

Food as Fun and Fantasy in the Old Comedy of Ancient Athens

Christopher Grocock

ABSTRACT: Wild flights of imagination were the bedrock of ancient Athenian comedy as it is represented by the surviving plays of Aristophanes and numerous fragments (principally in Athenaeus). Several important scenes in the surviving plays make extensive reference to foodstuffs and foodways to make comic points, especially in Aristophanes *Knights*, *Wasps* and *Peace*. These passages have often been discussed in the past from a literary viewpoint, with great emphasis on the symbolism of the foodstuffs referred to and with attempts to establish a mainly imaginary context for the scenes developed. There has been rather less emphasis on the precise nature of the 'original' foodstuffs as the vehicle for developing the humorous situations in the plays – food as the basis for the fantastical in the imagination of the authors. This paper seeks to 'start from the other end', as it were, and by looking at the basic processes of initial production of the types of food referred to and the distribution routes suggested for some of the specific items mentioned in the plays (cheese being the most obvious) with reference to the possibilities available to fifth-century Athens from both a geophysical (i.e. known transport links) and the political context(s) in which fifth-century BC Athens found itself during the different stages of conflict during its protracted wars with Sparta. This paper explores how the scenes created in the comedies may be interpreted as 'fun made by referring to real food,' rather than seeing them as completely or purely fantastical elements in the comedies, which has been the tendency in studies on these topics to date. It examines the possibilities that one of the core ingredients in two typical comic scenes – the Sicilian cheese – was a real product, actually transported to 5th century Athens in sufficient quantities for it to be a comic staple. In this, it takes a different approach to purely theoretical literary approaches, combining an examination of ancient texts and archaeology with current farming practice to establish what kinds of cheese might have referred to in the ancient application of invention to everyday realities.

151

In two passages in the comedies of Aristophanes, *Peace* and *Wasps*, the author makes rapid references to Sicilian cheese. These remarks are central to part of the comic (and geopolitical) points he is making in the scene from *Peace*, but the one in *Wasps* is throwaway, incidental almost, and yet it is there. Aristophanes wrote comedies, but as every comic playwright knows, comedy is a serious business; more so for Aristophanes, since his aim was not just to make an audience laugh, but to make them laugh so much that they laughed more at his work than his rivals in a drama competition. He wanted to win, and every word had

to count. So why *Sicilian* cheese? Was there something intrinsically funny about it for an ancient Athenian audience? It made me wonder. It also made me wonder what sort of cheese it was that he and his audience might have had in mind.

Let us begin with the two scenes. I have included the Greek text for anyone who wishes to may see them easily; the translations are my own.¹ I have emphasized the relevant words in bold.

First, *Wasps*.² This scene is ridiculous and fantastical enough without the cheese course: to satisfy his lust for passing stiff sentences in the lawcourts (an obsession of which his son Bdelykleon wishes to cure him), the old man Philokleon is presiding at home over the trial of his dog Labes (Snatcher), accused of theft by another dog, simply called ‘Dog’. The whole scene is wryly observed by Xanthias the slave:

	Φιλοκλέων	τίς ἄρ' ὁ φεύγων;	
	Βδελυκλέων	οὗτος.	
	Φιλοκλέων	ὅσον ἀλώσεται.	
	Βδελυκλέων	ἀκούετ' ἤδη τῆς γραφῆς. ἐγράψατο κύνων Κυδαθηναίεὺς Λάβητ' Αἰξωνέα τὸν τυρὸν ἀδικεῖν ὅτι μόνος κατήσθειεν τὸν Σικελικόν . τίμημα κλωδὸς σύκινος.	895
152	Φιλοκλέων	θάνατος μὲν οὖν κύνειος, ἦν ἅπαξ ἀλῶ.	
	Βδελυκλέων	καὶ μὴν ὁ φεύγων οὐτοσὶ Λάβης πάρα.	
	Φιλοκλέων	ὦ μισαρός οὗτος: ὡς δὲ καὶ κλέπτον βλέπει, οἶον σεσηρῶς ἐξαπατήσειν μ' οἶεται. ποῦ δ' ἔσθ' ὁ διώκων, ὁ Κυδαθηναίεὺς κύνων;	900
	Κύνων	αὐ αὐ.	
	Βδελυκλέων	πάρεστιν οὗτος.	
	Ξανθίας	ἕτερος οὗτος αὐ Λάβης. ἀγαθὸς γ' ὑλακτεῖν καὶ διαλείχειν τὰς χύτρας	
	Βδελυκλέων	σίγα, κάθιζε: σὺ δ' ἀναβάς κατηγόρει.	905
	Φιλοκλέων	φέρε νυν ἅμα τήνδ' ἐγγεάμενος κάγῳ ῥοφῶ.	
	Σωσίας	τῆς μὲν γραφῆς ἠκούσαθ' ἦν ἐγραψάμην ἄνδρες δικασταὶ τουτονί. δεινότατα γὰρ ἔργων δέδρακε κάμὲ καὶ τὸ ῥυππαπαῖ. ἀποδράς γὰρ ἐς τὴν γωνίαν τυρὸν πολὺν κατεσικέλιζε κἀνέπλητ' ἐν τῷ σκότῳ –	910

Φιλοκλέων	νή τὸν Δί' ἀλλὰ δηλὸς ἐστ': ἔμοιγέ τοι τυροῦ κάκιστον ἀρτίως ἐνήρυγεν ὁ βδέλυρός οὗτος.		
Κύων	κοῦ μετέδωκ' αἰτοῦντί μοι. καίτοι τίς ὑμᾶς εὖ ποιεῖν δυνήσεται, ἦν μή τι κάμοι τις προβάλλῃ τῷ κυνί;	915	
And later, 'Dog' adds this further accusation:			
Κύων	μή νυν ἀφήτέ γ' αὐτόν, ὡς ὄντ' αὖ πολὺ κυνῶν ἀπάντων ἄνδρα μονοφαγίστατον, ὅστις περιπλεύσας τὴν θυεῖαν ἐν κύκλῳ ἐκ τῶν πόλεων τὸ σκῆρον ἐξεδήδοκεν.	925	
Philokleon	Who's the accused?		
Bdelykeon	This fellow.		
Philokleon	What a big fine he'll get!		
Bdelykeon	Now hear the charge: it is alleged by Dog, of Kydatenaeum, that Labes of Aexone feloniously consumed the cheese all by himself, the Sicilian cheese: penalty, a collar of sycophant – sorry, sycamore-wood.	895	153
Philokleon	No, death – a dog's death! once he's convicted.		
Bdelykeon	And here is this 'Snatcher', the accused.		
Philokleon	What a filthy brute! Doesn't he just look like a thief! So he thinks he'll bamboozle me, grinning like that. But where's his accuser, Dog of Kydanathaeum?		
Dog	Woof! woof!		
Bdelykeon	Here he is.		
Xanthias	This one's another 'Snatcher', Only good for barking and licking the dishes clean!		
Bdelykeon	Sit down, be quiet. You, come up here and start prosecuting.		
Philokleon	Right then, and while he does, I'll pour some soup out and slurp it down.		

Dog You have heard for yourselves the charge which I have brought,
Gentlemen of the jury, against the defendant. For he has done
The direst deeds both again and against every man jack of you.
He sneaked off into a corner and – well, he ensicilized³
Loads of cheese and woofed it down in the dark.

Philokleon By Zeus, it's clear he did! He's just now belched cheese
most evilly at me, the loathsome creature!

Dog And he didn't give me any when I asked for some.
Think about it – who'll be able to do you a good turn,
Is somebody doesn't throw a bit to me, your watchdog?

And later, 'Dog' adds this further accusation:

Dog And don't find him innocent – why, of all the dogs he's by far
the most eat-it-by-yourselfing man there is,
he's sailed right round the mortar in a circle
and gnawed the hard rind off the city-states.

154 There is pure Aristophanic fantasy here – one dog prosecutes another in a makeshift Athenian-model courtroom scene set in a humble domestic setting; later, witnesses called include a dish, a pestle, a cheese grater, a brazier, a cooking-pot and other half-burnt kitchen equipment. More than that there is political satire on two leading politicians of the day – the Greek word for 'Dog', *kuōn*, sounds a little like Aristophanes' principal target, the demagogue Kleon, who styled himself as 'the people's guard-dog'. *Labēs* or 'Snatcher' sounds like another politician, Laches. The *cheese* represents their ill-gotten gains – and one of 'Dog's main accusations is that 'Snatcher' wouldn't share it when asked!

But what about the cheese? It is clearly (and obviously) *Sicilian* – the adjective is placed at the start of a line in an emphatic position, and comes at the end of the charge, which might more literally be rendered 'cheese – alone – he ate up/ - the Sicilian stuff'. Later, 'Snatcher' is accused of 'ensicilizing' it. And finally, in a glorious confusion of realities and fantasy, he 'went round gnawing the hard rind off all the city-states'. So *hard* cheeses which have developed a solid crust are implied: τὸ σκίρον means 'the hard part' – Sommerstein translates it as 'rind', while Barrett interprets it as 'plaster' and claims in a note (somewhat oddly, I think) that 'cheeses were encased in plaster to keep them fresh'.⁴ We are dealing with a mature, hard cheese here: the presence as a witness of the 'cheese grater' or τυρόκνηστιν, which implies that the cheese itself was hard as well. The situation Aristophanes creates is utterly fantastical, but one of his building blocks seems to be a product familiar to his audience – a hard cheese with a rind, from Sicily. As we shall see, this was almost certainly a sheep's cheese – something like a pecorino romano – and in the scene devised by the playwright, the cheese need not be regarded as fantasy at all; it is used to implant in the

audience's mind the idea that the greedy politicians had helped themselves to some of the cities' revenues. The idea that 'he's sailed right round the mortar in a circle and gnawed the hard rind off the city-states' is a glorious conflation of concepts which leaves the mind reeling, though one can easily imagine a dog nibbling off the accessible parts of a cheese within reach. In fact, it happened to us. Our old dog Winston was once left in the back of the car with some provisions we had bought, including a very large piece of pecorino. We felt he was safe to be left as he had never eaten shopping of any kind before. On this occasion the temptation proved too great, however, and 'gnawing all round' is precisely what happened! We did not need to put him on trial.

The second scene from Aristophanes is from *Peace*, a satire produced in 421 BC on the protracted war between Athens and Sparta, the deity War is watched by the hero Trygaeos as they demonstrate their powers of destruction by putting ingredients which sound like or remind the audience of different ancient Greek states into a giant mortar, ready to be pounded together to make a *muttōtós*, a paste often served with fish, and in consistency not unlike the Latin *moretum*:⁵

Πόλεμος	ἰὼ βροτοὶ βροτοὶ βροτοὶ πολυτλήμονες, ὡς αὐτίκα μάλα τὰς γνάθους ἀλγήσετε.	
Τρυγαῖος	ὦναξ Ἄπολλον τῆς θυείας τοῦ πλάτους, ὅσον κακόν, καὶ τοῦ Πολέμου τοῦ βλέμματος. ἄρ' οὐτός ἐστ' ἐκεῖνος ὃν καὶ φεύγομεν, ὁ δεινός, ὁ ταλαύρινος, ὁ κατὰ τοῖν σκελοῖν;	240
Πόλεμος	ἰὼ Πρασιαὶ τρὶς ἄθλιαὶ καὶ πεντάκις καὶ πολλοδεκάκις, ὡς ἀπολείσθε τήμερον.	
Τρυγαῖος	τουτὶ μὲν ἄνδρες οὐδὲν ἡμῖν πρᾶγμά πω: τὸ γὰρ κακὸν τοῦτ' ἐστὶ τῆς Λακωνικῆς.	245
Πόλεμος	ὦ Μέγαρα Μέγαρ' ὡς ἐπιτετρίψεσθ' αὐτίκα ἀπαξάπαντα καταμεμυττωτευμένα.	
Τρυγαῖος	βαβαὶ βαβαιᾶξ ὡς μεγάλα καὶ δριμέα τοῖσι Μεγαρεῦσιν ἐνέβαλεν τὰ κλαύματα.	
Πόλεμος	ἰὼ Σικελία καὶ σὺ δ' ὡς ἀπόλλυσαι.	250
Τρυγαῖος	οἶα πόλις τάλαινα διακναισθήσεται.	
Πόλεμος	φέρ' ἐπιχέω καὶ τὸ μέλι τουτὶ τάττικόν.	
Τρυγαῖος	οὔτος παραινῶ σοι μέλιτι χρῆσθ' ἀτέρω. τετρώβολον τοῦτ' ἐστὶ: φείδου τάττικου.	

- War: Alas for you mortals, mortals, mortals, much-suffering ones.
How much your jaws will ache, and soon!
- Trygaeos: O Lord Apollo, look at how wide that mortar is!
What an evil thing it is, and look how War is scowling!
Is this the one we try to flee from, 240
The terrible one, the shield-bearer, the one
who makes us shit ourselves?
- War: Alas Prasiae, city of leeks, three times wretched, yes, and five times,
and ten times, how you'll be smashed up today!
- Trygaeos: At least, gentlemen, this doesn't affect us yet:
For this trouble is Sparta's. 245
- War: Alas Megara, Megara, how you will be mashed up at once,
Thoroughly beaten into a paste (*myttotos*).
- Trygaeos: Oh no Oh noooo, what great and odiferous wailings
He's thrown in for the people of Megara!
- War: Alas for Sicily, how you are ruined too! 250
- Trygaeos: What a wretched community will be grated up!
- War: Come on, let me pour on some Attic honey as well.
- Trygaeos: Hey you, I suggest you use some other honey.
That's the four-obol kind; go easy with the Attic stuff!

The mention in lines 250 and 251 to Sicily being dragged into the pan-Hellenic conflict uses the verb *διακναισθήσεται*, 'will be grated up'. This is not unique to Aristophanes and elsewhere he uses of a bad actor ruining a play; but its root *διακναιώ* means 'to grate' or scrape away', and a *κνήστις* was a grater, which (in its compounded form *τυρόκνηστιν*, 'cheese-grater') we saw was a witness in the courtroom scene in *Wasps*. Here too, the link to Sicilian cheese must have been an easy one for the audience to make. War was pounding the four Hellenic areas mentioned like leeks, garlic, cheese and honey; behind the pantomime-like scene lay a contemporary political reality; all these areas had been badly affected by the war between Athens (and its allies) and Sparta (and its allies) and the suffering was real. Aristophanes' play was produced as peace negotiations were reaching a (successful if temporary) conclusion. But the association of Sicily and a hard, grateable cheese which reached Athens from there is once again a plain one to see. The fantasy is built on familiar objects, of which this cheese is one.

But before we look at what kind of cheese this might have been, it is worth examining the surviving ancient evidence from the other end of the trade route – Sicily itself.

Sicily and ancient sources on cheese

Dairy produce – and cheese in particular, was an essential part of ancient foodways, and the fact that the raw material – milk – can be turned into a nourishing, valuable, lasting and transportable product was not lost on either Greeks or Romans, and recent finds show that it was valued in Asia Minor and Egypt as well.⁶

Its appeal was and is due to the combinations involved in its manufacture of ‘aroma, bacteria and serendipity’ whose complexities are discussed by Sarah Freeman and Silvija Davidson in their helpful explanations of the different factors involved.⁷ Its value

from a dietetic perspective – depending on the individual – was well appreciated by the Hippocratic writers: the treatise *On Ancient Medicine* assures us that ‘Cheese does not harm all people who can eat as much of it without the slightest adverse effects . . . but others suffer dreadfully’ (*VM* 20).⁸

Sicily, ‘land of plenty to archaic Greeks and Carthaginians’ as Andrew Dalby so neatly puts it, was a source not only of luxury foodstuffs but also of ideas, in the shape of both cooks and cookbooks, by the 5th BC, and Sicilian luxuries made the term ‘Sicilian tables’ a synonym for gastronomic pleasures’. The potential of such luxuries may even have stimulated ancient Greek (and especially Athenian) expansion in the area.⁹ Sicily was certainly an attractive target for Athenian expansion, as Thucydides’ account of the Sicilian expedition recorded in Books 6 and 7 of his *Histories* makes plain: Athens had several allies on the island, but were also (by 415 BC at least) opposed by Syracuse.

Other ancient references to Sicily as a source of luxury provender comes from the comic poet Hermippus, who indicates the extent and volume of commerce across the Greek world in this period:

‘Tell me now, Muses whose dwellings are on Olympus, how many good things Dionysus has brought here to men in his black ship since he plied the wine-dark sea: from Cyrene, [silphium] stem and oxhide; from the Hellespont, mackerel and all salt fish; from [Thessaly], wheatmeal and ox ribs; from Siralces an itch for the Spartans; from Perdiccas many ships full of lies. The Syracusans send us pigs and cheese; and the Corcyreans, may Poseidon damn them in their slick ships, for they have shifty thoughts ... Africa provides much ivory for sale; Rhodes, raisins and dreamy figs. From Euboea, pears and fat apples; captives from Phrygia; mercenaries from Arcadia. Pagasae sends slaves and jailbirds; the Paphlagonians sent the chestnuts



A bronze alloy cheese-grater in the form of a goat. Found in a man's tomb, Asia Minor, 6th – 5th centuries BC

and glossy almonds which are the ornaments of the feast. Then Phoenecia, bread wheat and the fruit of the date palm; Carthage, rugs and fancy pillows'.¹⁰

'On the basis of this and other sources of the sixth and fifth centuries' comments Andrew Dalby, 'one may distinguish some true local contributions to the developing gastronomy of the Aegean coasts and the wider Greek world'.¹¹ He goes on to confirm what we have already looked at in this paper, namely that 'Sicilian cheese was quite a commonplace of Athenian comedy. It crops up often enough to show that its reputation is more than a literary reminiscence of the Cyclops episode of the *Odyssey*, which later readers universally pictured as taking place in Sicily. The Cyclops was certainly said to make goats' milk and ewes' milk cheese (*Od.* 9. 218-33), as Athenian comedies and satyr plans often recalled.¹² Antiphanes 233 [*Epitome* 27d] lists 'a cook from Elis, a jug from Argos, Phliasian wine, bedspreads from Corinth, fish of Sicyon, flute girls of Aegium, Sicilian cheese, perfume from Athens, Boeotian eels' in a combination which Dalby suggests may be 'a satirical feast for some temporary political alliance'.¹³ From the fourth century we have confirmation from Aristotle (*History of Animals* 522a22) that 'Goat's milk is mixed with sheep's milk in Sicily, and wherever sheep's milk is abundant'.¹⁴

Ancient cheese manufacture

158 Roman sources provide us with some helpful information on manufacture and storage. They are somewhat later than Aristophanes, but equally clearly are helpful in understanding ancient production techniques, if not methods of using the cheese, which were probably little changed since then. Cato 76 provides us with a recipe for *placenta* involving 14lb of sheep's cheese but this is clearly fresh – he says it must be *ne acidum et bene recens*, 'not sharp and nicely fresh'. Such cheese would not have been suitable for long-distance trade. There is rather more detail to be found in Varro and Columella. Varro, *De Agricultura* ii. 11. 4, tells us in his brief mention of cheese-making that the period for making cheese extends from the rising of the Pleiades in spring until the Pleiades in summer,' which the Loeb editors interpret as from 10th May to mid-July. Columella xii.10 – 13 lists several 'things which ought to be collected and stored during the summer about the time of the harvest or even when it is over,' of which cheese *usibus domesticis*, 'for use in the home,' is the last, on the grounds that in this season, the cheese produces very little whey.¹⁵

Columella's exposition of cheesemaking in book vii section 8 of his work is by far the most detailed: quality of the milk and methods of curdling are set out in great detail, and he notes the practice of the *rustici* to press the fresh cheeses with weights to squeeze the whey out. Once removed from its basket, the cheese is put in a shaded storeroom and sprinkled with salt. Then it is pressed a second time with weights for nine days, before being washed in fresh water and stored in wickerwork trays to dry out under controlled conditions. *hoc genus casei potest etiam trans maria permitti*, he says at vii. 8. 6: 'this type of

cheese can even be exported overseas'. This seems to fit most closely with the kind of cheese Aristophanes was suggesting, though it is worth noting that Columella's detailed account of cheese-making comes straight after his discussion on keeping *goats*, not *sheep*, and goats are clearly indicated in the discussion about fresh cheeses in the same chapter, immediately following the comments about cheese for export.

Pliny the Elder, a contemporary of Columella (before AD 79), lists all the cheeses which he knew or had heard came to Rome in his *Historia Naturalis* xi. 97.240: the most highly-praised came from the districts of Lozère and Gévaudan, in the region of Nîmes (but it had a short shelf-life); from Alpine pastures came two sorts of cheese; but more useful is Pliny's comment that from the Apennines came 'Coebanum cheese, mostly made from sheeps' milk,' and from the lands bordering Tuscany and Liguria, came 'Luni cheese, remarkable for its size, since individual cheeses weigh up to 1,000lb'. Finally, we should note *trans maria vero Bithynus fere in gloria est*, '(Among cheeses) from overseas, the Bithynian cheese is practically put on a pedestal'. Bithynia (southern Turkey in modern parlance) is a longer voyage than Sicily to Athens ever was.¹⁶

Current cheese production in the region

At this point it might be helpful to consider what sorts of cheeses are produced in Greece and in Sicily nowadays. I do not pretend to be an expert in these matters and would welcome clarification on the discussion which follows, which is obtained from the sources cited. However it was interesting to note as I embarked on my brief exploration of the available material what differences there are in regional varieties; in particular, I found it fascinating that *Greek* (?equating to ancient *Athenian* practice?) cheese production is nowadays dominated by the manufacture of feta, which forms a central plank of modern culinary offerings for the visitor.¹⁷ Feta is not the sole type of cheese produced, though sheep and goat's milk cheese predominate: as Diane Cochilas notes, 'Cow's milk cheeses exist but only a handful of Greek islands ... the mountainous Greek landscape generally is not conducive to cattle grazing. There are approximately 70 distinct cheeses produced in Greece today, although many are similar and fall into one of several broad categories'.¹⁸ In particular we may note these hard sheep or sheep/goat cheeses: *Formaella of Parnassos*; *Kefalotiri*, made in Macedonia, Sterea Hellas, the Peloponnese, Thessaly, Crete, Epirus, and in the Ionian and Cycladic islands; *Graviera* of Naxos and of Crete; and a mixture of the two last kinds, the *Kefalograviera* made in Epirus, Etolokanania and Evritania. These cheeses are all ripened for at least three months (at least five, in the case of *Graviera* from Crete) and have a moisture content of 35-36% and fat content varying from 28.8% in the *Kefalotiri* type to 40% in the *Graviera* of Crete.¹⁹ The fat contents of the cheeses show how it concentrates the value of the raw milk as food; typically, sheep's milk contains 9% fat, and 5.7% protein (only reindeer milk has a higher fat and protein content), while 10 litres

of sheep's milk will produce about 2 kg. of cheese.²⁰ The setting time of sheep's milk cheese is less than 45 minutes. Presswork (shaping the cheese and squeezing out whey) takes place on the 2nd to 4th days, and the cheese can then be put into storage. In temperatures over 12°C, ripening is fast.²¹

In Sicily, the picture is rather different, and a number of sheep or sheep/goat cheeses produced nowadays would serve as the rind-covered, grateable type Aristophanes seems to have had in mind. These are the *Pecorino Siciliano* and *Pecorino Pepato*, both aged 2 – 4 months, and often used grated; the *Piacentu Ennesse*; the *Calcagno*, aged up to 10 months, and also often grated; and the *Maiorchino* from Messina and the northern coastal regions, which is aged between 6 – 8 months, and can be matured up to a maximum of 24 months and can weigh up to 20kg.²² As I have said, this information has had to be garnered from available internet sources. When lockdowns are firmly in the past, a regional exploration of local cheeses has got to be incorporated in a tour of these areas! What is curious, however, is the way in which modern regionality in cheese production reflects a lack of hard cheeses in the area round Athens. Was this also the case 2,500 years ago?

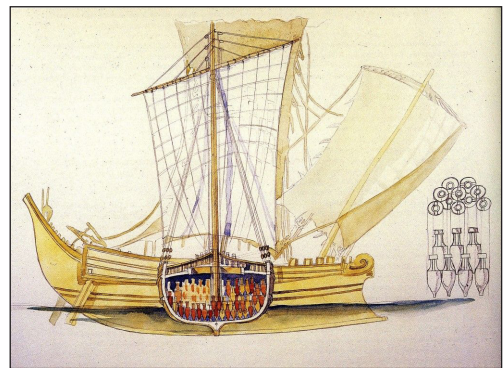
How was the cheese transported?

The type of vessel used to transport goods round the Mediterranean has now been researched very thoroughly, and is exemplified by the reconstructed vessel *Kyrenia II*.²³ About 14 m in length, the vessel displaces about 25 tons and has an average speed of 4–5 knots depending on sailing conditions.

160

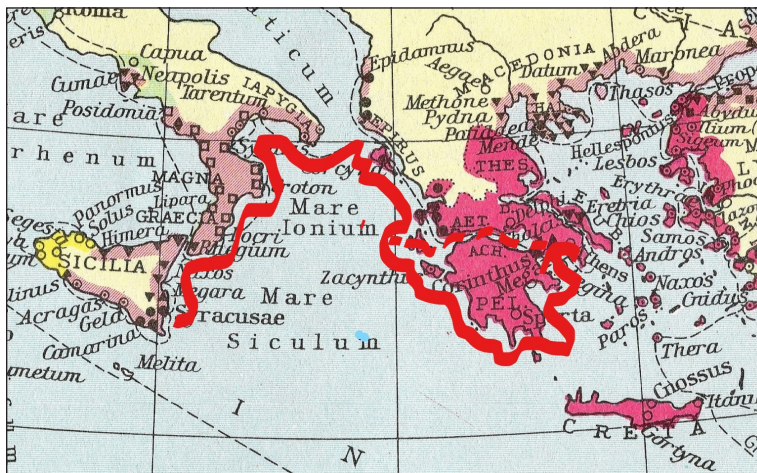
What routes were taken?

We get a confirmation of a trade route from Thucydides' narrative about the Athenian expedition to Sicily in 415 BC, in *History* 6.44: the naval force sailed from Corcyra and crossed to Iapygia and Tarentum, then followed the coast down to Rhegium before crossing the straits of Messina and reaching Sicily. We can also note that on a return journey from Sicily to Athens, it was at Thurii that Alcibiades jumped ship to avoid a political trial (*History* 6.61). In addition, evidence of shipwrecks showing likely routes can confirm the accepted pattern of ancient trading – namely, that ships'



captains tended to hug the coastlines as far as possible, and kept a ‘weather-eye’ open in case they needed to make port in a hurry.²⁴

The narrower arrows across the gulf of Corinth indicate the time which might have been saved if a



ship was able to use the so-called Diolkos or overland ship crossing, saving the long (and potentially hostile) route around the Peloponnese, though it should be noted that David Pettegrew has cast doubt on the logistics of colportage, and in any case Corinth was in the enemy camp as far as the Athens of Aristophanes’ day was concerned. The longer route was probably the one taken.²⁵ It is some 1,000 nautical miles in length, as opposed to the direct distance of about 400 nautical miles from the eastern littoral of Sicily to Athens.

Another factor needs to be borne in mind – the winds and weather. To the west of the Peloponnese, the prevailing winds come from the north west. This supported the route from Sicily via Calabria and then crossing over to Corfu.²⁶ Sailing at 4–5 knots over a 12-hour day, a sailing vessel could cover 50-60 nautical miles without too much trouble.²⁷ Thus, a journey round the southern Peloponnese from Sicily to Athens might have taken about twenty days, perhaps less, but often probably more.

This would probably not have affected the quality of the cheese by the time it reached Athens; a ship’s hold would have been shaded and at a relatively ambient temperature, and the salinity of the sea-voyage would probably not have added to the saltiness of the cheese as it was prepared for transportation. It is generally accepted that trade by sea was carried out from mid-spring to mid-autumn; cheese made in one year might well have been stored prior to early sailing in a subsequent year. Matching this to the seasonality of cheese production, it also seems practicable for cheese made in the early season (i.e. from mid-May) to have been ready after three month’s maturing for shipment in mid-August; it might even have been shipped in mid-July, and the time spent in the ship’s hold could have expedited its final maturation. This certainly seems to have been the case with the transportation of ancient *liquamen* or fish sauce.²⁸

In conclusion, despite the utterly fantastical, off-the-wall scenes which Aristophanes (and Athenian Old Comedy generally) made a staple of his plays, it can be seen that they

were built around everyday, familiar objects – one of which was Sicilian cheese. Likely types of this cheese, of which a pecorino would be a likely modern type, made mainly from sheep’s milk, still form a major part of high-quality Sicilian agricultural produce. Its production, preservation and conveyance in the 5th century BC over the long sea-route to Athens was not a fantasy at all, but was one of the ‘hooks of realism’ around which the comic fantasies revolved.

Notes

1. Greek texts downloaded from the Perseus collection of the University of Tufts, Chicago, at <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0043%3Acard%3D903>, accessed on 28/4/2021. *Wasps* – the trial scene, lines 894 – 914 (produced at the Lenaea in 422 BC); *Peace*, War and Havoc stir things up for the Greeks, lines 238 – 254 (produced at the Dionysia, 421 BC).
2. Commentaries ad loc. by Alan H. Sommerstein, *Aristophanes Wasps: The Commentaries of Aristophanes Volume 4* (Aris & Philips: Warminster, Wiltshire, 1983); more recently, Zachary P. Biles and S. Douglas Olson, *Aristophanes, Wasps* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 2015); fine helpful translations in the *Loeb Classical Library* series by Jeffery Henderson (*Aristophanes: Clouds, Wasps, Peace*. Harvard University Press: Cambridge, Mass., 1998) and David Barrett (*Aristophanes: The Wasps/ The Poet and the Women/ The Frogs*. Penguin Books: Harmondsworth, 1964.) I have re-allocated the speaking parts, which are a matter of confusion in the manuscript tradition, to make more sense of the final outburst.
3. *ensicilized* is Sommerstein’s rendering of Aristophanes’ invented verb *κατεσικέλιζε* (one of his favourite tricks), rendered ‘sicilized’ by Olson in the Loeb, ‘siliated’ by Barrett in the Penguin translation, and ‘ensicilized’s
4. Sommerstein, ad loc; Barrett, n. 33 p. 217.
5. Commentaries ad loc. by S. Douglas Olson, *Aristophanes, Peace* (Oxford University Press: Oxford, 1998), pp. 117-121; Alan H. Sommerstein, *The Comedies of Aristophanes; vol. 5, Peace* (Aris & Philips: Warminster, 2nd corrected impression 1990), pp.144-5. On *moretum* see Chrostopher Grocock and Sally Grainger, ‘Moretum – a Peasant Lunch Revisited,’ in Harlan Walker (ed.), *The Meal* (Prospect Books: Totnes), pp. 95-103. Déry, ‘Milk and Dairy Products’ p. 119, suggests that the cheese used in the poem is a ‘round cheese’ and ‘evidently a hard (one) stored up against times of want.’
6. For a helpful survey see Joan P. Alcock, ‘Milk and its products in Ancient Rome,’ in Harlan Walker (ed.), *Milk: Beyond the Dairy: Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery 1999* (Prospect Books: Totnes, Devon, 2000), 31 – 8, at pp. 31, 33. There is a useful history of cheese in Harold McGee, *On Food and Cooking: The Science and Lore of the Kitchen* (British edition Harper Collins, London 1991) and pp. 3-6. For the Asia Minor find, see <https://www.imj.org.il/en/collections/431984>; for the Egyptian find, see <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/16/science/oldest-cheese-ever-egypt-tomb.html>.
7. Sarah Freeman, Silvija Davidson, ‘The Origins of Taste in Milk, Cream, Butter and Cheese,’ in Harlan Walker (ed.), *Milk: Beyond the Dairy: Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery 1999* (Prospect Books: Totnes, Devon, 2000), 161-67.
8. Cited by Elizabeth Craik, ‘Hippocratic Diata,’ in John Wilkins, David Harvey and Mike Dobson, *Food in Antiquity* (University of Exeter Press: Exeter, 1995), pp.343 – 350, at p. 347.
9. A. Dalby, *Food in the Ancient World from A to Z* (Routledge: London and New York, 2003), p. 302. See also Mario Lombardo, ‘Food and “Frontier” in the Greek Colonies of South Italy,’ in John Wilkins, David Harvey and Mike Dobson, *Food in Antiquity* (University of Exeter Press: Exeter, 1995), pp. 256-272, and his discussion of ‘Sybaritic Luxury’ at pp. 267-69.
10. Hermippus 63 {*Epitome* 27e}, translation by A. Dalby, *Siren Feasts* (Routledge: London and New York, 1996), p. 105; the original text from R. Kassel and C. Austin (eds.), *P C G: Poetae Comici Graeci* (9 vols.; De Gruyter: Berlin, 1983 -).
11. Dalby, *Siren Feasts*, p. 105
12. Dalby, *Siren Feasts*, p. 108, and n. 51.

13. Dalby, *Siren Feasts*, p. 125.
14. Dalby, *Food in the Ancient World*, pp. 80-81.
15. Cato and Varro, ed. and trans. William David Hooper, rev. Harrison Boyd Ash (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Loeb Classical Library; Harvard University Press/ William Heinemann, 1935); Columella, *On Agriculture*, ed. and trans. E. S. Forster and Edward H. Heffner (3 vols. Cambridge, Mass. and London: Loeb Classical Library; Harvard University Press/ William Heinemann, 1968).
16. Pliny the Elder, *Historia Naturalis*, ed. H. Rackham (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Loeb Classical Library; Harvard University Press/ William Heinemann, 2nd ed. 1983).
17. See for example <https://athensattica.com/things-to-do/gastronomy/>, accessed 16.4.2021; the website of the Costelaros Cheese factory, <https://www.greekgastronomyguide.gr/en/item/kostarelos-cheese-dairy-markopoulo-attica/>, accessed 22.5.2021, and <http://www.realgreekfeta.gr/history-of-feta/>, accessed 16.4.2021.
18. <https://www.dianekochilas.com/intro-to-greek-cheeses/>, accessed 22.5.2021.
19. <http://www.greece.org/hellas/cheese.html>, accessed 22.5.2021.
20. K. Biss, *Practical Cheesemaking* (Ramsbury, Marlborough, Wiltshire: The Crowood Press, 1988), pp. 8, 29.
21. Biss, pp. 81, 105ff., 110. See also the detailed description of production methods in Columella, *De Re Rustica* 7.8 1 – 4, and the summary in Alcock, ‘Milk and its Products’, pp. 36-7, and Carol A. Déry, ‘Milk and Dairy Products in the Roman Period’, in Harlan Walker (ed.), *Milk: Beyond the Dairy: Proceedings of the Oxford Symposium on Food and Cookery 1999* (Prospect Books: Totnes, Devon, 2000), 117 – 25, at pp. 118-19.
22. Information taken from <https://www.tasteatlas.com/most-popular-cheeses-in-sicily>, accessed 22.5.2021. See also https://www.researchgate.net/figure/Map-of-Main-Traditional-Landscapes-in-Sicily_fig3_254315240, accessed 22.5.2021.
23. There is an interesting presentation on Kyrenia II at https://www.brown.edu/Departments/Joukowsky_Institute/courses/maritimearchaeology11/files/19115628.pdf, <http://www.cypnet.co.uk/ncyprus/city/kyrenia/castle/shipwreck/index.html> and http://www.learningsites.com/Kyrenia/Kyrenia_home.php, accessed 11.5.2021.
24. Strauss, J. (2013). *Shipwrecks Database*. Version 1.0. Accessed 11.5.2021: oxrep.classics.ox.ac.uk/databases/shipwrecks_database/; thanks are due to Sally Grainger for navigating my way to this. See also <http://www.ancientportsantiques.com/ancient-sailing/>, accessed 11.5.2021, which contains a wealth of clear and fascinating information about ancient ships and shipping routes.
25. See <https://www.sailingissues.com/corinth-canal-diolkos.html>, accessed 22/5/2021; David F. Pettegrew, ‘The Diolkos of Corinth,’ *American Journal of Archaeology* 115 (2011), 549-74, at https://www.academia.edu/7948794/The_Diolkos_of_Corinth, accessed 22.5.2021.
26. Citation and map details from <http://www.ancientportsantiques.com/ancient-sailing/>, accessed 11.5.2021, which contains a wealth of clear and fascinating information about ancient ships and shipping routes.
27. <http://www.ancientportsantiques.com/ancient-sailing/#3>, accessed 27.5.2021.
28. See Sally Grainger, *The Story of Garum: Fermented Fish Sauce and Salted Fish in the Ancient World* (Routledge: London and New York, 2021), pp. 168-9.