

## Grains, Poverty, and War in Aristophanes

According to modern estimates, Attica became a net importer of grain c. 500 BCE, although it had occasional shortfalls at least a generation before (see, e.g., Garnsey, 1987 and Moreno, 2007). Imported cereals would have been needed for over half of the population by the end of the fifth century, even during peacetime (Moreno, 2007). The Peloponnesian War complicated the situation further, with the Spartan fortification of Decelea impeding Athenian access to grain markets in Euboea from 411 onward. The fortification also aggravated the annual Spartan incursions which had also reduced agricultural output in Attica during the Archidamian war, although opinions differ as to the degree of disruption (Foxhall, 1993; cf. Bresson, 2016).

The nine extant comedies of Aristophanes from this period, along with relevant fragments, provide some insight into popular attitudes about the grain supply, as well as individuals and groups associated with driving up the price. References to grain, grain producers, and cooking with grains range from observations that might be neutral during peacetime to those aimed at a wartime audience. The nature and effect of these references vary with the play and date. The plays dated to the Archidamian War (*Acharnians*, *Knights*, *Wasps*, and *Peace*) place bread and grain-based delicacies such as cakes within the nexus of wartime food deprivation and visions of feasting once peace returns. References to grains and similar comestibles in Aristophanes' later wartime plays, particularly *Thesmophoriazousae* and *Frogs*, are consistent with the bleaker situation outside the theatre.

The political relevance of grain begins with *Acharnians*, when Dicaeopolis asks the father of the Megarian “pigs” about the price of grain in Megara during the Athenian embargo (758), also a barometer of supply (cf. Olson 1991). At the celebratory banquet at the end of the play, loaves (1123 κριβανίτας) become the routine accompaniment to cheesecakes (1125 τυρόνωτον), as well

as luxurious meats. In *Knights*, barley (1101 κριθάς), barley groats (1104 ἄλφιτ') and kneaded barley-grain cakes (1166-7 μαζίσκην... μεμαγμένην) are not only basic foodstuffs, but also bargaining chips in the *agon* involving Cleon and the Sausage-Seller. They are also appetizers for the meat expected after a sacrifice (Anderson and Dix, 2020). In *Peace*, Trygaeus's "barley-cake" (2 μᾶζαν) is a dung-cake "kneaded" (πεπλασμένην) for the beetle. Trygaeus speaks of his pain (119 ἄχθομαι) of lacking an obol to buy his daughters bread, and he promises them a genuine daily barley-cake (123). Returning with his treaty, he provides a flat cake, a sesame cake, and promises of sex (867-70; see Olson, 1998 and Storey, 2019).

Other examples include the κύον, κύον ("bitch, bitch") passage involving Bdelycleon at *Wasps* 1403-5, a play elsewhere stuffed with culinary fun. This vituperative anecdote about purchasing grain is aimed at a woman breadseller (ἄρτοποιίς) of modest means who did not cause Bdelycleon's problems. Bdelycleon's insult and her response make the tenuousness of her profession clear (Pontes, 1995). This passage is comparable to Lysias's later speech *Against the Grain Dealers*, in which these small-scale brokers, typically metics, are viewed as gouging the public. (Moreno, 2007)

In contrast, *Thesmophoriazousae* (almost certainly from 411; see Austin and Olson, 2004) and *Frogs* (produced 405) are less oriented toward grains, despite ample opportunities with the Thesmophoria, celebrating Demeter and Korē (cf. Austin and Olson on implicit connections at lines 2 and 299). However, at *Thesmophoriazuse* 420 the First Woman complains that barley-groats, olive oil, and wine, store-room staples previously accessible to wives, are now locked away by their husbands using "Spartan keys" (423). Finally, at *Frogs* 503-507 Persephone greets Xanthias and Dionysus with a banquet, including loaves of bread and an entire ox. Unfortunately, the Underworld is not Athens. Eurypides does not talk of cakes, which require leavening or

whipped egg whites, as would fit οἰδοῦσαν, “swollen,” at 940; rather, he has slimmed his Muse down (941 ἴσχνανα), consistent with Athens’ straitened military and food situation (cf. Dover, 1993 and Marshall, 2020).

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