

Aristophanes' *Birds* as Satire on Athenian Opportunists in Thrace

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Perhaps the most famous of ancient comedies, Aristophanes' *Birds* gave to the world the term *Nephelokokkygia* (Cloudbuckooland). The Greek text was first printed in 1498, and translations, productions, and adaptations of *Birds* have emerged since 1579, when the first modern-language version was published. In Pierre Le Loyer's Rabelaisian but apolitical *La Néphélococugie, ou la nuée des cocus*, the heroes are two aging cuckolds (*cocu* in Old French signified both a cuckoo and a cuckold), brothers from Toulouse escaping the wanton ways of women from which they suffered in their home town.¹ It was Jean Boivin's 1729 French translation of *Birds*, published as a pair with Sophocles' *Oedipus*, which first made Aristophanes' Cloudbuckooland famous in international literary circles. *Birds* was adapted by Goethe for performance in Weimar, in a notably unpolitical comedy in which the central conceit is that Goethe (who took the leading role of "Treufreund") finds his reading public as daft, fickle, and easily misled as the cynical Peisetairos finds the birds.² At the Haymarket Theatre in London in 1846, despite a mildly sardonic portrait of contemporary campaigners for electoral reform, it was the spectacular and musical opportunities offered by the ancient text which induced the great British operetta composer James Robinson Planché to turn Aristophanes' *Birds* into in an Easter extravaganza.³

Since the revival of performances of Greek drama in universities during the 1880s, and subsequently on professional stages, there have been innumerable productions of the play, all over the world. In 2006, students from the Korean National University, working with the drama department from the University of California at Irvine, combined ornithology and politics in a play entitled *Birds in DMZ*. An adaptation of Aristophanes' comedy, it was staged at the Arezzo International Theatre Festival in Italy. Two disgruntled Koreans escape

1 Edited with modern translation by Doe and Cameron 2004. See the discussion of Perret 1992, 24–37, and Dudouyt 2016.

2 Hall 2007a, 11–13.

3 Hall 2007b, 79–81.

to the demilitarized zone (DMZ) between North and South Korea, “an uninhabited, heavily mined strip of land 250 kilometers long and four kilometers wide [that] has been called a ‘de facto wildlife preserve’ and ‘accidental paradise.’ Plants and animals once thought extirpated on the Korean peninsula have now been discovered there, while the wetlands have become a winter home for rare black-faced spoonbills and red-crowned cranes, which need big, open, quiet spaces.”⁴

The bird costumes, the songs, and the novel conceit of building a brand-new city-state in the middle air have ensured that the play has continued to appeal. But while agreeing on *Birds*’ aesthetic excellence, scholars have not arrived at a convincing consensus on the nature of its socio-political project. Those who maintain that it is consciously apolitical reproduce language similar to this account of *Birds* in an anonymous translation of the complete Aristophanes, first published in 1912 but much reproduced in print and online:

The “Birds” differs markedly from all the other Comedies of Aristophanes which have come down to us in subject and general conception. It is just an extravaganza pure and simple—a graceful, whimsical theme chosen expressly for the sake of the opportunities it afforded of bright, amusing dialogue, pleasing lyrical interludes, and charming displays of brilliant stage effects and pretty dresses. Unlike other plays of the same Author, there is here apparently no serious political motif underlying the surface burlesque and buffoonery.⁵

The “apolitical” interpretations of *Birds* have focused on diverse aspects. The substantial and elaborate lyric sections have attracted the interest of metrists and specialists in ancient music, especially since musical notation for part of the Hoopoe’s song was found on an ostrakon in Upper Egypt.⁶ Specific studies have appeared focusing on the different types of bird and whether they still use Greece as a habitat (quantitatively speaking, the dominant interest of Dunbar’s massive Oxford commentary⁷). A second group prefers the idea that it is pre-eminently a “golden age” fantasy, or, as Dunbar put it, “a highly original variation on an ancient theme, the nostalgic myth of life in the reign of

4 Nelson 2015, 447. The play was adapted and directed by Eli Simon and Suk-Man Kim.

5 Anon. 1912, vol. II, 82.

6 Hall 2007a, 8. For a full metrical analysis with further bibliography see Parker 1997, 296–357.

7 Dunbar 1997.

Kronos."⁸ This line of argument does take on a mildly political hue if we agree with Hubbard that *Birds* satirizes the nebulous utopias being developed by the more arcane of contemporary sophistic theorists.⁹ Others have emphasized the metaphor of wings, and linked the play with Homeric winged words, arguing that it is a play about language itself, or, in the case of Arrowsmith, focusing on the wings of Eros, desire being a key term in the discourse of the democratic city-state.¹⁰

There are, however, some more politically focused interpretations of *Birds*. Many have been convinced that Cloudcuckooland is Athens or Sicily or both; some believe that the play reflects Aristophanes' dislike for what he had satirized in *Wasps* as the Athenians' excessive litigiousness. One, typically, writes, "Cloud-cuckoo-land is Athens with feathers, and Peisetairos re-creates the hustle and bustle he claimed he was trying to escape."¹¹ A more pervasive "political" reading, first popularized in an influential essay by Johann Wilhelm Süvern, first delivered as a lecture in Berlin in 1827, sees in the play serious satire on Athens' fantasy of extending her empire to Sicily; this fantasy's tragic denouement in 413 is of course memorably narrated by Thucydides in his Book VII.¹² Such an approach inevitably means introducing Alcibiades and the Hermocopid scandal into the discussion,¹³ and other scholars have emphasized, rather, the play's treatment of impiety and the importance of traditional sacrifice in mediating between gods and men.¹⁴

A few excellent studies have appeared of the depiction in *Birds* of tyranny as a political constitution and the tyrant as a type of character. These include the contention of Saxonhouse and Meyer that the comedy provided a model for Plato's *Republic*.¹⁵ Henderson has suggested that Peisetairos' rule is not portrayed as negatively as all that and that he possesses considerable practical and political gifts which help unite the community;¹⁶ Aristophanes, on this account, was prepared to think, at least in fiction, about the possibility that a tyranny could be beneficial. Ambler takes a more moderate approach. He agrees that, despite Peisetairos' hubris and self-aggrandizement, Aristophanes

8 Dunbar 1997, 5.

9 Hubbard 1998.

10 Arrowsmith 1973.

11 Mahoney 2007, 271.

12 Süvern 1835.

13 See especially Vickers 1995.

14 Romer 1994.

15 Saxonhouse 1978; Meyer 2014.

16 Henderson 1998, 141–44.

does not appear to condemn him. Ambler infers from this that Aristophanes believes that while a gullible populace which wants an empire must also embrace a Peisetairos, the price for this would be accepting that their tyrannical ruler would milk the system for all the personal power and advantages he could.¹⁷ But what none of these readings has even noted, let alone taken seriously, is the way the play teems with references to the north, the Black Sea, and especially Thrace as an arena for aspects of Athenian political life.¹⁸

Aristophanes' *Birds* was first performed at the City Dionysia in Athens in 414 BCE. What do we know about the general sentiments of the audience at the time? Much of their attention was fixed on the north, where their relationships had been drastically altered by the loss of Amphipolis between 424 and 422. The Thracian cities in the old Athenian *phoros*, tribute-paying district,¹⁹ were mostly aiming for complete independence from Athens, and the situation was volatile, especially in Chalkidiki. Many people in the audience of *Birds* will have had direct experience of military operations in Thrace, which had historically loomed much larger in their heads than Sicily. The alliance with northern Greece had been breaking down since 420, creating problems with the supply of timber for shipbuilding. Perdikkas the Macedonian was becoming problematic: during the winter of 417/16 the Athenians had tried to blockade Macedonia and in 416/15 raided Macedonian territory (Thuc. 5.83.4 and 6.7.3), which forced Perdikkas to renew his alliance with them before the summer of 414 (Thuc. 7.9). All the way through from 415 to 413 the Athenians were still able to maintain naval operations round Greece and the northern Aegean as well as send the first fleet and then reinforcements to Sicily.

Nearer home, in the Peloponnese, Athenian masons and craftsmen assisted in erecting the Long Walls at Argos in 417 (Thuc. 5.82) and the year after made an official alliance with Argos. The city-state of Orneai in the valley of the river Inachus, the focus of an inevitable pun at *Birds* (399), had tried to remain independent, and was also allied with Argos from 418. But in 416 it was occupied by the Spartans, who demolished it completely after a battle in which some Athenians had probably died; this is why Peisetairos "jokes" that if he and Euelpides die, they can try to get a public funeral in the Kerameikos by claiming to have fallen at Ornea, "fighting the country's foes."

17 Ambler 2012.

18 An exception is constituted by some insightful comments on Thracian references in *Birds* in Tsakmakis 1997, 40–42.

19 On which see Edson 1947.

This is not to deny that the departure of the fleet for Sicily, the inconclusive first battle of Syracuse, and news of diplomatic activity with the Etruscans and Carthaginians, were being much discussed in Athens in the spring of 414, when the fleet was beginning to move out from its winter quarters in Catania. The repercussions of the Hermocopid affair were also still palpable; Andocides had only recently been exiled. But the denseness and variety of allusions to places, people, and incidents associated with Thrace in *Birds* must cast serious doubt on the longstanding and oft-repeated claim that the comedy is primarily an ironic critique of the imperial ambitions underlying the Sicilian expedition.

For the Athenians of the late fifth century BCE, "Thrace" had a range of resonances. It encompassed much of the troublesome borderlands to the north-west and north-east dividing Greeks and Macedonians from other ethnic groups: Triballians, Illyrians, Scythians, Phrygians, and Persians. It was the source of many of the Athenians' mercenaries (the tyrant Peisistratus, who spent his exile in the Pangaion area around the lower Strymon [Aristotle, *Ath. Pol.* 15.2], derived his huge personal revenues, which paid for his private Thracian legion, from the gold and silver mines there²⁰) and of many Athenian slaves.²¹ The names *Thraix* and *Thraitta* are familiar in slave nomenclature. Herodotus observes that the Thracians sold their own children into slavery (5.6). When the sixteen slaves of the metic Cephisodorus, resident in the Piraeus, were sold in 414 BCE, the year *Birds* was produced, five were Thracian, two were from beyond western Thrace, in Illyria, and one from even further to the north-east, in Scythia (*IG I³* 421.34–49). Some slaves were obtained from Salmydessus on the south-western coast of the Black Sea (*P. Argent.* 3 fr. 1.5–9); some were traded for salt in the Thracian hinterland (Pollux 7.14); others, originally from the Mytilenean *apoikia* of Ainos in Hellenistic Thrace, were procurable at the slave markets of Lesbos (Antiphon 5.22).

Thrace was a district on the edges of which even nominally Greek cities within the Athenian empire were notoriously rebellious and troublesome. Its people were thought to be warlike, primitive, and uncultured, but also venal and untrustworthy; this stereotype finds ample realization in the figure of Polymestor, the Thracian warlord in Euripides' *Hecuba*, the only surviving tragedy of the several we know that were set in Thracian regions.²² The support of powerful Thracian rulers, such as the Odrysian monarch Teres I (r. 460–55 BCE) and especially his shrewd son Sitalces (r. 431–24 BCE) was

20 *Ath. Pol.* 15.2; Davies 1971, 453; Stahl 1987, 84n106.

21 Finley 1962; Isaac 1986, 145.

22 Hall 1989, 107–10, 122–23, 126, 128, 137–38.

courted by Athenians against other foes, but the Thracian kings were believed to be manipulative and treacherous. Above all, “Thrace” was a vast territory with which the Athenian ruling class had always held intimate links and where they possessed personal fiefdoms and estates. It was often in Thrace that they found refuge and accumulated fortunes when they were in political trouble nearer home.²³

A few years later than *Birds*, Alcibiades built himself a fortress, to which he could retire at will, at Bisanthe in the Thracian Propontis (Plutarch, *Life Alcibiades* 36.2). Thucydides the historian, whether or not he interviewed Alcibiades in Thrace, as has been argued by a series of eminent scholars,²⁴ was a particularly prominent Athenian with ancestral links to Thrace. He was also *strategos* in Amphipolis when that city defected in November 424, and returned to Thrace as an exile after his trial at Athens in 423 (Thuc. 4.106.3–4, 5.26.5; see also the reference to the “betrayal” of the Thracian front in Ar. *Wasps* 288–89). Thucydides lived on for twenty years at an estate in Scapte Hyle (Plutarch, *de Exilio* 14, *Life of Cimon* 4), a small town opposite Thasos in the Pangaion region (Hdt. 6.46).

Sears has demonstrated “the significance Thrace had for Athenian politics, society and culture” and described the “intricate interplay between Athens and Thrace” for the two centuries from Peisistratus onwards as a “romance,”²⁵ immediately evoking the British experience of the lucrative backwaters of empire constituted by the Indian Raj. Moreno, like Sears, infers that the Thrace-loving Athenians were often motivated as much by a spirit of adventure as by simple expedience, and calls the younger Miltiades an “aristocratic buccaneer.”²⁶ Miltiades used the Thracian Chersonese as a power base and outlet for ambitions that were frustrated back in Athens.²⁷ Demosthenes envisages the attraction of uncivilized Thrace for Athenians as lying in the *exousia* or license to violate laws continuously (*Against Aristocrates*, 23.57). Elite Athenian families built up longstanding relationships with Thracian leaders, based on “cooperation rather than enmity.”²⁸ The Athenians who escaped prosecution or enriched themselves in Thrace were a familiar enough phenomenon

23 For an overview of the historical interaction between Thrace and Greece at this time, see Isaac 1986. For the financial promise held out by the natural resources of Thrace, especially the Strymon region, see Lavelle 1992.

24 See Westlake 1985.

25 Sears 2013, 3.

26 Moreno 2007, 142; Sears 2013, 60.

27 Sears 2013, 51.

28 Sears 2013, 51; Isaac 1986, 34.

that their compatriots had a nickname for such individuals: *Thraikophoitai* (Thrace-frequenters). Tellingly, the author who introduces us to this term is Aristophanes, in his lost comedy *Gerytades*.

Gerytades was an important drama about poetry and aesthetics, of a not dissimilar date to *Birds*, in which a delegation of poets descended to the Underworld. Their aim was to consult their dead predecessors on an unknown mission, perhaps to recover the divine personification of Poetry. Athenaeus, who quotes the longest fragment, implies that these poets were rather desperate and rested on slender hopes (ἐπιλεπτῶν ἐλπιδῶν), which might remind us of the name of Euelpides in *Birds*: they were Sannyrion, Meletus, and Cinesias, hardly the most celebrated poets of their generation (fr. 156b; Athenaeus XII.551). The word *Thraikophoitai* is used as a model for *Haidophotai* (Hades-frequenters) in the same fragment, where a gatekeeper to Hades asks who they are. One of the poets responds, "One from each poetic craft we chose together, meeting as an assembly: those we knew as Hades-Haunters (ἄδοφοίτας) and as loving to travel there (θαμὰ ἐκέισε φιλοχωροῦντας)." The gatekeeper responds, "So there are men among you who are Hades-frequenters (ἄδοφοίται)?" When the poet replies in the affirmative, the gatekeeper, trying to understand, says in line 9, "Like Thrace-frequenters (ὥσπερ Θρακκοφοίται)?" The poet can finally say, "now you have got it!" The important point here is that the term *Thraikophoitai* is already familiar; I suspect that the association with a rather desperate enterprise—an infernal katabasis, no less—in a dark and frightening location, from which one may not return, plays its role in the joke here, too.

If we take the possibility of the northern, Thracian, and Black Sea *Tendenz* of *Birds* seriously, the play emerges as a satire less on Athenian politics than on the murky doings of individual opportunistic Athenians on the make in the Thracian hinterland of their empire. It makes *Birds* rather less lyrical and utopian and much more to do with Athenian relationships with non-Greeks in the profitable if often lawless backwaters of the colonial north. It makes Peisetairos less like Hugh Lofting's anodyne Dr Dolittle and more like the megalomaniac, menacing Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*. Peisetairos unambiguously sets himself up as the tyrant of a new town-cum-aerial-toll-station and in doing so goes partly native.

This chapter marshals some arguments for seeing *Birds* as primarily a satire on the most ambitious *Thraikophoitai*: first, paratragic—the play has an intense relationship with Sophocles' famous tragedy *Tereus*, and is set in the same place—Thrace; second, topographic—there is a large number of references to specific places and events, the bulk of which emphatically point in a Thracian direction; third, thematic—the play explores slavery, the exploitation of less advanced ethnic groups by clever Athenians, the protocols and procedures

which apply when any new colony is founded, the type of individual who arrives in such colonies, and the ease with which a democracy can deteriorate into a tyranny under unscrupulous management; and fourth, exploring the possibilities that there is a more specific individual reference underlying the figure of the new “Thracian” tyrant Peisetairos, and even that Aristophanes had a particular Thracian settlement—Pistiros—in mind.

If we imagine ourselves present at the theater in 414 BCE, the stage will have provided a representation of a large bush or thicket—the only such wild, non-urban scene in Aristophanes’ extant plays. The two Athenians enter, on foot rather than by the ship they would have needed to travel to Sicily, but after a long journey. It has consisted of over a thousand stades, as Peisetairos complains (6). This is not an unsuitable description of the distance over land between Athens and the area to the north of Thessaloniki and Chalkidiki, which is somewhere between one and two thousand ancient stades. The first information about the Athenian pair’s intended destination is unambiguous: Euelpides says that they bought birds from a bird-seller to act as guides and lead them to “Tereus the Hoopoe, a bird although his parents were not birds” (15–16). For an Athenian audience in the fifth century, at least after Sophocles’ spectacular tragedy *Tereus*, if characters in a play were going to see Tereus the Hoopoe, it meant they were going to the land of the Thracians.

Dunbar notes that, prior to Sophocles, Tereus had been changed not into a hoopoe but into a sparrowhawk.²⁹ It was only once Tereus’ legend had been located in Thrace,³⁰ and he was represented as a Thracian monarch on stage, that identification with a hoopoe seems to have become inevitable. The similarity of the names of the mythical Tereus and the historical leader Teres will have helped confirm location of the bloodthirsty myth, but so, surely, will the close resemblance between the plumage of hoopoes and the visual representation of Thracians on vases: the geometrical black-and-white cloaks are irresistibly reminiscent of a hoopoe’s wings, the head-gear with its flap over the forehead and tailpiece looks like the hoopoe’s crest, and the hoopoe’s russet head reminds us that Thracians in Athenian vase-painting sometimes have their hair carefully picked out in reddish hue.³¹

29 Dunbar 1997, 140–41; see e.g. Aeschylus, *Suppl.* 60–62.

30 Hall 1989, 103–5nn8–11, 125–26, 136–37. Although Sophocles’ *Tereus* was certainly set in Thrace, there was still some confusion in the fifth century as to the precise region of Thrace or Thracian-occupied northern Greece where the mythical Tereus was centred: see Thuc. 2.29.

31 Lee 2015, 75.

Tereus was one of the most famous tragedies by Sophocles. It had featured “horse-loving Thracians” who worshiped the sun (fr. 582 *TgrF*) and were derided as avaricious barbarians (fr. 587 *TgrF*). Although particular tragedies have more or less metatheatrical importance in other Aristophanic comedies (Euripides’ *Telephus* in *Acharnians*, or his escape tragedies *Helen* and *Andromeda* in *Thesmophoriazusae*, for example³²), the imitation and subversion of the parodied tragedy is nowhere as emphatic as in the relationship between *Tereus* and *Birds* in this opening scene.³³

Thematically, the relationship continues to evolve. In the course of Sophocles’ tragedy, the Athenian princess Procne, living in Thrace after her marriage to the Thracian king Tereus, along with her sister Philomela, had taken revenge on him for raping Philomela and cutting out her tongue. They had killed his son by Procne, whose name was Itys, and served him up to be eaten by his father.³⁴ All three were turned into birds—Tereus into a hoopoe, Procne into a nightingale, and Philomela into a swallow. No other comedy by Aristophanes opens with an equivalent explicit signal that the audience is revisiting the precise setting of a previous theatrical work. Moreover, the characters of Tereus and Procne actually reappear in his comedy (Procne as a non-speaking *aulos* player at 675), along with the macabre themes of human-bird metamorphosis, kin-murder, and cannibalism.

Euelpides is soon warming to his theme, addressing the audience directly. He and Peisetairos are fleeing Athens because of the high taxes and endless litigation. Tereus seemed like a good person to help with their project of finding a quiet land in which to settle because he is winged and has had a bird’s-eye view of the earth (32–48).³⁵ But it turns out that Tereus’ metamorphosis has been rather unsatisfactory. He remains a strange human-bird hybrid.

EUELPIDES By Heracles! what a creature! what plumage! What means this triple crest?

HOOPOE Who wants me?

EUELPIDES The twelve great gods have used you ill, it seems.

HOOPOE Are you twitting me about my feathers? I’ve been a man, strangers.

EUELPIDES It’s not you we are jeering at.

32 Foley 1988; Hall 2006, 225–54; Schlesinger 1936 and 1937; Rau 1967.

33 Dobrov 2001, 106.

34 See further Hall 1989, 103–6; Fitzpatrick 2001.

35 Even here, the detail points in a northerly direction, however: Euelpides says that as citizens leaving Athens they are doing the opposite from “Sakas,” a nickname for the tragedian Acestor which implied that he had *Scythian* origins (31).

HOOPOE At what, then?

EUELPIDES Why, it's your beak that looks so ridiculous to us.

HOOPOE This is how Sophocles outrages me in his tragedies. Know, I once was Tereus.

EUELPIDES You were Tereus, and what are you now? A bird or a peacock?

HOOPOE I'm a bird.

EUELPIDES Then where are your feathers? I don't see any.

HOOPOE They've fallen off.

EUELPIDES Through illness?

HOOPOE No. All birds moult their feathers, you know, every winter; others grow in their place.

The attention paid here to the Hoopoe's inadequate feathers implies that his outfit supported the description. It has even been suggested that the very costumes the actor playing Tereus had worn in the tragic production were brought out of the wardrobe, rather worse for the passing of time, especially for Aristophanes' production.³⁶

Although the loss of almost all of Sophocles' *Tereus*, besides a few fragments and a lacunose hypothesis, means that we can't be sure how much overt reference was made to it in Aristophanes' burlesque tribute, the Hoopoe's speech itself has a strong paratragic element.³⁷ The theme of rape, as Tereus had raped Philomela, comes up when Peisetairos, advancing over the course of the play in the hubristic psychology of the stereotypical tyrant, threatens Iris the rainbow goddess with rape (1253–56). The themes of kin-killing and even kin-eating are also later to re-emerge, as we shall see, when the parricidal Athenian youth applies for citizenship in Cloudcuckooland, and when the corpses of dissident birds, in the most sinister fashion, are roasted and eaten by their own species.

The topography of the comedy provides numerous clues that it is broadly to be imagined in Thrace, rather than Athens, Sicily, or the completely unidentifiable land of utopian fantasy that have been favored by most previous critics. The parricide is told to get out of Cloudcuckooland, and enlist as a hoplite to fight, where else but Thrace (1369)?³⁸ Here the wings that Peisetairos is distributing to newly enrolled citizens of Cloudcuckooland become metaphors for weaponry and armor including a crested helmet looking like a cock's comb

36 I owe this suggestion to Dr. Rosie Wyles.

37 Dunbar 1997, 135.

38 Dunbar 1997, 653.

(1364–66). Hindsight, informed by Thucydides' particular emphasis on Syracuse, makes it difficult to remember that Sicily was far from the only military front on the Athenians' minds at this time. Athens was sending frequent expeditionary forces to the northern Aegean and its hinterland.³⁹ The very spring that *Birds* was produced a task-force under Euetion was assembled to try to recover Amphipolis (Thuc. 7.9).

There are several witticisms that require a detailed understanding of Thrace and Athenian activities there in order to understand them. The joke about the Cleonymus tree (1470–81) refers to a place called Kardia. Although there is punning here on the word “heart,” it is equally important to remember that Kardia was the name of a remote Greek colony, with some Athenians among the inhabitants, on a strategic point of the Thracian Chersonese.⁴⁰ Another Athenian politician against whom a joke is cracked is Laispodias (1567–69), recently a candidate for the *strategia*, attacked by the orator Antiphon for some dubious activities in Thrace.⁴¹ The Decree-Dealer arrives with new laws and says that the Cloudcuckoolanders have to use the same weights and measures as Olophyxia (1040–42), which Herodotus mentions (as Olophyxos) in his description of the eastern prong of Chalkidiki (7.22):

Athos is a large and noble mountain, projecting into the sea, and inhabited ... Where Mount Athos terminates, stands a Greek city, called Sana; in the interior parts, between Sana and the elevation of Athos, are situated the towns of Dion, Olophyxos, Acrothoon, Thyssum, and Cleona, inhabited by Greeks.

Thucydides notes that Olophyxos was one of several “small towns” (μικρὰ πόλίσματα) in which a few Chalchidikian Greeks live alongside “hybrid tribes of bilingual barbarians” (ξυμμείκτοις ἔθνεσι βαρβάρων διγλώσσων)—Pelasgians and Thracian tribes including the Edonians (4.121.4). Peisetairos is awarded a golden crown (1274–75), which remains on his head for the remainder of the play, just as Brasidas had been granted a golden crown for liberating the people of Thracian Scione from Athens in 423 BCE: they “welcomed Brasidas with all possible honours, publicly crowning him with a crown of gold as the liberator of Hellas; while private persons crowded round him and decked him with garlands as though he had been an athlete” (Thuc. 4.121.1).

39 Westlake 1995, 93. I have explored the problem of anachronistically reading Aristophanic comedy through a Thucydidean filter in a study of *Knights* (Hall 2018).

40 Dunbar 1997, 690.

41 Dunbar 1997, 717.

When Peisetairos proposes to build a vast wall like that at Babylon, the Hoopoe responds, “O Cebriones! O Porphyrion! what a fearful citadel!” (553). Here the mythological parallel drawn by the Hoopoe is with the primordial battle of the giants who tried to overthrow the gods: Pindar says that Porphyrion was the “king” of the giants, slain in the gigantomachy by an arrow from Apollo (Pindar, *Pythian* 8.12–18). And the place where Greeks believed that battle had taken place was Phlegra, the westernmost prong of Chalcidiki, also known as Pallene (Herodotus, *Histories*, vii. 123); Euelpides shortly afterwards reminds us of the area, when he mentions that Zeus had hurled his thunderbolt against the giants (576). The location of the battle must have felt appropriate because Olympus, where the Olympians who defeated the Giants reside, is of course in northern Greece, and its peaks, visible from Thessaloniki and western Chalcidiki, are often immersed in clouds. Lest we forget the previous battle which had taken place in these regions, the battle of the gods and giants is made the subject of a joke again at *Birds* 1249–52. Peisetairos tells Iris to convey to Zeus that if he gives the new ruler of Cloudcuckooland any further grief he will attack his palace (1248–52):

And blast it with my eagles, who are armed with lightning. I, a bird, shall send more than six hundred porphyrions arrayed in leopardskins up to heaven against him. And just one Porphyrion once gave him enough to deal with.

Peisetairos’ threat, if taken seriously, is terrifying. Instead of the traditional one hundred giants led by Porphyrion against the gods, he has six hundred birds of the type that previously only Zeus has used as his symbol; both he and they are, moreover, armed with the weapon that has previously been Zeus’ own prerogative—the lightning bolt. The leopard skins complete the picture, since they are worn by the warring giants on gigantomachy scenes, such as the fragmentary Athenian early red-figure cup by Athenodotos in the British Museum.⁴² And the threatened new assault on the gods will take place in virtually the same geographical location.

Even the new cosmogony Peisetairos provides to persuade the birds, who are born from eggs—that are the oldest claimants to cosmic power—has Thracian resonances. It uses words from the Orphic *Argonautica*,⁴³ and

⁴² 1894.3–14.1; see Schefold 1981, 93 with fig. 119.

⁴³ Bacon (1928, 117–18) points out that the term *oligodranēs* is very rare but shared by the Orphic *Argonautica* 430 (also in a cosmogonic context) and the root in words in other texts which have an Orphic resonance.

Orpheus, certainly since Aeschylus' lost *Bassarids*—the second tragedy of his *Lycurgeia*, a trilogy Aristophanes knew well—had become irretrievably associated with Thrace.⁴⁴

Another Thracian reference may lie behind a passage traditionally associated with Africa. One of the advantages of no longer worshiping the Olympians, says Peisetairos, is that there will no longer be a requirement to go to Delphi or to Ammon (618–20) to sacrifice. The importance of the oracle of Zeus Ammon at Siwa in the Libyan desert has always made editors assume that this is the place which Aristophanes is directing his audience to imagine; some translators even interpolate the information into the text, by way of explanation of a name rather less familiar to the general reader than “Delphi.”⁴⁵ Ammon is mentioned by the chorus again at 716, in company with two central Greek shrines: “We are your Ammon, Delphi, Dodona.” There was another temple of Zeus Ammon in a sanctuary much nearer home, at what is now called Kallithea in Pallene, the westernmost prong of Chalcidiki. This was in the territory of the ancient city of Aphytos, a tribute-paying Athenian ally. Indeed, the Patrokleides mentioned in another passing joke (*Birds* 790) had proposed a decree concerning trade with Athens' Chalcidikian ally Aphytos (*IG I³ 63*), and the remains of the temple of Zeus Ammon near Aphytos were discovered in 1968. The surviving temple is itself fourth-century, and sources of the imperial era, when the area round the sanctuaries was subject to intense building activities, claim that the Spartan general Lysander ordered the Aphytaeans to sacrifice to Ammon in 405 BCE after the god appeared to him in a dream (Plutarch, *Life of Lysander* 20.4–5). But in another building in the same sanctuary, Dionysus had certainly been worshiped since the eighth century BCE, and the much later attestation to the Lysander tradition can scarcely rule out the possibility that Zeus Ammon was already consulted in Pallene by 414 BCE. That cult title had been introduced to Greece by Dorians long before, when they founded Cyrene in Libya, and temples for Zeus Ammon were built at Sparta, Gytheion, and Piraeus.⁴⁶ During archaic and classical times Aphytis was a prosperous city, minting its own coins, which depicted an eagle on one side and the head of its patron, Ammon Zeus. The city's economy appears to have been based mainly on farming and vine-culture. Aristotle mentions the “agricultural law” of the Aphytians as constituting a singular chapter in the history of ancient Greek public finances (*Politics* 6.1319 a14). The city became

44 See Rau 1967, 109–11; Hall 1989, 127; Austin and Olson 2009, 99–100.

45 E.g., the popular online translation by G. Theodoridis at www.poetryintranslation.com/PITBR/Greek/Birds.htm.

46 Tsigarada 2011, 176.

a member of the Chalcidikian League; it previously paid tribute under the Thracian phoros of the Delian League.

It is interesting that the shivering first poet's proposed song for the foundation of chilly Cloudcuckooland has a profoundly northern focus (941–45): "Straton wanders among the Scythian nomads, but has no woven clothes. He proceeds ingloriously clad in leather without a tunic." Later, the dithyrambic Cinesias proposes to take to the air and fly a long way first south, but then back north again (1398–400). The divine visitors, too, have northern connections. Prometheus was associated by the Athenians who went to the theater with the Black Sea, and in particular with Scythian Caucasus, where he had been shackled by Zeus in the famous tragedy *Prometheus Bound* attributed to Aeschylus. He is still trying to get other species—humans or birds—to help mount a revolt against Zeus' tyranny (153–55). He has apparently been accepted back onto Olympus, but is so keen to help dislodge Zeus from power that he gives Peisetairos the vital information that the gods are suffering from a famine due to the blockade; the only solution is to marry Basileia, who will bring with her sovereign power (1534–36).

At the beginning of *Iliad* 13 Poseidon sat on one northern Aegean island, Samothrace, to watch the Trojan War and grazed his horses between two others, Imbros and Tenedos. In 414 BCE he had also appeared recently in the opening sequence of Euripides' *Trojan Women*, agreeing to cause terrible storms that would afflict the Greeks returning across the northern Aegean from Troy. Heracles' connections with colonization, and popularity in the Black Sea region, are well attested;⁴⁷ he had also appeared in Scythia in the tragedy *Prometheus Unbound* as the liberator of Prometheus.

More obviously Balkan is the Triballian god, one of the most appealing characters in Old Comedy. He is introduced as an ontological possibility by Prometheus at 1520–24. He tells us that there are *barbaroi theoi*, barbarian gods, living "inland" (*anōthen* 1522, 1526) from the Olympians and somehow able to threaten Zeus and the Olympians with invasion. Aristophanes, as Dunbar says, is

reproducing the normal relation between Greek colonists and the native population, who would withdraw inland when the colonists built and fortified a new city ... Now Aristophanes imaginatively compares them [i.e. these barbarian gods], in their relation to the Olympians, to fierce tribes on the inland frontier.⁴⁸

47 Braund and Hall 2014, 373.

48 Dunbar 1997, 700.

The Triballians lived in what is now central and western Bulgaria (a territory of which more will be said below), and were neighbors of the Illyrians. First mentioned in extant Greek sources by Herodotus (4.49.2) and Thucydides (2.96.4), they were a Thracian tribe living to the north of the Rhodope mountains. In the winter of 424 they had defeated and killed Sitalces, king of the Odrysian Thracians (Thuc. 4.101.5), who had originally been an Athenian ally. They had a reputation for breaking laws of *xenia* and peculiar savagery.⁴⁹ Their Triballian god is particularly memorable when he tries to speak Greek. It is he, perhaps as the indigenous northerner, who gets to decide that the gods will indeed hand over the princess to Peisetairos, although the Greek is not clear (καλάνι κόραυνα καὶ μεγάλα βασιλινᾶν / ὄρνιτο παραδίδωμι, 1678–79). But earlier he has greeted Peisetairos in a hilarious mis-pronunciation of the Athenian's name: ναβαισατρεῦ- i.e. “yes” (*na* for *nai*) *Baisatreu*, 1615. I will return to this aural confusion and tortuous play with the protagonist's name in the conclusion.

That Aristophanes here conceives a divinity modeled specifically on the type of barbarian in the interior to the north and north-west of mainland Greece is implied by part of Prometheus' account of the crisis in cosmic relationships caused by the rise of Cloudcuckooland (1515–24): he points out to Peisetairos that men no longer sacrifice to the gods and no smoke rises from the sacrificial altars—“the barbarian gods are hungry and they're shrieking like Illyrians and threaten to come down to war against Zeus” (1520–22):

οἱ δὲ βάρβαροι θεοὶ
 πεινῶντες ὥσπερ Ἴλλυριοὶ κεκριγότες
 ἐπιστρατεύσειν φάσ' ἄνωθεν τῷ Δί.

It so happens that the Illyrians—the neighbors of the Thracian Triballians in the area broadly equivalent to modern Albania—were notorious for their terrifying shrieks as they entered combat. Thucydides makes the Spartan Brasidas reassure his troops before fighting the Illyrians that their menacing conduct, including the intolerable loudness of their battle-cry (βοῆς μεγέθει ἀφόρητοι), does not make them disciplined or effective soldiers (4.127–28).⁵⁰

Moreover, several of the dominant themes of the play—barbarians, slavery, hybridity, colonization, and tyranny—seem most intelligible if they are seen to emerge from an episode taking place in the middle air somewhere in

49 Dunbar 1997, 702.

50 For another connection of the Illyrians with angry gods, see Herodotus 9.42 with Matijašić 2011, 303–4.

a northern barbarian hinterland, more particularly a Thracian interior beyond the Aegean, regardless of the other exotic parts of the world from which some of the birds have flown in. It cannot be proven, but some of the different types of birds could have implied the numerous different tribes the Athenians and Herodotus included in the category “Thracian,” such as the Dolonkoi of the Chersonese who accepted Miltiades as oikist when threatened by the warlike neighboring Thracian Apsinthioi (Hdt. 6.34–35). Different feathers, colors, and patterned costumes—and Thracians are elsewhere associated with feathers, bright hair color, and tattoos—could easily lend themselves to suggesting this type of ethnographic diversity among the “barbarian” birds.

The original meaning of the word “barbarian” was of course “non-Greek-speaker,” and the birds have to be taught the Greek language by the Hoopoe (199–200): “Before I came they were quite ignorant, but since I have lived with them I have taught them to speak.” They remain scarcely literate, to judge from Peisetairos’ allegation that they haven’t even studied their children’s versions of Aesop properly.⁵¹ People who speak with foreign accents with questionable rights to citizenship, *especially* Thracian and Scythian ones, are a running joke in the play, and being a bird is more than once directly related to being a linguistic *barbaros*: at 199–200 the birds twitter like barbarians. The bird whose song was most often conventionally compared with barbarian speech in Greek poetry is the swallow, like Cassandra at *Agamemnon* 1050–51; in *Birds*, the nickname of Menippus, suggesting his barbarian birth, is Chelidon (1292–93), the barbarizing speech of the Triballian god results in him being likened to a swallow (1681–82), and in Aristophanes’ *Frogs*, the roar of the allegedly mixed-race Cleophon is that of “a Thracian swallow sitting on a barbarian leaf” (681–82).

Where Athenians made allegations about barbarian genealogy, allegations that parents or ancestors were slaves were usually soon to follow. There is in *Birds* a recurrent gag about the mysterious Execestides (11, 764–65, 1527), concerning the allegation that he was not a proper Athenian citizen but a foreigner, indeed a barbarian and a son of a slave.⁵² As we saw earlier, the Athenians drew a large proportion of their slaves from Thrace, and slavery is an unusually prominent theme in *Birds*, even for an Old Comedy. There is a good deal of action involving the slaves whom the Athenians bring with them, Xanthias, and Manes or Manodorus, the first of whom, Xanthias, certainly has a name typical of Thracian slaves. Peisetairos is not a gentle slave-owner: when they bring out the baskets of wings that are to be the badge of citizenship, he is conspicuously and unnecessarily violent against them (1325–34).

51 Hall 2013, 287–89.

52 Bain 1993, 364–65.

Aristophanes sets up the theme of slavery in the opening scene, as soon as he has established that our quest heroes' destination is Thrace. The Athenians and their birds hear some noise and Euelpides hammers on a rock (54) calling for a slave to answer; Dunbar suggests that Aristophanes well knew that hoopoes nest in a hole in a tree, a building, or the ground.⁵³ Peisetairos asks why he is calling for a slave when he should be summoning the Hoopoe, but to their surprise a bird with a large beak runs on. When questioned, he explains that he is a "slave-bird" (ὄρνις ἔγωγε δοῦλος) (70). The straightforward equation of birds and slaves here is not insignificant; there are many other characteristics they share, for example they both are conventionally said to "gape" (20–21),⁵⁴ and Peisetairos later tells the birds that they are actually perceived "as slaves, as fools, as Maneses" (νῦν δ' ἀνδράποδ' ἡλιθίους Μανᾶς, 524). It turns out that, like his master Tereus, the bird-slave was once human, but changed into a bird when his master did and needed a slave in bird form. Already the question of human–bird metamorphosis is interrogated from the comic perspective, and the bird-slave's hybridity exposed: human/bird, Greek/barbarian, and free/slave have within a few minutes of the prologue been established as the primary boundaries ready for probing and ultimately reassertion. Euelpides calls him *trochilos* (80), a name combining a pun on a species of bird, the Egyptian plover, and the stereotype of the slave who is always running around.

Such boundaries—human/bird, free/slave, Greek/Thracian, and even God/human/bird—are consistently challenged and eroded in this strange new city. All the humans changed into birds retain some human features: Tereus still enjoys eating legume soup (77); the metamorphosis of the two Athenians is also unsatisfactory—having persuaded the birds of the plan, they express concern that they have no wings, to which the Hoopoe simply says (654–55), "Never fear. You shall eat a certain root and wings will grow on your shoulders"; and when the Athenians reappear, Peisetairos' human face is obviously still clear, to judge from the comparison with a blackbird who has had a pudding basin haircut (806)—he is a bird–human hybrid, just as the populations of Black Sea cities, where ethnic acculturation took place, were known as *meixobarbaroi* or *hēmibarbaroi* (e.g., Eur. *Phoen.* 151; Strabo 13.1.58). Humans, moreover, are to receive metic status, *metoikein* (13181–89), in Cloudcuckooland; the question remains, if they manage to get some wings, will they be able actually to "count" as birds and acquire full citizenship?

53 Dunbar 1997, 153.

54 Hall 2006, 237.

The ethnic hybridity and cultural fusion that characterize the new city are exactly what was experienced by Greek colonists on the edges of the Greek-speaking world, and the play actually offers us by far our most detailed account of what happened at the moment that a Greek colony was founded, even if it is viewed through an absurdist comic lens. The meat that Peisetairos so assiduously cooks is that of rebel birds, who have been executed (1584–85). This is reminiscent of the theme of cannibalism, or same-species-eating, which provide the climax of Sophocles' *Tereus* albeit *before* the human–bird metamorphoses took place. But Peisetairos and Euelpides bring with them a *chutra*, cooking-pot (43), part of the equipment for a sacrificial meal; commentators have suggested that the audience might think of the sacred fire that colonists took from the Athenian *prutaneion* to light the altar fire of their new city.⁵⁵ The extended sequence of visitors in the oikism scene during and after the sacrifice, the foundation ode, and the other pieces of papyrus inscribed with prophecies and decrees—a paper jungle—provide a lively picture of the excitement surrounding a new foundation and especially of the opportunities it offered for entrepreneurial self-advancement and self-enrichment.

Yet one of the things that the play stresses is the inferior quality of the humans who turn up in Clouduckooland: it is a dystopic magnet for lowlife criminals and corrupt bureaucrats. The parricide sees it as a haven, and so does Meton the geometrician and architect who arrives to provide a plan for the city (993). This historical figure had been in trouble in Athens recently after the apartment block that he built burned down, and he had tried to get his son exemption from military service on the ground of financial hardship.⁵⁶ The Inspector had apparently intended to set up lawcourts as a first step in the administration of the city, but it soon becomes apparent that the birds have no need of them, requiring neither a clean legal record nor upright conduct in applicants for wings, the badge of citizenship:⁵⁷ they explicitly invite anyone who wants to beat up his father to come live with them (753–59). This is one reason why I do not think that this play constitutes a “pro-barbarian” satire on Athenian imperialism and exposure of how it “oppressed” hapless subjects such as Thracian natives: it mocks the gullibility of the barbarian natives and its target is unscrupulous Athenians who wanted to become tyrants and believed that they could fulfill this nefarious ambition in Thrace.

55 Dunbar 1997, 150.

56 Dunbar 1997, 561.

57 Dunbar 1997, 566–67.

At the conclusion of the play, Peisetairos becomes tyrant of Cloudcuckooland, having persuaded the birds that he is vastly more intelligent than they are and suggested that if they provide the active brawn (ῥώμη πράττειν) to his deliberative brain (γνώμη ... βουλευέειν), they can both profit from the collaboration (637–38). Aristophanes characterizes him as becoming increasingly autocratic and arbitrary in his treatment of everybody over the course of the play, even flogging the Sycophant, a free visitor and former fellow citizen (1462–66). There must have been many individual Athenians like Peisetairos over the years: Sears believes that Thrace was uniquely attractive to ambitious Athenians because it provided “the promise of material and political advantages far beyond those available in Athens.”⁵⁸ It is important that what the Athenian emigrants dislike about Athens is its *polupragmosunē* (44); they want a “quiet” life, by which they mean one in which they are unaccountable to democratic laws and procedures.

Although collecting gifts and tolls from all who neighbor or pass through the birds' territory promises to make Peisetairos super-rich in the future, he is not so yet. He is setting up a rather down-market tyranny on short resources: the sacrifice entails a humble sheep and goat, rather than the bulls we would expect at a city-founding (856) The poet specializing in colony-founding poems who arrives at the sacrifice reminds us of fabulously wealthy tyrants in his reference (one of the conspicuously few to Sicily in the play!) to a Pindaric poem in honor of Hieron of Syracuse (926), but he is in fact reduced to begging for basic foodstuffs and clothing. The birds themselves are not going to be able to enrich individuals like the Sycophant, because their personal poverty is stressed (157–58; 1410–11). Athenian aristocrats and adventurers had regularly married the daughters of existing tyrants in order to get access to power. Peisistratus himself had for this reason married the daughter of Megacles (Hdt. 1.60), and Miltiades the Younger had regained control of part of the Thracian fiefdom first acquired by his deceased father Miltiades the Elder by forging an alliance with King Olorus of Thrace and marrying his daughter, Hegesipyle (Hdt. 6.39). Peisetairos confirms his hold on power by marrying the daughter of the pre-existing local tyrant; in his case she is Basileia, the divine principle of Sovereignty, and along with her Peisetairos acquires access to his father-in-law Zeus' power, in particular his thunder.⁵⁹

58 Sears 2013, 4.

59 There is epigraphic evidence that the terms on which the Archon Basileus was to let out the temenos of Neleus and Basile (a personification of sovereignty) were stipulated just a couple of years before the production of *Birds*: see Shapiro 1986.

So how did Athenian exiles setting themselves up as tyrants among Black Sea communities, as Xenophon for a while aspired to do, historically present themselves to their semi-barbarian publics? Public play-acting a close relationship with divinity was of course a longstanding tradition among tyrants: Peisistratus of Athens himself, after enriching himself in his Thracian properties, was said to have been equipped by his allies with a tall woman costumed as Athena, beside whom he entered Athens on a chariot and drove to the Acropolis (Hdt. 1.60). Nearer Thrace itself, Clearchus I of Heraclea Pontica, after studying in Athens, set himself up as tyrant, and, according to local historian Memnon

turned out to be truly savage and bloodthirsty toward his subjects, and reached the peak of arrogance, so that he called himself the son of Zeus, and tinged his face with unnatural dyes, adorning it in all kinds of different ways to make it appear glistening or ruddy to those who saw him; and varied his clothing to appear fearsome or elegant. This was not his only vice; he showed no gratitude to his benefactors, was extremely violent, and ventured to carry out the most appalling deeds. He ruthlessly destroyed those he attacked, not only among his own people but whenever he perceived a threat elsewhere.⁶⁰

There is a mythical counterpart to Clearchus' conduct in the story of Sisyphus' brother Salmoneus, who also wanted to display publicly his claim to Zeus-like cosmic authority. After becoming king of Elis, Salmoneus demanded that his subjects actually call him Zeus. To add to the insult, Salmoneus mocked Zeus by driving his chariot through the city dragging bronze kettles to simulate thunder and throwing torches to simulate lightning.⁶¹

So we have been encouraged by Aristophanes to think in terms of Thrace and disaffected incoming Greek adventurers and aspiring tyrants metatheatrically, topographically, and thematically. The final question is whether Aristophanes was satirizing not just *Thraikophoitai* as a species but a particular individual. Memories of the Thracian connections and theatrical self-presentation of Peisistratus, the most famous Athenian tyrant of them all, must surely have been stirred by the end of *Birds*, especially given that Peisetairios shares with him the first half of his proper name.

60 Memnon of Heraclea, *FGrHist* 434 F 1, translated by A. Smith at www.attalus.org/trans/late/memnoni.html. See Braund and Hall 2014, 371–72.

61 Pseudo-Apollodorus, *Bibliotheca* 1. 9. 7; Hyginus, *Fabulae* 60, 61; Strabo 8.356.

Another candidate whose name begins with Peis-, and who was currently in the news at the time of the production of *Birds*, is the Athenian Peisander. One of the more prominent politicians to emerge after the death of Nicias, he was caricatured as fat, greedy, and cowardly, and featured as the protagonist or the topic of a play entitled *Peisander* by Plato the comic poet. But he was certainly cool-headed in a crisis, and “able and persuasive as an orator.”⁶² He had been an army officer in 422/1 (Ar. *Peace* 395) and in 415 became one of the enquiry commissioners appointed to look into the Hermocopid scandal (Andocides 1.36, 43). He may have been *strategos* when *Birds* was first performed. Subsequent to the comedy, Peisander did indeed become chief architect of the 411 oligarchic coup, and his leanings toward tyranny if they are satirized in *Birds* may conceivably be a sign of Aristophanes’ prescience. But he was already sufficiently well known to have been jibed at by Aristophanes in *Babylonians* in 426; the possibility that Peisander lies, at least in part, behind Aristophanes’ Peisetairos, is strengthened if we see *Birds* as a satire on Athenian relations with Thrace, since he is likely to have been involved in the catastrophic Chalkidiki campaign and battle of Spartolos (in Thrace between Olynthos and Potidaea) of 429 BCE.⁶³

Both Peisistratus and Peisander have occasionally been connected with Peisetairos by scholars previously. But, in conclusion, I would like to suggest that there is a “real” place lying behind Cloudcuckooland: Pistiros (Πίστιρος) an emporion situated in the valley of the river Maritsa at Adjijyska Vodenitsa in what is now western Bulgaria, south-east of Sofia, near the modern city of Vetren.⁶⁴ It is about 150 kilometers from the coast of the Aegean, over the Rhodopian mountains. The artifacts that have been found there—especially the ample Athenian ceramics—show that it was well served by trade routes.

Pistiros was founded in the third quarter of the fifth century BCE as a strongly fortified urban commercial center, almost certainly founded by Thasian colonists, who had previously founded another a small city on the Aegean coast with the similar name of Pistyros.⁶⁵ The Thasians were a source of more or less permanent anxiety to the Athenians. Thasos was a significant tribute-paying member of the Delian League and later the Athenian Empire, liable for a substantial cash tribute of 30 Talents, and (certainly in 424 BCE) a seven-ship

62 Woodhead 1954, 132.

63 This depends on a disputed reading of a fragment, certainly mentioning Peisander, of Eupolis’ *Astrateutoi*; see Woodhead 1954, 133–34.

64 42°14′36.78″N 24°5′28.55″E.

65 Velkov and Domaradzka 1996, 210; Bouzek and Domaradzka 2007. See also Hansen and Nielsen 2005, 895.

Athenian squadron was based there (Thuc. 4.105).⁶⁶ But the Thasians had a long history of rebellion linked with their financial and commercial entrepreneurship; they immediately revolted in 411 when the oligarchs took over in Athens.

Excavations over the last three decades at the Thasians' emporion in the interior have uncovered a sizable settlement, on a scale similar to Olynthos in Chalkidiki or Thasos town itself, with a very substantial fortification wall and residential and industrial buildings, including kilns and smithies, beyond the eastern gate. The fortification wall, firmly dated to the third quarter of the fifth century (and therefore not long before the production of *Birds*) is particularly massive and the excavators have described it as a very ambitious feature representing "the most significant single investment of time and resources."⁶⁷ It is two meters wide, consisting of two masonry faces of granite slabs filled with rubble and topped with an additional superstructure made of clay and stones. The surviving remains of a tower crowning the eastern gateway show it was at least two storeys high.

An inscription on a granite block found in 1990 at the nearby site of Assar Dere, dated to the mid-fourth century, has enabled scholars to identify the site as Pistiros.⁶⁸ Although the inscription is at least half a century later than *Birds*, it gives a fascinating glimpse into the tribalism and potential for violence that marked Greek-barbarian relationships in this kind of colonial emporion. It determines, on oath to Dionysus, the terms under which an important figure, evidently a Thracian king, must allow the Greek settlers and traders—the *emporitai*—to operate at Pistiros:

If any of the *emporitai* has a cause to plead against another, they will be judged each among his own relatives, and with respect to such things as are owed to the *emporitai* by the Thracians, no cancellation of debts is to be made. The land and pasture belonging to the *emporitai* shall not be taken from them ... Hostages from among the inhabitants of Pistiros are not to be taken nor handed over to another. Neither shall the possessions of the *emporitai* be appropriated by him or by any of his people. No dues shall be levied on the goods which are imported to Maroneia from Pistiros or from the emporia, or from Maroneia to Pistiros and to the emporia Belana of the Prasenoï.

66 Unz 1985, 30–31.

67 Chiverrell and Archibald 2009, 295.

68 Chankowski and Domaradzka 1999, 295.

The agreement reaffirms the validity of certain rules of inter-ethnic conduct that were made “in Cotys’ time”—that is, during the reign of the Odrysian Thacian King Cotys I (383–59 BCE): his successor promises not to mistreat (kill, rob, imprison) the citizens of other Greek settlements including Maroneia and Apollonia, “nor the Thasians who are at Pistiros.”

The Greek–barbarian relations may have been strained at times, but trading was always vigorous at Pistiros: it “has yielded the largest single concentration in the east Balkan peninsula of coins, imported tableware, wine, and oil amphorae, as well as a wide range of manufactured objects, representing a range of styles that can be associated with workshops or working methods of regional and extra-regional origin.”⁶⁹ There has been a “wealth of metal finds, including regional and inter-regional coins, weights and measures, scales, and ceramic containers for bulk transportation,”⁷⁰ and numerous loom-weights. Religious activities are confirmed by Dionysiac scenes on vases, clay, and stone sculptures, and by low-level decorated baked clay altars and fragments of painted clay walls. Cultural life, or at least an interest in the cultural life enjoyed in other parts of the Greek world such as Athens, has been confirmed by finds including terracotta figurines of comic actors, some as yet uncatalogued, which I saw myself when I visited in August 2016. It is also interesting that among the substantial evidence for the enjoyment of food and drink, there are bones not only of domestic chickens but large wildfowl such as cranes and storks, which even today abound in the area around the site.⁷¹ When I visited, birds were abundant in both number and variety in the local thickets, and the birdsong was deafening.

Finally, let us return to the Triballian god’s inability to pronounce Peisistratus’ name properly: *Baisatreu* (1615). It so happens that our Thracian deity is not the only one to have had problems with the name. The entire textual tradition spells the name of the protagonist *Peisthetairos* (with the variant *Peisthaiteros*), connected with the verb “to persuade” (*peithein*). It needs to be translated “persuaded by his comrades” or “obeying his comrades” in other than an active sense. The problem here is twofold: first, the dramatic role suggests that this hero is notorious for persuading other individuals, not for being persuaded by them, which needs a part of the verb suggesting the active voice; and second, Greek names are never otherwise formed from the passive stem of verbs. Most editors therefore write *Peisetairos* or *Peithetairos*, both of which are lexically plausible and give the appropriately active sense to the hero’s powers

69 Chiverrell and Archibald 2009, 295.

70 Chiverrell and Archibald 2009, 295.

71 Stallibrass 2007.

of persuasion.⁷² Others have written *Pisthetairos*, an attested real Athenian name connected with the noun *pistis* (trust), which would produce a meaning that he was a trustworthy comrade. This would be apt enough, since just before the name is first disclosed (644), the chorus of birds, before entrusting the planning of their new civic project to him, hope that the Athenian emigrant will prove an honest ally to them, (631–37). But could Aristophanes have been punning on another proper name? When Prometheus warns Peisetairos that ever since he had become “oikist” of the air (ἐξ οὐπερ ὑμεῖς ᾠκίσατε τὸν ἀέρα, 1515), the barbarian gods have become so hungry that they will attack Zeus screaming. Their demand, says Prometheus, is for emporia, trading posts, in which joints of sacrificial meat will be made permanently available (1523–24). And as we have seen, the Triballian god mispronounces Peisetairos’ name, producing what the manuscripts record as the nonsensical *Baisatreu*. Playing around with the Greek tyrant-hero’s name is here palpably encouraged by Aristophanes.

The name of the massively walled emporion in Thrace, which had been erected so recently (Πίστιρος) by the Athenians’ money-making Thasian allies, sounds like a slightly compressed version of Πεισέταιρος, Peisetairos’ name. Even if Cloudcuckooland is not specifically Pistiros, I believe Aristophanes’ bird city is an imagined colonial and commercial community in Thrace—a conglomerate of all the emporia, mines, and fiefdoms that Athenian exiles, opportunists, traders, aspiring tyrants and their allies and henchman, from Thasos or otherwise, had ever historically operated.

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⁷² The form “Peithetairos” has a near-parallel in the eloquent Athenian statesman mentioned by Aristotle, but about whom nothing else certain is known, named Peitholaos, or “Persuader of the People” (*Rhet.* 3.10.7).

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