα; Plut. Pyr. 14.6 κώθων, ὁ μακάρε, καθημερινός ἐστιν, Ant. 4.3 μεγαλομαχία καὶ σκάμμα καὶ κώθων ἐμφανῆς. This meaning seems, from the small sample of evidence available, to be a Hellenistic usage rather than Classical.
dence (483c), which is firmly placed in Peloponnesian contexts of celebration and conviviality, not war and military equipment. Importantly, Athenaeus says that Archilochus talks as if the κόθων was the typical drinking vessel, the κύλιξ, and extends his list with no other passage than ours from Knights (483d). He furthermore cites Theopompus Com. (fr.55: on a bibulous woman, as a soldier?) and a passage on drinking from Heniochus (fr.1: clearly in a symposiac setting). And in the description that follows, Athenaeus is clearly thinking of a κόθων as a drinking vessel. Sparkes stated that the two passages in Aristophanes (Eq. 600 and Peace 1094) where the κόθων appears are “military contexts.” However, in Peace the cup is named specifically in a peace context, where the annoying Hierocles tries to get a free drink. What then of the passage in Knights?

I believe that what constitutes the humour of this passage is not that the κόθων is a soldier’s (a Spartan) cup, as is the common conclusion, but that our fragments from Greek comedy (and Archilochus) clearly show that it was a vessel for drinking and as such a metonymy of the symposium, and so we ought to rethink this passage. The choreutai enact their own steeds, who in turn act as if they were the horsemen boarding the transport ships, and they are so to speak taking the symposia with them on campaign. The saying goes that “not every man sails to Corinth” (Ar. fr.928)—because of the high prices of the prostitutes there, we may assume; and in Cantharus (fr.10) “having breakfast at the Isthmus” seems to refer to cunnilingus. Moreover, in a fragment of Apollodorus Carystius, a character discussing the good life dreams that during peace the cavalry would go to Corinth and celebrate for ten straight days (fr. 5.15–22):

18 In Aristophanes women are notoriously bibulous (e.g. Lys. 207, Eccl. 132–133).
19 JHS 95 (1975) 128.
20 The sexual double entendres of this passage are beyond the scope of this article.
οὐ τοῦτο τὸ ζῆν ἐστι τὸν καλοῦμενον θεῶν ἀληθῶς βίον. ὅσῳ δ᾿ ἡδίονα τὰ πράγματ’ ἐν ταῖς πόλεσιν ἦν ἂν ἢ τὰ νῦν, εἰ μεταβαλόντες τὸν βίον διήγομεν· πίνειν ἀθηναίους ἀπαντάς τούς μέχρι ἐτὼν τριάκοντ’, ἔξεναι τοὺς ἵππεας ἐπὶ κόμον εἰς Κόρινθον ἡμέρας δέκα, στεφάνους ἄχοντας καὶ μύρον πρὸ ἡμέρας.

This existence is not what is truly called the life of the gods. How much more pleasant things would be in our cities than they are now, if we changed the life we lead: all Athenians under thirty, drink! Cavalry march out to Corinth before daybreak for a ten-day party, wearing garlands and myrrh!\textsuperscript{21}

Moreover, in a comedy of Antiphanes, likewise called \textit{Knights} (fr.108), the cavalymen of Athens(?) are shown to be more concerned with enjoying themselves than fighting battles:

\begin{quote}
\{A.\} πῶς οὖν διαιτώμεσθα; \{B.\} τὸ μὲν ἐφίππιον στρώμ’ ἐστιν ἡμῖν, ὃ δὲ καλὸς πίλος κάδος, ψυκτήρ· τί βούλει; πάντ’, Ἀμαλθείας κέρας.
\end{quote}

A: So how are we going to live? B: The saddle-cloth is what we’ll lie on; the nice helmet’s our wine-jar or our \textit{psukhtēr} [a wine cooler]. What do you want? We’ve got everything—Amaltheia’s horn.

And (fr.109)

\begin{quote}
τῶν δ᾿ ἄκοντίων συνδοῦντες ὀρθὰ τρία λυχνεῖον χρῶμεθα.
\end{quote}

We tie three of our javelin-shafts together, stand them up, and use them as a \textit{luchneion} [lampstand].\textsuperscript{22}

The reference to the horn of Amaltheia, the goat from whose horn flowed whatever its possessor wished, sheds some light on the public perception of the character of the cavalry class.

The rapid cluster of symposiac vessels and military food is in itself a humorous movement made by Aristophanes, but he takes the joke further, by making the chorus make some of the

\textsuperscript{21} Transl. J. Rusten, \textit{The Birth of Comedy} (Baltimore 2011) 688.

cavalrymen buy ordinary, non-luxurious food, garlic and onions, for their provisions as well, which at least in the comedies represented war fodder for the soldiers: onions especially become a metonymy for war, while garlic is connected with cockfighting and symbolises eagerness for war. However warlike these vegetables are, they are nevertheless framed by the drinking cup and its symbolism, and I believe that even the Greek of the passage reveals a break in the sentence. Neil proposes that οἱ δὲ answers a suppressed οἱ μὲν, but there is no reason for this, and I hold that what we have here is a strong adversative (as in Clouds 396) between the cavalrymen (as a group), who buy symposiac cups, and the ones (some of the cavalrymen or someone else, e.g. the rowers) who buy provisions. This strong adversative οἱ δὲ plays a significant role, assuming that the first καί is likely to be adverbial, and thus there are perhaps three ways of translating the contrast:

They jumped manfully into the horse carriers having bought wine bottles (κόλβοις), but others also bought garlic and onions.

But it could also be

They jumped manfully into the horse carriers having bought wine bottles (κόλβοις), but others even bought garlic and onions.

It could even be read

They jumped manfully into the horse carriers having bought wine bottles (κόλβοις), but others (not the horses) also bought garlic and onions.

In all circumstances, the choral self-praise has been turned into mockery. In the first translation, and the third, the break in the sentence is generated through the almost apologetic tone “others also bought garlic and onions” as if the chorus were

23 E.g. Ach. 550, 1099–1102; Pax 1129.
24 E.g. Eq. 492–493, Ach. 165–166. Note that in Eq. 600 we have cups as one part of a tricolon of metonymies.
25 The Knights 90.
26 J. van Leeuwen, Aristophanis Nubes (Leiden 1898) 73.

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going to war, with only a symposium in mind as implied by their drinking cups; or as two different groups, the drinking horses and the rest of the crew, who know the purpose of the journey. The second translation is even more degrading as it implies that the chorus is completely blind to its own faults; buying drinking equipment for a symposium, while actually going to war, making themselves ironic butts for the paradox of war and symposia, so manifestly employed in the Acharnians, especially at 1141–1149. Regardless of these options, the chorus of horsemen are in a fix generated by their own self-praise in the epirrheme: thus, the drinking cups bought by the chorus frame the sentence with the general assumptions about the choral horsemen, young men fit for a party rather than for war.\textsuperscript{28} The cup, the κώθων in our passage, alludes to a symposiac trip by boat, a deep drinking adventure, κωθωνισμός. Aristophanes thus creates a humorous tension in this passage that undermines the chorus’ praise of themselves: what were they in fact doing in wealthy Corinth?\textsuperscript{29}

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\textsuperscript{28} It thus seems likely that there was a common belief that the leading members of the society relaxed while the lower stratum did all the hard work (Ach. 162–163, Eq. 784–785), and this passage is no different. The chorus through their embodied (visually and metaphorically) as horses are having a party in Corinth, while the “real” army—probably those who eat onions (Pax 1127–1129)—is doing all the hard work.

\textsuperscript{29} On Corinthian pleasures see Davidson, Courtesans 92, 116; J. B. Salmon, Wealthy Corinth (Oxford 1984) 398–400; D. Hamel, Trying Naira (New Haven 2003) 3–28. The mention of a fable, the eating of crabs, and Theorus (schol. Eq. 608a explains his doings there ὡς μούχος δὲ καμοδιέται ὁ Θέωρος καὶ ἱκθυοφάγος καὶ πονηρός, περὶ Κόρινθον ὡν διέτριβεν, ἵνα διὰ τοὺς ἐκεῖ πόρνας) all point in the direction of symposia rather than war. Neil, The Knights 91, argues against the known Theorus, but in Vesp. 1220 (not mentioned by Neil) a Theorus is showed at a symposium, just as here. This, I believe, is the well-known Theorus; see also N. Kanavou, Aristophanes’ Comedy of Names: A Study of Speaking Names in Aristophanes (Berlin 2011) 33–35.

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