

The Well-Equipped Traveller: *Birds* 42

Richard Hamilton

AT THE BEGINNING of Aristophanes' *Birds* (42ff), Euelpides and Pisthetaerus have set out in search of a τόπος ἀπράγμων, equipped with a κανοῦν, a χύτρα, and some myrtle crowns (μυρρίναι). The scholia offer two explanations:

They bring these things for sacrifice (τὰ πρὸς θυσίαν) so that once they have fixed their settlement,¹ they can sacrifice at the founding (ἐν τῇ ιδρύσει). It is said in *Peace* that people used to make foundations (ἰδρουν) with χύτραι. Didymus says they bring the things as defense against the birds, the κανοῦν for a shield (ἀντὶ ὄπλου), the χύτρα for a helmet so the birds cannot fly at them and strike them, and the μυρρίναι to shoo them away.

Subsequent scholars have sometimes offered both explanations (W. Dindorf, 1827; I. Bekker, 1829), but more often have rejected Didymus either explicitly (C. D. Beck, 1782; J. van Leeuwen, 1902) or by giving only the first explanation (F. H. Bothe, 1828; T. Kock², 1876; W. W. Merry³, 1896; B. B. Rogers, 1906; V. Coulon, 1928). Although χύτραι are in fact used as armor in the battle with the birds (357, 358, 365, 386, 391) and this is the last time they are mentioned in the play, scholars are undoubtedly correct to dismiss Didymus' suggestion. Our adventurers cannot have expected such a battle; Didymus is simply arguing back from the fact.² Moreover, the battle equipment seems to have come from inside Hoopoe's habitation—at least that is where it is returned (πάλιν, 435) after the battle.³ We should note also that the κανοῦν and μυρρίναι play no part in the

¹ So J. W. White, *The Scholia on the Aves of Aristophanes* (Boston 1914) 22, who treats οἰκήσαντες as an inceptive aorist and rejects the common emendation οἰκίσαντες on the grounds that this verb is not used without an object.

² His explanation "non videtur loci totius menti convenire" (Beck); he was "in miserum igitur errorem abreptus festivo loco comoediae nostrae, ubi ollae et canistra revera pro armis sunt" (van Leeuwen).

³ Cf. 361, ὀξύβαφον ἐντευθενὶ λαβῶν ἢ τρύβλιον, which might imply that the other implements were not ἐντευθενί, except that the plural χυτρῶν in 357 indicates that there are more than the single one mentioned in 42. Also, the article in the phrase τῶν χυτρῶν suggests 'the (kitchen) crockery'. Kock contrasts the ritual equipment of 42 with the household equipment of 359ff, which he thinks was brought with it.

battle, while several of Hoopoe's utensils do (τρύβλιον, 77~361; χύτρα 78~357).⁴

The other suggestion in the scholia seems to be that "the whole apparatus belongs properly to the ceremonies in founding a new state."⁵ The essential element in such a ceremony was the sacred fire from the hearth of the mother city, and critics often assume that this was contained in the χύτρα.⁶ Still, there are considerable difficulties with this interpretation also. Since our travellers at the outset want simply to find a city, not found one (47f), these critics seem to be as guilty as Didymus of reading the later action (here the founding ceremony for Clouduckooland, at 850ff) back into the prologue. Furthermore, the rituals involving χύτραι to which the scholiast and others appeal, while speaking of ἰδρυσίς, in all cases mean the 'settling' of a god in a new place (a shrine or altar),⁷ not a sacrifice on behalf of a newly-founded city: ταύτην (i.e., Peace) χύτρας ἰδρυτέον (*Pax* 923); τὰς χύτρας αἰς τὸν θεὸν / ἰδρυσόμεθα (*Plut.* 1197f); χύτρας / μεθ' ὧν ὁ βωμὸς οὗτος ἰδρύθη ποτέ (fr.245 Kock). Finally, when we examine the founding ritual in *Birds* we find that it involves no porridge offering in χύτραι but, rather, a procession and an animal sacrifice with lustral water (χέρνιβα, 850) and sacred basket (κανοῦν, 850). In *Peace*, in fact, the porridge offering of χύτραι is rejected for a more elaborate sacrifice, and once again we have a sacrificial animal (here sheep, not goat), χέρνιψ, and a κανοῦν (956), with a procession around an altar. Since we find precisely the same elements in the Phales procession in *Acharnians* (253), we may wonder whether these are not simply the standard elements in any major sacrifice.⁸

⁴ We later find that they have also brought bedding and apparently have two slaves with them (656f, cf. 435), although K. J. Dover, *Aristophanic Comedy* (Berkeley 1972) 144, thinks the slaves at 435 are 'attendants' who "appear when required—summoned more probably by the hoopoe than by Peisetairios—to carry the properties into the skene."

⁵ Merry; so also van Leeuwen ("ad coloniam condendam"). See A. J. Graham, *Colony and Mother City in Ancient Greece*² (Chicago 1983) 25, whose sole explicit evidence is *Etym. Magn.* s.v. "πρυτανεία." The idea that the equipment in 42 is ritual is now so widespread that the passage is used as the primary text for the sacrifice at the foundation of a colony by L. H. Jeffrey, *Archaic Greece* (London 1976) 58 n.4. Likewise M. Blech, *Studien zum Kranz bei den Griechen* (= *RVV* 38 [Berlin 1982]) 319, concludes on the basis of this passage alone that myrtle branches were used in ritual, "um eine neue Stadt zu gründen."

⁶ So Kock, Merry, Rogers, Coulon, citing *Lys.* 297, 308, 315, *et al.*

⁷ This is the usual meaning: Link, *RE* 8.2 (1913) 1393 s.v. "ἰδρυσίς." Our travellers say they wish to be καθιδρυθέντε (45), and this may have misled commentators; but the verb is passive: they are *being* settled, not founding a settlement.

⁸ This seems to be the common conclusion of both ancient and modern scholars: cf., e.g., Poll. 10.65 and W. Burkert, *Greek Religion* (Cambridge [Mass.] 1985) 56. We should note that the procession at *Ach.* 284 has a χύτρα.

While the *χύτραι* on which the commentators focus are a false lead (and the myrtle crowns would be no better), it is at first tempting to connect the *κανοῦν* of 42 with that of 850 and 864: *χύτρα* occurs almost fifty times in Aristophanes with a variety of meanings, from ‘soup bowl’ to ‘baby container’, and there are “over 50 references to the wearing of garlands,”⁹ but *κανοῦν* appears only seven times and is confined (except for our disputed passage) to the three rituals just mentioned: the Phales procession in *Acharnians* (244, 253), the *ἰδρυσίς* of the goddess in *Peace* (948, 956), and the sacrifice for Cloud-cuckooland in *Birds* (850, 864).¹⁰ Even so, there are problems: the sacrificial *κανοῦν* in *Peace* 948 contains a knife, barley corns, and myrtle wreath for the priest;¹¹ some critics (Kock, Merry, Rogers, Coulon) guess that Pisthetairos’ basket contains precisely these objects, but in our passage the wreaths are mentioned after the *χύτρα*, as things in addition to, not *inside*, the *κανοῦν* (as Rogers notes), and there is no mention of knife or barley corns. Moreover, Pisthetairos later calls for a (myrtle?) crown¹² and lustral water when he is about to address the birds (463f); this suggests that the myrtle crowns he brought with him were not satisfactory. Finally, the purpose of the *χύτρα* in 42 is unclear: we have seen that a porridge offering is not needed later, and fire from the mother city is mentioned neither here nor in the founding ceremony.

The equipment, then, is neither military nor sacrificial; there is a third possibility, not considered by the critics, that it is sympotic. Myrtle crowns are standard features of Aristophanic symposia (e.g. *Pax* 1154, *Nub.* 1364).¹³ Crowns and *χύτραι* are found together at Aristophanic feasts (*Eccl.* 844f; cf. *Thesm.* 400, 403). The *κανοῦν* is harder to place in this context, but it was a standard element at Homeric feasts (*Il.* 9.217, 24.626; *Od.* 1.147, 8.69, 17.335, 18.120)

⁹ W. B. Stanford, *Aristophanes, The Frogs*² (London 1963) 103.

¹⁰ Cf. B. A. Sparkes, “Illustrating Aristophanes,” *JHS* 105 (1975) 131: “The word is used by some authors to mean household basket, but in Aristophanes its context is always that of ritual, at which time it held barley, fillet and knife.”

¹¹ For the priest’s myrtle crown M. Platnauer, ed., *Aristophanes, Peace* (Oxford 1964) ad 948, cites *Vesp.* 861, *Av.* 43, *Thesm.* 37; but only the last is a true parallel. Blech (*supra* n.5) 319 n.5, adds *Eur. Alc.* 171f and *Theophr. Char.* 16.10; but in neither is a myrtle crown worn by a priest, and his conclusion is necessarily vague: “Die Myrte zählte zu den üblichen Zweigen des Opferrituals.”

¹² Cf. Rogers ad 463: “A myrtle wreath was always worn by an orator.” There are numerous parallels: *Thesm.* 380; *Eccl.* 131, 148, 163; *Nub.* 625; *Vesp.* 861; *Plut.* 21. Blech (*supra* n.5) 319 n.8, lists the Athenian officials (e.g. archons, generals, thesmothes) who wore myrtle crowns.

¹³ For myrtle crowns at symposia, cf. Blech (*supra* n.5) 71: “von den aus Zweigen gewundenen Kränzen sind nur Myrte und Efeu im Gegensatz zum Lorbeer mehrfach erwähnt.”

and in comic banquets (Pherecrates fr.137; Plato Com. fr.15; Diphilus fr.89; Nicostratus fr.15);¹⁴ its one occurrence in Herodotus (1.119) is at a feast.¹⁵ Further, our adventurous pair is equipped with spreads for a couch (στρώματα, 657); they liken their ideal city to a soft cloak to recline in (122) and name as that city's most serious activity attending wedding feasts (128ff).¹⁶

The sympotic interpretation is strengthened when we recall that Pisthetaerus and Euelpides were driven to search for a τόπος ἀπράγμων by the ceaseless buzz of the Athenians at court; cicadas, after all, chirp for only a month or two (39–41). The mention of cicadas recalls (among others) Hesiod's description of summer, where the cicadas sing and the farmer is told to relax and enjoy the food and drink at a picnic (*Op.* 582ff).¹⁷ The details of this passage, emphasizing time and location, fit nicely with our passage in *Birds*:

οἱ μὲν γὰρ οὖν τέττιγες ἓνα μῆν' ἢ δύο
ἐπὶ τῶν κραδῶν ἄδουσ' (*Av.* 39f);

ἡχέτα τέττιξ
δενδρέω ἐφεζόμενος λιγυρήν καταχεύετ' ἀοιδὴν
πυκνὸν ὑπὸ πτερύγων θέρεος καματώδεος ὄρη
(*Op.* 582–84).

This idyllic setting recurs later in the play when the birds describe their ideal life, resting in the shade

ἡνίκ' ἂν ὁ θεσπέσιος ὀξὺ μέλος ἀχέτας
θάλπεσι μεσημβρινοῖς ἡλιομανῆς βοᾷ (1095f).

It is probably no accident that the equipment with which our travellers set out is gradually replaced by local bird equipment obtained

¹⁴ Cited from Edmonds, *FAC*. Didymus (Zenobius 2.31; cf. Edmonds *ad* Plato Com. fr.15) said that dinners were brought in ἐπὶ κανῶν, and Poll. 6.32 refers to a κανοῦν ἀρτοφόρον; cf. Ath. 4.147, citing the fourth-century dithyrambic poet Philoxenus (=Page, *PMG* 836.b.6), and 4.152c. L. Deubner, "Hochzeit und Opferkorb," *Jdl* 40 (1925) 213 n.5, adds Theoc. 24.137, but this is probably a Homeric echo.

¹⁵ So Humborg, *RE Suppl.* 4 (1924) 869 s.v. "κανοῦν": "das k. wurde wohl in erster Linie im Haushalt gebraucht." See also J. Schelp, *Das Kanoun der griechische Opferkorb* (Würzburg 1975) 11. Humborg also remarks (870) "dass das k. auch sonst im tagtäglichen Gebrauch die mannigfaltigste Verwendung fand, lehren zahlreiche Bildwerke," although he does not say how he differentiates the picture of a κανοῦν from other types of basket. Professor Jeffrey S. Rusten has kindly supplied these additional references, drawn from the TLG data-bank, to the non-ritual use of a κανοῦν: Ath. 4.149A; Ach. Tat. 5.3; LXX Gen. 40.16, Ex. 29.32, Jud. 6.19; Joseph. 2.295; Clem. Al. 4.36.

¹⁶ This wish is fulfilled first by the luncheon invitation from the Hoopoe (642, cf. 659) and finally by the feast at the wedding of Pisthetaerus and Basileia, for which the (bird) meat has already been cooked (1689f).

¹⁷ This passage was imitated (translated?) by Alcaeus (fr.347 L.-P.) and others.

from within the stage building, much as the original bird guides are replaced first by Hoopoe and then by a transformed Pisthetaerus, and as the original impulse to seek respite is replaced by Pisthetaerus' grand scheme. In fact, all three items—*χύτρα*, crown, and *κανοῦν*—give way in turn; this series of substitutions defines the three main staged actions in the establishment of Cloudecuckooland, which is ritually completed at 1118. First, the Athenians raid Hoopoe's kitchen to get *χύτραι* and other equipment with which to defend themselves (356ff).¹⁸ Then Pisthetaerus turns to words, as had been the original intent (198), and instructs a slave to bring him a new (?) crown before he begins his speech (463f). Finally we come to the actual founding of the city, for which Pisthetaerus needs not only a new (?) *κανοῦν* and *χέρνιψ* but also a priest and a sacrificial animal (849f). The sacrifice is repeatedly interrupted until at last Pisthetaerus goes inside to complete it and the chorus sings the parabasis, containing the echo of Hesiod's idyllic setting (1091ff). We should note, finally, that in each of the three cases there is a connection with feasting, although this connection becomes more tenuous as the play progresses: the weapons come from the kitchen, and part of the birds' distress must stem from their fear of being cooked; when Pisthetaerus calls for crown and water, Euelpides asks if they are going to have dinner (464), encouraged no doubt by Pisthetaerus' cooking metaphor at 462f; at the actual sacrifice there is worry that the victim will not provide *ικανὸν ὄψον* (900); and one of the gifts the chresmologue seeks is a share of the *σπλάγχνα* (975).

Our travellers, then, are equipped not for battle or sacrifice but for a party, and, as often in Aristophanes, a seemingly incidental line in the prologue turns out to have far-reaching influence on the themes and structure of the play.¹⁹

BRYN MAWR COLLEGE

October, 1985

¹⁸ Note how the *χύτρα* is emphasized at 357, 358, 365, 386, 390f.

¹⁹ I am grateful to Professor Albert Henrichs for references and improvements in detail. This paper has also benefited measurably from careful readings by Professor Gregory W. Dickerson and S. Douglas Olson.