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THE KNIGHTS' ELEVEN OARS: IN PRAISE OF PHORMIO?
ARISTOPHANES' *KNIGHTS* 546–7

Abstract: The curious “eleven oars” of the chorus of Knights recall the victory of Phormio and his eleven triremes in the gulf of Naupactus in 429 BC, and may echo a lost victory ode performed at the celebration of the victory.

αἴρεσθ' αὐτῶ πολὺ ῥόθιον, παραπέμψατ' ἐφ' ἑνδεκα κώπαις
θόρυβον χρηστὸν Ληναίτην

In the companion volume to his new Aristophanes *OCT*, N.G. Wilson notes that the eleven oars of the *Knights* chorus remain an unsolved problem: “[T]he figure eleven has not been explained. Is there any chance that this numeral had a special significance?” Implied therein is a dismissal of earlier commentators’ attempts to resolve the crux.¹ T. Hubbard (1990), who believes that the chorus consisted of twelve pairs of disguised knights and horses,² argues that the reference to eleven oars would add to the “background color” and thus the humor of the parabasis antepirrheme (595–610), if the chorus were in fact equipped with oars: “The knights’ ‘oars’

¹ Wilson (2007) 51. For earlier discussions, see e.g. Diels (1875); Merry (1895) ad loc.; Taillardat (1962) 436; van Leeuwen (1900) 104–5; Sommerstein (1981) 173; Hubbard (1990) 115–18; Imperio (2004) 222–5. Sommerstein’s argument that the eleven oars are the spectators’ hands (= ten fingers) and tongues (1 per person), which is to say that the “eleven oars” refer to wild applause and shouting, does not persuade, since Aristophanes would expect his audience to use not only hands and mouth (as we do) but feet as well. Cf. Poll. 4.122 τὸ πτερυγοκοπεῖν, ὅπερ ἐστὶ τὸ ταῖς πτέρυγαις κτυπεῖν πρὸς τὰ ἐδῶλια ἐν τοῖς θεάτροις, ὁπότε τινὰ θορυβοῖεν; Cratin. fr. 360.3 μήτηρ ἰκρίων ψόφησις seems also to confirm this notion.

² Following Neil (1901) 82; Stone (1981) 379. The appearance of the performers involves a number of problems: (1) Was the chorus mounted on real horses? (2) Was half of the chorus mounted on the other half, as depicted on a 6th-century black-figure amphora (Berlin F 1697)? (3) Were horses not represented at all (thus Sommerstein (1981) 4)? (4) Or were the chorus members a combination of knight and horse? (1) 24 horses in the orchestra seem incompatible with the theatrical possibilities in Athens since they easily could get out of hand and destroy the production. (2) This proposition ignores that carrying an adult on one’s back while dancing and singing would be extremely difficult (thus Dearden (1976) 120). The analogy with the vase should not be pressed, since the depiction shows boys mounted on men; see Rothwell (2007) 37–8. (3) If there was no visual representation of horses at all, the reference to the chorus as “beasts” (*Eq.* 273) seems peculiar; cf. *Av.* 366. (4) Some sort of costume as Man/Horse would facilitate their need to sing and dance without becoming rapidly exhausted. Cf. vases that depict soldiers riding dolphins or ostriches (Rothwell (2007) 58–80, 142–4).

thus help articulate throughout the parabasis an identification of interest not only between chorus and poet, but also between the upper-class cavalrymen and the common sailors who formed the backbone of Athens' naval might (and much of the audience).³ There is no denying that oars physically present in the manner Hubbard suggests would help articulate important elements of the play. But there are problems both with how oars alone could connect the passages⁴ and in the number of oars thus onstage: twelve, not eleven.⁵

Though a reference by the chorus to their own props and appearance is not unexampled in Aristophanic comedy,⁶ the text offers no unavoidable reason to accept Hubbard's thesis.⁷ Indeed, the lack of a deictic article (ἐφ' ἔνδεκα κώπαις) suggests that oars are not physically present.⁸ Nor are oars necessary to create a meaningful connection between the poet and the chorus, since this is achieved through the striking naval imagery itself (esp. 541–4). We are thus back where we started: Does the numeral have a special significance?

While an ancient scholium (VEΓ³) on the passage is most likely relying on the passage in question itself in explaining ἐφ' ἔνδεκα κώπαις as a naval command, the suggestion of a reference to an expression familiar in Athens during the Archidamian War is a sensible starting point for making sense of the passage. Thucydides reports that at the second sea-battle of Naupactus in 429, Phormio son of Asopius (*PA* 14958), although outnumbered four to one, held his position and delivered a mortal blow to the Peloponnesian forces,

³ Hubbard (1990) 117–18.

⁴ The first parabasis, although closely related to the second (note esp. the choral transition from horsemen to horses/rowers at 595–610, and from horsemen to triremes/girls at 1300–15), demands a type of choral performance different from that expected by Hubbard. There is a difference between a rower and the ship he is rowing. The physical representation of oars does not enhance or articulate the performance of the conversation of the triremes, since the point of the passage is that they are not sailing at all, in contrast to the antepirrheme of the first parabasis.

⁵ One for each imagined pair. For the sake of argument, some consideration may be given to the possibility that the coryphaeus is costumed differently from the rest of the chorus in this regard, but there is no evidence for this in this play or in any of Aristophanes' plays. Furthermore, the coryphaeus' command would thus not apply to himself, and it seems strange that he would stand out from the rest of the chorus in a passage where the point is that everyone in the Theater should raise his voice in praise. The use of 2nd-person singular imperatives suggests that the whole chorus acts; cf. e.g. *Ach.* 281–3; *Th.* 953–7.

⁶ At *Eq.* 580 the chorus refer to their long hair, which must be part of their costume. The meaning of *stlengides* is disputed, but van Leeuwen's emendation is preferable, because the whole verse would then refer to the appearance of the chorus (thus Wilson (2007) 51; contra Imperio (2004) 243).

⁷ For the difficulty of accounting for props onstage, see Poe (2000); English (2005); Revermann (2006) 186–7, 244–6.

⁸ The weapons of other choruses are clearly displayed and used (e.g. *Ach.* 184, 236, 295, 341–6; *V.* 225–6, 420, 1062(?), 1075; *Av.* 348, 364).

despite having had his fleet reduced to eleven triremes showing the masterly seamanship of the Athenians (Th. 2.90.5, 91.1).⁹ This victory “even more than the first, was the achievement of the Athenian collectivity.”¹⁰

The high regard in which Phormio was held during this period is attested by the many largely positive mentions of him in Aristophanes (*Pax* 348; *Lys.* 804; fr. 88, 397) and Eupolis (fr. 44, 269).¹¹ More importantly, Aristophanes doubtless had Phormio in mind in the *Knights* parabasis, for he refers to him by name in the ode to Poseidon (562), while the epirrheme (569–70) perhaps contains an echo of Phormio’s speech before the battle, as reported by Thucydides (2.88–9).¹² So too, Phormio’s naval force at Naupactus seems to be recalled by ναυφάρκτω στρατῶ at 567¹³ as a poetic variant of νηῖτη στρατῶ (Th. 2.24.1; 4.85.7). A recollection of Aeschylus (*Per.* 950, 1027) may also be involved, infusing the eulogia with an aura of the naval victory at Salamis, to match Aristophanes’ use of Marathon to signal the supreme force of Athenian (and Greek) foot soldiers (e.g. *Ach.* 693–701; *V.* 1077–90).¹⁴

There may have been a dedication of gold Nikai on the Athenian Acropolis to commemorate this victory.¹⁵ There was certainly

⁹ Th. 2.90–2. On this battle, see Morrison and Coates (1986) 72–6. On Phormio, see Westlake (1968) 43–59; Olson (1998) on *Pax* 346–7b.

¹⁰ Westlake (1968) 59 concludes that Phormio “personified the spirit and skill of the Athenian navy,” and cites the words of Pericles from the outset of the war (Th. 1.143.5): μέγα γὰρ τὸ τῆς θαλάσσης κράτος, “sea-power is of enormous importance.” Pausanias saw his tomb near that of Pericles (1.29.4).

¹¹ For Phormio in Eupolis’ *Taxiarchoi*, see Storey (2003) 246–60. On the basis of an Attic oinochoe (fig. 5), Storey (2003) 249 dates the play to mid-410s and thus a decade after *Knights*, demonstrating the continuing status of Phormio. See also n. 36 below.

¹² Cf. Gomme (1956) 233. It might, however, simply be a figure of speech in battle exhortations; cf. Imperio (2004) 241.

¹³ Cf. Müller-Strübing (1873) 682–3. Imperio’s (2004) 240 dismissal of Müller-Strübing’s interpretation is unwarranted, and a similar “weak” pun can be found in the antepirrheme (599–600 ὅτ’ εἰς τὰς ἰππαγωγούς εἰσεπήδων ἀνδρικῶς, πριάμενοι κώθωνας, οἱ δὲ καὶ σκόροδα καὶ κρόμμινα), where κρόμμινα suggests a coastal town, Crommyon, targeted in the Solygeian campaign (Th. 4.42.4).

¹⁴ On this trope, see Olson (2002) 128 on *Ach.* 180–1.

¹⁵ *IG* I³ 368; cf. Thompson (1944) 176: “The two Nikai dedicated in 426/5 BC cannot, on account of the date of the decree, be associated with the taking of Sphacteria; besides, the chief dedication for that event was a great bronze Nike set upon the Acropolis. Rather the golden figures should be related to the two brilliant naval victories of Phormio in the Corinthian gulf in 429 BC.” For victory monuments on the Acropolis, see Hurwit (1999) 230. The Dodona dedication (*IG* I³ 1462) could be connected with this victory as well; cf. Hornblower (1991) 370, 521–2.

one in Delphi,¹⁶ and that the celebration was specifically connected to Phormio is confirmed by Pausanias (10.11.6):¹⁷

ὥκοδόμησαν δὲ καὶ Ἀθηναῖοι στοὰν ἀπὸ χρημάτων ἃ ἐν τῷ πολέμῳ σφίσι ἐγένετο ἀπὸ τε Πελοποννησίων καὶ ὅσαι Πελοποννησίοις ἦσαν τοῦ Ἑλληνικοῦ σύμμαχοι. ἀνάκειται δὲ καὶ πλοίων τὰ ἄκρα κοσμήματα καὶ ἀσπίδες χαλκαῖ· τὸ δὲ ἐπίγραμμα τὸ ἐπ' αὐτοῖς ἀριθμεῖ τὰς πόλεις ἀφ' ὧν οἱ Ἀθηναῖοι τὰ ἀκροθίνια ἀπέστειλαν, τήν τε Ἡλείων καὶ Λακεδαιμονίων Σικυῶνά τε καὶ Μέγαρα καὶ Πελληνέας Ἀχαιῶν Ἀμβρακίαν τε καὶ Λευκάδα καὶ αὐτὴν Κόρινθον· γένεσθαι δὲ ἀπὸ τῶν ναυμαχιῶν τούτων καὶ θυσίαν Θησεῖ καὶ τῷ Ποσειδῶνι ἐπὶ τῷ ὀνομαζομένῳ Ῥίῳ.¹⁸ καί μοι φαίνεται τὸ ἐπίγραμμα¹⁹ ἐς Φορμίωνα τὸν Ἀσωπίχου ἔχειν καὶ ἐς τοῦ Φορμίωνος τὰ ἔργα.

The Athenians also built a colonnade with the treasure they got in the war from the Peloponnesians and their Greek allies. In addition, figure-heads of ships and bronze shields are dedicated. The inscription on them lists the states from whose spoils the Athenians sent the first-fruits: Elis, Lacedaemon, Sicyon, Megara, Pellene in Achaea, Ambracia, Leucas and Corinth itself. (It also states) that from the spoils of these sea-fights a sacrifice was made to Theseus and Poseidon at the place called Rhium. In my opinion, the inscription refers to Phormio son of Asopichus and his exploits.²⁰

That the commemoration followed the typical procedure of honoring the polis and not the individual may explain Pausanias' uncertainty about the connection to Phormio.²¹ If, however, he is right, it would be surprising if Phormio and his troops were not celebrated at Athens. A comic fragment of unknown origin (*adesp.* 957) mentions that Phormio dedicated three (silver?) tripods and one of lead. To whom and on what occasion is unknown, but the passage does suggest that Phormio himself celebrated at least some of his exploits, and thus lends credibility to Pausanias' interpretation of the monument. The Delphian inscription refers to formal sacrifices (θυσία) at Rhium to the chief Athenian mythical hero and to the god of the sea, whom

¹⁶ The Athenian victory at Sphacteria was likewise celebrated and a golden Nike dedicated (Paus. 4.36.6), though we do not know the occasion and the details of the celebration.

¹⁷ For a thorough discussion of this passage, see Walsh (1986).

¹⁸ Both the Athenians and the Peloponnesians celebrated the victory (Th. 2.92.5).

¹⁹ For a victory and its commemoration accompanied by an epigram of elegiac couplets or the like, see e.g. Paus. 5.10.4; Plu. *Mor.* 871^B; 872^D. We cannot know for certain whether the epigram Pausanias read was poetic, though Plu. *Mor.* 870^F mentions a Corinthian Diodorus who on behalf of his crew and their common victory had an epigram inscribed; note that what, according to Pausanias, was stated on the spoils is similar to what Diodorus had inscribed in his epigram: ταῦτ' ἀπὸ δυσμενέων Μήδων ναῦται Διοδώρου | ὅπλ' ἀνέθεν Λατοῖ, μνάματα ναυμαχίας. The same holds true for the Dodona dedication (*IG* I³ 1462) mentioned above.

²⁰ See Frazer (1965) 282–6.

²¹ See discussion in Walsh (1986) 326–8; Meiggs and Lewis (1988) no. 25; no. 15 and no. 19 are similar.

Aristophanes singles out for honor in the ode of the *Knights* parabasis (551–64), in which Phormio is likewise mentioned (562), immediately after the reference to the eleven oars. Such demonstrations of thanks to the god in the commemoration and celebration of his victories may have generated Aristophanes' description of Poseidon as "most dear to Phormio."²²

That the Greeks celebrated victories with music as well as monuments is clear from the famous fragment of Alcaeus celebrating the death of Myrsilus;²³ and from Pindar's first Pythian Ode (75–8) and his second Paean (68–70), commemorating a local victory of the Abderites; the victories at Salamis and Plataea were celebrated by Simonides,²⁴ while the *Life of Sophocles* 17–19 records that the tragedian led a victory paean at the celebration after Salamis.²⁵ Though we might suspect the tradition that produced this final piece of evidence,²⁶ it points to the expectation that such events occurred. In the same vein a celebratory paean is raised twice in *Knights*; first by the chorus in our passage and then by the Sausage Seller who orders the whole Theater to raise their voice celebrating the victory over the Paphalagon.²⁷

This final point raises the possibility that the idea of the eleven oars depended on the way Phormio's victory was recalled in a celebratory ode, which might explain aspects of the passage's poetic coloring. If κώπη is taken as synecdoche for "ship," the close connection of κώπη (and other words for "oar")²⁸ with ῥόθιον²⁹ lends the

²² Zachary Biles suggests that "one oar from each victorious ship was paraded in victory celebration or was even incorporated into a naval monument. Hence '11 oars' really existed." Compare athletes dedicating a discus or halteres, dramatic poets and actors dedicating masks, and choregoi of dithyrambic choruses dedicating prize-tripods. But the Greeks usually dedicated the spoils of their enemies after naval battles (e.g. Hdt. 8.121; Plu. *Them.* 15.2), not their own equipment. For dedications generally, see Rouse (1902) 149–86.

²³ Fr. 332 Voigt; see discussion in Page (1955) 238–9.

²⁴ Plutarch (*Mor.* 872^E) states that the Plataea poem was not for public choral performance, but this only shows that most Greeks would have expected a public performance.

²⁵ καὶ μετὰ τὴν ἐν Σαλαμῖνι ναυμαχίαν Ἀθηναίων περὶ τρόπαιον ὄντων μετὰ λύρας γυμνὸς ἀηλιμμένος τοῖς παιανίζουσι τῶν ἐπινικίων ἐξῆρχε.

²⁶ Lefkowitz (1981) 77.

²⁷ *Eq.* 1317–18. In both passages in *Knights* the anapaestic meter of the traditional paean is used, and the chorus sings aloud after the command on behalf of the whole Theater, but as opposed to e.g. *Pi. Pae.* 2.35–6, 71–2, 107–8, there is no mention of ἢ ἢ Παιάν in either place.

²⁸ e.g. *E. Andr.* 855; *Hel.* 394, 527, 1272, 1452; see Allan (2008) 196 *ad* 394. This poetic use parallels the use of πλάτη; cf. Johansen and Whittle (1980) *ad* 134; *E. fr.* 727^C.10 πεμπτήρ' ἄλιων ἑρεμῶν. In *E. IT.* 1125–7 κώπη refers to the rower. In *Ar. V.* 1119 κώπην ... λόγχην ... λαβῶν means to join the navy or the army (cf. [X.] *Ath.* 1.19). No rule governs the number referred to in connection with the prosaic phrase "to travel by oars" (singular at e.g. *X. HG* 6.2.27; *E. IT* 116; plural at *X. An.* 6.4.2).

entire passage a poetic tone, although giving the crucial word a simple colloquial sense. By metonymy ἐφ' ἑνδεκα κώπαις thus extends its meaning and signifies “for a glorious victory.” One might compare *Knights* 406, where the chorus sings πῖνε πῖν' ἐπὶ συμφοραῖς (meaning simply, “Hurray”), which we can identify as a quotation of a lost victory ode by Simonides.³⁰ In both cases, ἐπί followed by dative is used in this way,³¹ as also in the possibly parodic, ὦ περὶ πάντ' ἐπὶ πᾶσί τε πράγμασι δωροδόκοισιν ἐπ' ἄνθεσιν ἴζων, *Eq.* 402–3. If there was such an ode, Aristophanes doubtless altered (or added to) it with Ληναίτην to facilitate the metaphorical transition from the nautical theme (451–4) to the Theater of Dionysus and the competition at the Lenaea.³²

With or without a poetic background, the reference to the “eleven oars” represents Phormio’s exploits and articulates the battle/victory theme of the parabasis. The ode to Poseidon (551–64) concentrates on the divine and human agents involved in the historical event, while the second ode (581–94) invokes Athena in a way that brings to the spectators’ minds the goddess’ cult on the Acropolis, where victory dedications were made.³³ Thus the odes following the passage under scrutiny interact with the atmosphere of prayer for divine help toward victory and reinforces the dedicatory background, while also focusing on the assimilation of military and poetic victory throughout (esp. 583–4, 589–90).³⁴ This metaphorical play between the poet, the navy and Athenian power recalls a similar trope in *Acharnians* (646–51). The coryphaeus has shown the poet working his way up from the bottom of the ship to the top in a metaphorical battle against former generations of comic poets and rivals,³⁵ and he orders the audience to join the chorus in celebrating Aristophanes’ anticipated victory at this competition (548–50) as a great achievement by alluding to Phormio and his eleven ships, who by their supreme skill vanquished the enemy. By praising Phormio as one of the good old leaders, who τήνδ' ἐκόσμησαν πόλιν (568), as opposed to the new

²⁹ For ῥόθιον, cf. Olson (2002) 275 on *Ach.* 807–8. For the connection between ῥόθιον and words for oar/ship, e.g. *E. Cyc.* 16–17; *IT* 407, 1133, 1387; *Hel.* 1117, 1268–9, 1452; *Ar. fr.* 86.

³⁰ Simon. 7 = *PMG* 512.

³¹ Cf. Smyth (1956) § 1689: 3 (*Reason*). For other examples, see e.g. *Ar. Eq.* 655; *Lys.* 1276; *E. Alc.* 1155; *S. El.* 1230.

³² Sommerstein (2001) 244 suggests a pun on ναίτην, which can only be accepted if we give the word a poetic Doric ᾱ instead of an Attic η (e.g. νηίτη). In that case, the quotation would seem to extend further than ἐφ' ἑνδεκα κώπαις, and the adjective ναίτην (in whatever form the original required) must be taken into account as well.

³³ Parker (2005) 399.

³⁴ Reading χορικῶν with the mss., *pace* Wilson (2007) 51. See Imperio (2004) 249–50.

³⁵ Biles (2001) 195–200.

generation of *strategoi* (573–6),³⁶ the chorus depicts its poet as the helmsman of Comedy and the savior of the city (cf. *Ach.* 162–3). Aristophanes thus makes his own claim of poetic superiority harmonize with the self-proclaimed ideological superiority of Athens.³⁷

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³⁶ This might suggest that Phormio, a "real" hero as opposed to Cleon, was seated among the "normal" spectators, and thus that he was not yet dead. Cleon was probably present at the performance; see *Eq.* 203.

³⁷ As e.g. of Pericles in the funeral oration, Thuc. 2.35–46, esp. 39–41. I would like to thank S. Douglas Olson, Z. Biles, J. Mejer (+) and T.H. Nielsen for valuable suggestions and criticism. I dedicate this paper to the memory of the late Jørgen Mejer.

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