

Class, Citizenship and Symbolic Struggles in Classical Athens

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ABSTRACT:

This article examines the symbolic construction of citizenship in Classical Athens through a relational theory of class inspired by Bourdieu and an anthropology of consumer goods à la McCracken. Focusing on clothing, especially the *himation*, it argues that civic identity was materially enacted through practices that encoded leisure, autonomy and moderate prosperity. Democratic discourse enabled broad groups of citizens to appropriate elite symbols while redefining them normatively. At the same time, visible manual labour and servility were symbolically displaced onto slaves and outsiders.

KEYWORDS: classical Athens; citizenship; social class; symbolic practices; material culture.

1. Introduction: Theoretical Framework and Methodological Principles

The concept of class has long occupied a prominent place in classical scholarship, shaping attempts to reconstruct the socio-economic structures, labour relations, political dynamics, and cultural practices of ancient communities. For the Greek *polis*, and for Athens in particular—by far the best-documented and most intensively studied Greek city—questions of wealth and poverty, mass and elite, free and enslaved, and independent, wage, or servile labour have understandably attracted sustained attention. From the standpoint of citizenship, scholarly interest has been especially marked since Josiah Ober’s influential *Mass and Elite in Democratic Athens*, which posited a delicate equilibrium between a leisured, liturgical elite and a working mass of citizens.¹

This contribution does not aim to offer an exhaustive survey of this vast literature. Rather, it seeks to address a more specific—and surprisingly persistent—gap. Much earlier scholarship, shaped by the Finleyan-Weberian paradigm, tended to conceive the social structure of the *polis* in terms that were both

1 Ober 1989.

conceptually imprecise and empirically restrictive. On the one hand, “status” was invoked as a broad, undifferentiated category that collapsed legal position, economic condition, and social prestige into a single continuum.² On the other hand, class-based reconstructions frequently rested on markedly simplified dichotomies—above all the opposition between a leisured propertied elite and a vast undifferentiated group of self-employed small producers, with a dependent labour force placed at the bottom.³ Such models, as recent critiques have emphasised, obscure the diversity of free productive labour, minimise the role of hired work, and impose an artificial bipartition that neither reflects the complexities of ancient socio-economic relations nor fully explains the dynamics of social conflict.

Even more nuanced studies—emphasising the multiplicity of legal, institutional, and cultural dimensions that structured social interactions—have seldom examined how symbolic practices and material culture contributed to the construction and negotiation of civic identity. In particular, Ober’s model, for all its impact, presupposes a relatively cohesive elite whose competition is merely arbitrated by the *demos*. This tends to downplay the autonomous agency of non-elite citizens and to obscure the symbolic strategies through which they articulated, negotiated, or contested their civic identity.⁴

2 Weber 1947; Finley 1973b. Their influential perspective, grounded in a broadly primitivist view of the ancient economy, tended to reduce social differentiation to a polarised contrast between an idle elite and dependent rural labourers living at or near subsistence level. More recent work has substantially revised this picture, demonstrating sustained economic growth from the Archaic period and, in many *poleis*, living standards well above subsistence: Morris 2004; 2005; Ober 2010; 2014; 2015; Kron 2011; 2014; Lewis 2018b, 180–93.

3 A case in point is Ste. Croix 1981, whose analysis of class struggle ultimately rests on a sharply dichotomous model opposing free landowners to dependent rural labour—primarily slaves—leaving little room for more complex or intermediate forms of dependency (esp. 133–204), a shortcoming shared by Finley’s analysis (1973b, 69–74). Furthermore, both treat land property as virtually the sole basis of wealth and other productive sectors, and the social relations embedded within them, are accordingly marginalised. References to “class” in studies of Greek popular morality likewise tend to rely on broad and undifferentiated oppositions between rich, poor, and a notional middle group, without clarifying the analytical content of the term (e.g. Dover 1974). Attempts to map the social structure of the democratic *polis* through broader professional and productive categories have often resulted in essentially descriptive typologies that collapse artisans, farmers, merchants, and even wealthy non-elite entrepreneurs into a single social bloc opposed to both rich landowners and slaves (e.g. Ehrenberg 1962).

4 An excellent methodological starting point for restoring popular agency to the centre of studies on Athenian democracy is provided by Canevaro 2026b, who shows that the masses—even in phases of Athens’ constitutional history in which they were not directly involved in government and thus not actively participating in political decision-making—were nonetheless capable of exerting pressure on the dominant elites, thereby carving out a meaningful sphere of action. Canevaro’s analysis, however, concentrates primarily on strictly legislative aspects.

More fundamentally, it rests on assumptions about “aristocracy” and “elite values”⁵ that recent scholarship has shown to be deeply misleading. Hereditary aristocracies were rare, unstable, and never entirely and necessarily coextensive with the upper socio-economic strata; claims to noble birth were themselves constructed, contested, and dependent on recognition. What unified the upper tiers of ancient society was not birth but the capacity to live off the labour of others and to convert economic capital into prestige through practices of conspicuous leisure.⁶ The most appropriate term for this group is not “aristocracy”, but leisure class in Thorstein Veblen’s sense:⁷ a self-conscious status group formed through shared lifestyles—dining, drinking, athletic activity, sympotic culture—and differentiated from others by degree rather than kind.

A central insight of recent critiques is that analyses of ancient stratification have often conflated what may be termed legitimating values (the principles by which groups justify authority) with differentiating values (the practices through which they mark distinction). Military excellence, for instance, was a legitimating value widely shared across society; it was not a marker of exclusive elite identity. What distinguished the elite was not the possession of different values, but the claim to embody these shared ideals at a qualitatively higher level: elites justified their authority by asserting that their superior ability to realise these broadly accepted standards—whether in warfare, civic benefaction, or moral excellence—conferred benefits upon the wider community. Differentiation, by contrast, depended primarily on material and symbolic practices: clothing, bodily comportment, leisure, consumption, participation in symposia, and control of servants or slaves.⁸ These practices were never absolutely exclusive, and their imitable nature created precisely the permeability that made symbolic conflict possible. As Duploux has argued, status was always fluid, constructed through continual negotiation and recognition; even noble birth was an artefact of “gentilician strategies” rather than an immutable fact of social organisation.⁹

This perspective calls for a more articulated analytical framework—one capable of integrating economic, cultural, and symbolic dimensions without collapsing them into a single register. The present study therefore turns to Pierre Bourdieu’s reconceptualisation of class. Unlike classical Marxism, which defines class solely in economic terms—ownership of the means of production, distribution of material resources, and relations of exploitation¹⁰—Bourdieu

5 Ober 1989, 55–60, 248–92 esp. 250–1.

6 See van Wees, Fisher 2015, 2–7.

7 Veblen 2007 [1899].

8 On this distinction see van Wees, Fisher 2015, 15–25.

9 Duploux 2006.

10 For a sophisticated neo-Marxist reformulation of class analysis, see Wright 1985, especially chapter 3, which substantially enriches the classical Marxist framework by incorporating additional conceptual categories beyond the differential distribution of economic capital and control over the means of production. Wright’s model integrates a broader range of

advances a far more complex and multidimensional theoretical structure. For him, the social space is organised by a set of primary independent variables, namely the different forms of capital: economic, cultural, social, and their recognised form, symbolic capital. These constitute the most powerful structuring principles of class, since their unequal distribution determines distances and proximities among groups. Alongside these, Bourdieu identifies secondary independent variables such as age, gender, ethnicity, religion, and professional condition.¹¹ These do not in themselves define class positions, yet they crucially modulate the accumulation, conversion, and effectiveness of capital, shaping distinct trajectories, habitus, and symbolic practices.¹² In this sense, classes are not discrete entities but structured sets of relations that emerge statistically from the clustering of agents who share similar configurations of capital and secondary differentiating factors.

This relational understanding of class opens the door to a further dimension central to Bourdieu's theory: symbolic practices and symbolic struggles. Because classes are continually reproduced through practices, their boundaries are subject to ongoing negotiation. Symbols—whether material (clothing, objects, food) or immaterial (postures, accents, tastes, moral norms)—play a pivotal role in this process. They are not mechanically tied to one class or another; rather, they are susceptible to appropriation, reinterpretation, and strategic manipulation. Through such manipulation, groups engage in symbolic struggles aimed at imposing their vision and division of the social world.¹³ As Bourdieu repeatedly emphasised, the attempt to naturalise a classificatory vision—to render one's own principle of division as self-evident and legitimate—is a genuinely political act, not in the narrow institutional sense, but in the sense of shaping the very principles through which social reality is perceived, classified, and evaluated. Symbolic power is therefore inseparable from class formation: it is both a means by which existing hierarchies are maintained and a terrain upon which they may be contested or transformed.¹⁴

While this lens has been fruitfully applied in recent studies on poverty—understood not merely as material deprivation but as restricted access to opportunities, networks, knowledge, and recognition¹⁵—it has rarely been brought to bear on the symbolic construction of citizenship. The ideological figure of the Athenian *politēs* was deeply normative and symbolically charged. Yet its

assets—including managerial and organisational skills—and traces the corresponding forms of exploitation that arise within productive relations. Yet his analysis remains focused almost exclusively on the sphere of production and the mechanisms of exploitation, leaving aside other dimensions through which class dynamics may operate.

11 Bourdieu 1984, 99-168.

12 On habitus and lifestyle see Bourdieu 1984, 169-225.

13 On symbols and symbolic struggles see Bourdieu 1984, 244-56.

14 On symbolic manipulation and its political meaning see Bourdieu 1987, 9-16.

15 See, quite recently, Taylor 2016; 2017, 19-22, which in turn builds on Sen 1987.

formation has seldom been analysed in terms of class-related symbolic practices or the ways in which non-elite citizens appropriated, reinterpreted, or contested the symbols that structured civic identity.

For reasons of space and methodological focus, the present study will concentrate specifically on consumer goods as symbols and as historical operators,¹⁶ with particular emphasis on clothing, which constitutes the primary category of goods analysed here.¹⁷ Drawing on the seminal work of Grant McCracken, goods are understood not as passive mirrors of social relations but as active vehicles of meaning that organise, transmit, and reshape cultural structures over time. Central to McCracken's framework are the notions of cultural categories—the conventional constructs through which societies segment themselves into distinctions of class, gender, age, occupation, ethnicity, and civic or legal status—and cultural principles, the ordering ideas that govern how these categories are differentiated and ranked. Goods give material expression to these categories and principles, but they do more than reflect them: by absorbing new historical contingencies and mediating the reinterpretation of existing cultural

16 It is worth noting that the application of the concepts of consumption and consumer culture to the Greek *polis*—and to the ancient world more generally—has long been fraught. For much of the twentieth century, economic sociology tied consumption to mass society and modern capitalism, especially the American model, effectively denying that pre-capitalist cultures could sustain meaningful forms of consumption (e.g. Galbraith 1957; Katona 1964; Rostow 1960; Horowitz 2004). Even scholars who attempted to extend the concept to earlier periods often remained constrained by this modernist framework (e.g. McKendrick *et al.* 1982), further reinforced by the Frankfurt School's view of consumption as passive commodification, which reduced consumers to one-dimensional agents (Horkheimer, Adorno 2002, 94–100). This doctrinal background inevitably shaped studies of ancient economies, themselves long influenced by primitivist assumptions (e.g. Davidson 2012, who denies that Athens ever developed a consumer culture; for a thorough overview of scholarship on Greek economy shaped by primitivist assumptions see Bresson 2015, 2–15; Lewis 2018a). Even after the decline of primitivism, consumer goods were mostly analysed either as commodities within trade networks or as technological artefacts for reconstructing production (e.g., among the most recent contributions, Opait 2010; Gauss *et al.* 2015; Bourogiannis 2022; Erpehlivan 2023). Only the convergence of studies demonstrating not only the economic rationality of the Greek *poleis* but also the existence of a genuine market economy in the Greek world (e.g. Faraguna 1994; 2019; Christesen 2003; Bresson 2015), together with cultural-anthropological work highlighting consumption as a potent symbolic practice enabling social life by creating identity, meaning, and relationships, as well as serving as one of the principal means of social inclusion and exclusion (e.g. McCracken 1990; Douglas, Isherwood 1996²) can provide the basis for a genuinely socio-cultural approach to consumption and consumer goods in the *polis*.

17 The focus on clothing stems from the fact that Greek culture—much like modern culture—regarded it, together with language and diet, as one of the most representative markers of the identity of a community or group: see [Xen.] *Ath. Pol.* 2.8, where the anonymous author explicitly considers *diaita* and *schema*—together with language (*phōne*)—as clear indicators of the ethnic and cultural “bastardisation” of the Athenians. On clothing as one of the categories of consumer goods that most eloquently materialise the symbolic principles of a group or society from an anthropological point of view, see Sahlins 1976.

logics, they become agents of transformation, capable of contributing to, and even driving, the reorganisation of the cultural system across time.¹⁸

Because goods do not merely reflect but actively organise cultural categories, their meanings cannot remain stable or uncontested. Groups positioned differently within the social space may appropriate, reinterpret, or challenge the symbolic forms through which these categories are materialised. It is precisely this dynamic dimension of material culture that leads McCracken to develop his critique of the classical “trickle-down” model and to conceptualise symbolic appropriation as a central mechanism of cultural change. McCracken’s critique of the classical “trickle-down” model underscores that symbolic appropriation is neither unidirectional nor passive.¹⁹ Subordinate groups may adopt symbols associated with dominant groups, but always through creative reinterpretation; elites may react by redefining their own symbolic repertoire.²⁰ Such dynamics also characterise “lateral” appropriations, where distinctions concern not class but ethnicity, civic status, or other cultural categories.²¹ Combined with Bourdieu’s theory of capital and symbolic power, this framework allows us to trace how political change may emerge through symbolic manipulation: when a group succeeds in naturalising its classificatory vision, the boundaries of the social space are redrawn and a new dominant ideological representation of citizenship emerges.

McCracken’s formulation, developed for the highly stratified societies of the early modern and modern West, presupposes elite groups whose boundaries are relatively clear and institutionally reinforced. Applying his model to the democratic *polis* therefore requires an explicit methodological clarification. As argued above, Greek *polis* did not possess a rigid, self-contained aristocratic culture; legitimating and differentiating values were widely shared across the citizen body, and what distinguished groups was not a closed *ethos* but the material and performative means through which shared values were pursued and enacted. For this reason, the relevance of McCracken’s framework does not lie in the sociological configuration of the groups involved—an element that would indeed be anachronistic—but in the processual insight it offers: the idea that symbolic forms, rather than the values they embody, constitute the primary terrain of social contestation. In the Athenian context, too, symbols such as clothing, comportment, consumption practices, or linguistic style were unevenly accessible

18 For this definition of consumer goods as historical operators see McCracken 1983; 1985; 1990, 27, 57–70 and *passim*. See also Boon 1973; Sahlin 1977; 1981.

19 The principle of trickle down was originally formulated by Simmel (1957), who postulated a rather mechanical and unidirectionally downward movement whereby subordinate classes passively imitate the distinctive symbols of the elites, while the latter, “moving ahead” to escape imitation, continually devise new symbols in order to preserve their distinction.

20 McCracken 1990, 93–103.

21 Particularly illuminating are the words of Trentmann, who highlights that the dynamics of exclusion and inclusion, differentiation and homogenisation, may occur “sideways” and not only “top-down” (Trentmann 2012, 9).

and therefore susceptible to imitation, negotiation, or creative reworking. It is at this symbolic level—rather than at the level of distinct, bounded “aristocratic cultures”—that phenomena analogous to McCracken’s processes of appropriation, redefinition, and lateral transfer can meaningfully be traced. In this sense, symbolic appropriation in the Greek *polis* concerned not the values themselves, which remained broadly shared, but the shifting repertoire of signs through which those values were materialised, ranked, and politicised.

Integrating these theoretical insights makes it possible to analyse the symbolic construction of the Athenian *politēs* in a new light. It foregrounds how class-related variables—economic resources, cultural competence, social capital, ethnic belonging, age—and the symbolic goods associated with them interacted in shaping the ideological boundaries of citizenship. It also highlights that certain groups, strategically positioned within the social space, could manipulate symbols and impose their classificatory vision—an act political in Bourdieu’s fullest sense—and thereby define the legitimate form of civic identity.

This brings us to the guiding questions of the present study: through which symbolic mechanisms, and by means of which materially embedded distinctions, did classical Athens construct, negotiate, and stabilise the normative image of the *politēs*? How did class-related symbols—particularly those associated with consumer goods—participate in shaping this ideal and in defining the boundaries of civic identity? More specifically, can we identify social groups whose position within the Athenian social space enabled them to naturalise a particular symbolic vision of the citizen? And, if so, is it possible to discern a recurring ideological pattern through which the symbolic boundaries of Athenian citizenship were articulated and reproduced?

2. Citizenship and sartorial codes

The clearest point of entry into the symbolic construction of Athenian citizenship lies in the domain that, more than any other, materialised social distinctions in visibly legible form: clothing. As argued in the introduction, garments constituted one of the most potent cultural categories through which Athenians articulated, negotiated, and contested identities—no less than language or diet—and thus provide an ideal starting point for tracing the symbolic mechanisms that shaped the normative image of the *politēs*. Clothing condensed differentiating values into material form, rendered distinctions publicly intelligible, and, precisely because it was imitable, became a privileged site of symbolic struggle.

It is therefore unsurprising that our earliest and most explicit reflections on the relationship between appearance, status, and civic identity are found in authors who approached dress as a marker of deeper social transformations. A well-known passage from Thucydides illustrates how changes in clothing practices index broader shifts in the cultural principles through which Athenians

construed the figure of the citizen. Thucydides observes that the Athenians were the first to abandon the archaic practice of bearing weapons as everyday attire and to adopt forms of dress associated with leisure rather than warfare. His remark that only recently had elderly men of high birth ceased to adorn themselves ostentatiously—an observation marked by the use of *eudaimones*—reveals that he is describing an elite that was redefining its symbolic repertoire.²² The complexity of the Thucydidean passage makes it an exceptionally productive point of departure for the diachronic and multi-axial analysis that follows—an analysis concerned with the symbolic construction of classical Athenian citizenship and its entanglement with class.

As regards the abandonment of weapon-bearing, the information offered by Thucydides is indeed corroborated by vase representations, as Hans van Wees has convincingly shown.²³ From around 650 BCE onward, elite figures depicted on vases no longer carry swords. At the same time, they begin to appear wearing the *himation*, a garment that would have made it virtually impossible to bear a sword. When walking, the *himation* severely restricted the movement of the left arm. Typically, one end of the cloak hangs in long folds over the left arm, while the other passes behind the back, beneath the right arm, crosses the chest, and is thrown over the left shoulder, where it falls again in soft folds.²⁴ Moreover, the draped arrangement of the *himation* was extremely unstable: many vase paintings show seated or reclining figures whose cloaks have slipped and lie in disarray around their waists. Walking in such a precariously balanced garment would already have been difficult; walking while carrying a sword beneath it would have been nearly impossible. The *himation*, therefore, was ideally suited for gazing, speaking, listening, and decision-making—rather than for combat.

Until the end of the sixth century, figures in vase painting who wear the *himation* are often shown holding a spear. This is gradually replaced by the walking stick, which first appears around 640 BCE in conjunction with the *himation*, and becomes virtually ubiquitous in Attic vase painting by the fifth century. As Thorstein Veblen observed, “the walking-stick serves the purpose of an advertisement that the bearer’s hands are employed otherwise than in useful effort, and it therefore has utility as an evidence of leisure”.²⁵ What is particularly striking is that, beginning in the mid-sixth century, figures on vases are no longer depicted standing upright with their sticks, but rather leaning forward and resting upon them languidly, with only the right leg firmly planted on the ground while the left is extended behind, the left foot barely touching the floor. This posture further amplifies the image of leisure. Between 500 and 450 BCE, in some vase paintings, these figures are also shown carrying parasols and wearing

22 Thuc. 1.6.3.

23 Van Wees 1998, 344–62.

24 For a thorough description of the *himation* see Stone 1984, 155–56; Lee 2015, 113–16.

25 Veblen 2007 [1899], 173.

luxurious attire.²⁶ These images thus seem to confirm the transition, evoked by Thucydides, from martial self-display to a more leisured civic posture.

It should be stressed, however, that this development—real though it was—ought not to be absolutised, as Geddes misleadingly does when she argues that the abandonment of luxury by the Athenian elite was total and motivated by the rise of democracy, which supposedly prompted elite citizens to adopt a more sober dress in order to honour, through sartorial and visual codes, the democratic ideal of egalitarianism (a move which she interprets as a hypocritical and calculated attempt by the elite to preserve its own power).²⁷ In the first place, as vase painting itself shows, the *himation*—which Geddes goes so far as to liken to the blue jackets of Maoist China²⁸—had already been the preserve of the elite from the mid-seventh century and symbolised precisely leisure and refinement. This point is further supported by the opposition that we find in vase painting, at least until the mid-fifth century, between artisans, cattlemen, shepherds, and farmers—whose status is marked by the wool or goatskin cap (*pilos*)—and members of the leisure elite, who are instead clothed in the *himation*.²⁹

Secondly, class distinctions remained clearly visible in sartorial practices,³⁰ and the Athenian elite—or at least a segment of it—even after the Persian Wars, did not relinquish more eccentric and refined exoticising fashions. A careful analysis of vase paintings and sculptures conducted by Beth Cohen has shown that the elite—and particularly the cavalry—are represented, from the sixth century down to the later fifth, wearing Persian or Thracian accessories: the Persian soft cap worn under the helmet by some Athenian warriors, or the typically Thracian ensemble consisting of deerskin boots, the rich and patterned cloak, and the fox-skin cap.³¹ As Margaret Miller has perceptively argued, Thucydides' remark about the abandonment of luxury is an ideological retrojection: the luxury which the historian attributes to the *presbyteroi* of past generations—presumably Near Eastern in inspiration³²—was in fact the luxury of the

26 E.g. the red-figure cup of Byrgos painter, Louvre G285. On parasols see Miller 1992.

27 Geddes 1987.

28 Geddes 1987, 313.

29 See the thorough analysis of Pípili 2000.

30 See Matuszewski 2019, 236–42.

31 Hdt. 7.75.1: Ὀρήκες δὲ ἐπὶ μὲν τῇσι κεφαλῇσι ἄλωπεκέας ἔχοντες ἐστρατεύοντο, περὶ δὲ τὸ σῶμα κιθῶνας, ἐπὶ δὲ ζειράς περιβεβλημένοι ποικίλας, περὶ δὲ τοὺς πόδας τε καὶ τὰς κνήμας πέδιλα νεβρῶν, πρὸς δὲ ἀκόντια τε καὶ πέλτας καὶ ἐγχειρίδια μικρά. See Cohen 2001, 244–51, who, however, notes that these garments were not worn all at once; rather, individuals selected only certain accessories on each occasion, which were then combined with the rest of their attire, typically Greek in character. If the selective adoption of certain accessories constituted a strategy of cultural co-optation aimed at “domesticating” barbarian alterity, dressing entirely like a Thracian or a Persian would have provoked considerable astonishment and disapproval among Greek fellow citizens: see Thuc. 1.130 with Miller 1997, 184.

32 The influence must have been perceived as Ionian, Lydian, or Persian: cf. Neil 1901, 174; Hornblower 1991, 26; Miller 1997, 187; Kallet 2003, 138.

“Persian princes” of his own day, and still offered the Athenian elite one of the principal channels through which to perpetuate symbolic distinction from the lower classes (as an alternative to the opposite strategy of adopting the austere, Spartan-inspired dress to which we shall return).³³

Ultimately, one may hypothesise that the Thucydidean formulation, although plausibly grounded in the testimonies of those who were already elderly in his time, was nevertheless shaped by a *Leitmotiv* widely attested in the comedy of the 430s and 420s,³⁴ where references to a former Golden Age abound—a theme that reappears insistently in the fourth century (despite the fact that the city did not experience any real and significant economic decline) and that constitutes a dominant feature of Athenian public discourse.³⁵ It remains undeniable, however, that the sober yet elegant clothing to which Thucydides refers did constitute, in democratic Athens, the sartorial and visual code typically (and *ideologically*) associated with the *politēs*, irrespective of social class.

If the Thucydidean passage articulates an ideological ideal of civic moderation, the sartorial and symbolic practices of classical Athens allow us to observe how that ideal was materially encoded, negotiated, and at times contested. In this respect, no garment is more revealing than the *himation*. Far from being a neutral or economically insignificant item, the *himation* functioned as the quintessential visual marker of the *politēs*, while remaining embedded in a complex system of social differentiation. Approaching such symbolic practices through a relational understanding of class makes it possible to see how economic resources, symbolic capital, cultural competence, and social position converged in shaping the normative figure of the *politēs*. Civic identity did not rest on legal status alone—although the juridical boundary between citizens and non-citizens remained fundamental and preponderant—but was continually produced through embodied and material signs—clothing, posture, leisure, and modes of consumption—that were unevenly accessible, strategically appropriated, and ideologically charged.

The analysis that follows therefore turns to these symbolic practices, with particular attention to clothing and bodily comportment, in order to trace how the ideal image of the citizen was constructed, stabilised, and defended. In doing so, it becomes possible to identify not only forms of differentiation within the citizen body, but also the more fundamental boundaries through which civic identity was symbolically defined against those excluded from it.

An excellent point of departure is provided by what may be defined as the locus classicus for the sartorial and visual representation of the Athenian citizen,

33 Miller 1997, 187. On the pervasive presence of accessories of Persian origin or of “Persianising” style in the fashions of the Athenian elite, see Miller 1997, 156–83; Osborne 2011, 148–49; Lee 2015, 121–24; Matuszewski 2019, 236–37.

34 E.g. Ar. *Ach.* 32–39; Cratin. Fr. 256, 257, 258 K–A, see also Athen. *Deipn.* 12.533 E.

35 See Cecchet 2015, 107–8, 155, 163, 189, 207–9, see in particular 115–40 on the economic conditions of fourth-century Athens.

moreover set within a public context. In Aristophanes' *Ecclesiazusae*, the women disguise themselves as men by appropriating the most representative visual attributes of their husbands; among these, alongside the beard, they explicitly list the *himation*, Laconian shoes (*lakōnikai*),³⁶ and the walking stick.³⁷

This representation corresponds closely to what emerges from the vase paintings discussed above. Archaic pictorial representations depicting figures clearly engaged in the enjoyment of leisure, together with the contrast—visible on certain vases—between such figures and others occupied with manual activities, and the fact that Aristophanes explicitly presents this as the dress code in which citizens attended the Assembly, strongly suggest that this was the typical attire of leisure. It is precisely this dress code that the husbands of the female protagonists in the *Ecclesiazusae*, who are predominantly farmers,³⁸ or at least non-elite citizens, are shown to have appropriated.³⁹ This representation is not an isolated case. Other sources similarly attest to the close symbolic relationship between the citizen and the *himation*, making clear that the garment functioned as a key visual sign of civic identity.

The normative image of the citizen articulated in literary sources finds a compelling visual *Vorbild* in late Archaic Athenian iconography. A telling example is provided by a fragmentary red-figure pointed amphora in Berlin, dated to around 490 BCE and attributed to the Kleophrades Painter.⁴⁰ The vase represents Theseus—by this period firmly established as a paradigmatic Athenian hero⁴¹—at the moment of killing the Minotaur.

On the reverse, the focus shifts from the heroic body to a group of young Athenians, identified as the sacrificial victims destined for Crete. They are shown standing together, animated in gesture yet wrapped in their *himatia*, awaiting the outcome of Theseus' combat. Notably absent, however, are the Athenian maidens traditionally associated with this episode and prominently featured in

36 The *lakōnikai* were a specific type of footwear rather than an imported product, although Aristophanes plays on this ambiguity in *Wasps*, notably in the exchange between Philocleon and Bdelycleon (Ar. *Vesp.* 1157–1160 with Biles, Olson 2015, 423). They were typically dyed in bright, vivid colours: Ath. *Deipn.* 5.125c; Poll. 7.88).

37 Ar. *Ecl.* 73–75, 273–279, 542–546.

38 Ar. *Ecl.* 279–282.

39 It should be noted that, in particular, the walking stick, beyond signalling the availability of leisure, could serve a variety of other functions and, judging from the evidence of several fourth-century sources, from a certain point onward came predominantly to acquire a negative symbolic connotation: see Matuszewski 2019, 254–57. Nevertheless, it seems undeniable that, at least until the early fourth century, it primarily functioned as a marker of leisure and was regarded as one of the characteristic features of the citizen; in any case, the fact that it could also serve other purposes does not preclude its contributing—when accompanied by other visual symbols—to the construction of the codified image of the ideal citizen: see Zanker 1995, 33, 37, 45; Davidson 2014, 123; Lee 2015, 170–71.

40 Schefold, Jung 1988, 253–55, figs. 304 a–b.

41 See Shapiro 1991, 130; Walker 1995.

earlier representations, such as Kleitias' François Vase.⁴² The selective composition adopted by the Kleophrades Painter—restricted to beautiful, *himation*-clad youths anticipating their liberation—transforms the mythical scene into an idealised image of civic youth. These figures function as a visual model of those who would later come to constitute the *dēmos*,⁴³ deliberately set in contrast to Theseus himself, whose heroic status is marked by the *chlamys*.⁴⁴

As argued above, by the early fifth century the *himation* worn on its own had become the quintessential garment of the Athenian citizen. Seen against this background, the vase's reinterpretation of Theseus' Cretan exploit was likely to resonate with contemporary viewers not merely as myth, but as political allegory. The scene could readily evoke a recent and highly charged historical memory: the tyrannicide, retrospectively heroicised as the foundational moment of Athenian democracy.

The symbolic association between the *himation* and civic identity may plausibly be extended beyond the sphere of ordinary citizens and heroic founders such as Theseus, to include the Eponymous Heroes themselves. As invented tribal ancestors, the Eponymoi occupied a distinctive position within the ideological architecture of Athenian democracy: they were neither distant mythical figures nor purely historical agents, but collective ancestors through whom the citizen body was organised, named, and imagined as a coherent whole.⁴⁵ For this very reason, their visual representation—wherever and however it appeared—must have been carefully calibrated to express civic unity rather than individual distinction.

The difficulty, of course, lies in the fact that no securely preserved monumental depiction of the Eponymous Heroes has survived, and the archaeological and textual traces of their lost statues do not allow for a definitive reconstruction of their appearance. Yet this absence of direct evidence does not render the question irrelevant. On the contrary, given the centrality of the Eponymoi to the political and symbolic life of the *polis*—as points of reference in the Agora, as organisers of tribal identity, and as mediators between individual citizens and the collective⁴⁶—it is hard to imagine that their public imagery did not play a significant role in shaping visual conceptions of Athenian civic identity.

42 Shapiro 1991, 124–26, fig. 3.

43 Cohen 1991, 251–53.

44 The *chlamys* was a short woollen mantle worn by men, typically folded and fastened at the neck with a brooch. Of Thessalian origin, it was often edged with decorative bands. In visual and literary sources it is characteristically associated with youths, ephebes, warriors, hunters, and cavalrymen, frequently in combination with the petasos. Among mythological figures, the *chlamys* functions as a distinctive attribute of mobile and active gods and heroes, most notably Hermes and Perseus: Stone 1984, 169.

45 On Eponymoi see Kron 1976; Kearns 1989, 80–92.

46 We know that by the fourth century bronze statues of the Eponymous Heroes stood in the Athenian Agora and possessed considerable symbolic importance, insofar as they functioned

In this light, the hypothesis that the Eponymous Heroes were represented not as highly individualised figures, but as a relatively homogeneous group of male statues wrapped in *himatia*, appears both suggestive and methodologically sound, even if it must remain hypothetical.⁴⁷ Such a choice would have avoided the visual language of heroic nudity or exceptionalism, instead foregrounding a form of dignified uniformity appropriate to collective ancestors of a democratic citizen body. The repetitive use of the *himation* would thus have served to align the legendary founders of the tribes with the everyday appearance of contemporary citizens, projecting the normative civic costume of democratic life back onto an ancestral and heroic horizon. In this way, the *himation* itself would have been symbolically elevated, transformed from an item of daily wear into a marker of timeless civic legitimacy.

Support for this interpretative framework may be sought, albeit indirectly, in the sculptural language of the Parthenon. On the east frieze, a group of tall male figures clad in a uniform civilian garment stand in quiet interaction, spatially positioned between the seated gods and the human procession. Although their precise identification remains debated, these figures have long been understood as Athenians and are often interpreted as the Eponymous Heroes.⁴⁸ If this identification is accepted, the visual logic is highly significant: the ancestors of the *demos* appear neither as gods nor as active participants in ritual, but

as a civic bulletin board: new laws and indictments were posted there once the competent magistrate had declared the legal action *eisagōgimos* (Dem. 20.94; 21.103; 24.18, with Camp 1986, 99; Lewis 1996, 6; Pébarthe 2006, 184, 320). The fourth-century base of the monument is still extant, providing secure archaeological confirmation of its location and function: for the monument of the Eponymous Heroes in the Agora see Shear 1970; 2007, 96, 101; Thompson, Wycherley 1972, 38–47. It is generally assumed that an earlier version of the monument—Late Archaic or early Classical in date—must also have existed, even though no unequivocal archaeological or textual evidence for such an earlier installation has survived (on this see Mattusch 1994, 76; Stewart 1997, 144; Hölscher 1998, 162). As for the fifth century, we know that in the time of Cimon—perhaps around 460 BCE—a sculptural group was dedicated at Delphi using the spoils of Marathon. This early work by Phidias included statues of Apollo, Athena, Theseus, Miltiades, and the ten Eponymous Heroes (Paus. 10.10.1–2). The fact that these ten heroes were displayed alongside gods and other heroic figures may suggest that, in order to distinguish them visually, they were represented wearing the *himation*; see Cohen 2001, 257 n. 113.

47 Carol Mattusch (1994, 76–7, 79–80; 1996, 62, 65) has advanced the hypothesis that the lost bronze statues of the Eponymous Heroes were not conceived as individually differentiated figures, but rather as a coherent series of generic male forms. This proposal rests, on the one hand, on the technical suitability of bronze sculpture for the serial reproduction of similar types, and, on the other, on analogies with the visual conventions governing secondary male figures in Attic vase painting. From this perspective, the consistent depiction of the Eponymoi clad in *himatia* would have provided an effective means of articulating their collective and civic character. Although necessarily conjectural, such a solution would accord well with the ideological function of the Eponymous Heroes as visual embodiments of a unified Athenian citizen body.

48 Kron 1984; Mattusch 1994, 74, 81 nn. 25–27; Harrison 1996, 200–2.

as mediating figures whose authority derives from proximity, continuity, and shared civic appearance. Once again, the *himation* functions as the key visual sign through which this relationship is articulated, reinforcing its role as the emblematic garment of Athenian civic identity.

Turning now to literary sources, beyond the *Ecclesiazusae*—and in a somewhat less explicit manner—other texts likewise attest the close symbolic association between the *himation* and civic identity. In Plato's *Theaetetus*, for example, the proper wearing of the *himation* marks the distinction between a free citizen and a slave⁴⁹—a contrast also suggested, albeit indirectly, in a passage from Xenophon's *Memorabilia*.⁵⁰ In Aeschines' *Against Timarchos*, the *himation* is implicitly presented as a symbol of masculine dignity and, as such, a prerequisite for legitimate political participation. Aeschines notes that Demosthenes, instead of wearing the *himation*, appeared in *kompsa chlaniskia* and *malakoi chitōniskoi*—garments of excessive refinement.⁵¹ More generally, the idea that a citizen should not leave the house without a *himation*,⁵² and that doing so would be socially inappropriate, is corroborated by several passages in Theophrastus. The illiberal man, when he sends his *himation* to be cleaned, refrains from going out because he owns no other to wear.⁵³ The shabby profiteer, when his is at the laundry, borrows one from a friend and wears it until he is forced to return it.⁵⁴

Such examples seem to suggest that the *himation* was theoretically accessible to a fairly large number of citizens—or, at the very least, that such accessibility was expected. Theophrastus' sketch of the cheapskate might even imply that a moderately affluent individual could own more than one. At the same time, it would be misleading to infer from its civic ubiquity that the *himation* was necessarily inexpensive or uniform in quality. First of all, iconographic evidence cautions against assuming that the civic prominence of the *himation* necessarily coincided with material simplicity. The visual economy of red-figure vase painting, constrained by its technical palette, tends to flatten chromatic and decorative variation and may therefore mask the extent to which dyed and ornamented awoollen cloaks circulated in fifth-century Athens.⁵⁵ That such variation was in fact common is suggested by individual images from the post-Persian War

49 Pl. *Thet.* 175e.

50 Xen. *Mem.* 1.6.2.

51 Aeschin. 1.131. It should be noted that the *chlanis* was a highly refined, unisex garment, typically reserved for festive days and special occasions: see Stone 1984, 163–64.

52 It is noteworthy that, in some contexts, the adjective “naked” refers to the absence of the *himation* rather than to full bodily nudity: see Stone 1984, 155, 186–87 n. 7.

53 Theophr. *Char.* 22.8.

54 Theophr. *Char.* 30.10.

55 On the diversity of textiles involved in the production of clothing in fifth-century Attica see Spantidaki 2016; on the central role of textiles in cultic and religious contexts in particular, see Rivière 2017 and Clements 2017; for the use and cultural significance of colours, see Bröns 2021.

period, such as a cuptondo depicting a youth wrapped in a richly embellished *himation*, which suffices to challenge the notion that austerity or chromatic restraint characterised the dress of the Pentekontaetia.⁵⁶

Literary sources corroborate this picture. In Plato's critique of democracy, its unrestrained freedom and internal plurality are famously likened to a *himation poikilon*, a variegated cloak, and to a bazaar of constitutions, in which each individual is free to fashion his own way of life.⁵⁷ The metaphor presupposes the *himation* not as a plain or impoverished garment, but as an object capable of a certain visual richness. Comedy offers similar indications. In Aristophanes' *Plutus*, the *himation* is explicitly treated as a garment of luxury and set in opposition to the worn *tribōnion* (a diminutive of *tribōn*, was a rather worn and humble garment, which, as will be discussed below, was associated with the Spartans⁵⁸). A sycophant, addressing an honest man who has suddenly grown wealthy thanks to the restored sight of Plutus, asks where he obtained an *himation*, given that only the day before he had been wearing a shabby *tribōnion*. Shortly thereafter, Carion seizes the sycophant and urges the newly rich man to strip him and dress him in the *tribōnion* that had previously been dedicated to Plutus, adding pointedly that what should properly be offered to the god are *semna himatia*.⁵⁹ A few lines later, an old woman lamenting the loss of her poor but beloved young companion remarks ironically that he had always shown restraint with her—so much so that he had asked her for nothing more than a twenty-drachma *himation*.⁶⁰ In the *Ecclesiastouzae* Blepyrus, from whom Praxagora steals a *himation*, appears to possess only a single one.⁶¹ Theophrastus also refers to a prytanis who appears before the Assembly wearing a *lampron himation*.⁶²

56 Rome, Villa Giulia 50422: Pan. Ptr., cup, c. 470-460 BCE; ARV² 560.156 with Miller 1997, 155.

57 Pl. R. 557 a-c with Musti 1995, 278; Bultrighini 1999, 79.

58 Stone 1984, 162-63; Lee 2015, 118.

59 Ar. *Pl.* 880-882, 940.

60 Ar. *Pl.* 982. A sum of twenty drachmas should be regarded as economically significant for the average Athenian. Comparative estimates place bare individual subsistence at c. 1.2 litres of wheat per day and minimum family subsistence (for four persons) at c. 4.5-5 litres. At grain prices commonly attested in the Classical period (roughly 5-9 drachmas per medimnos, with higher prices also recorded), a daily wage of 1-1.5 drachmas corresponds to subsistence or near-subsistence levels for a household. Against this background, twenty drachmas would amount to several weeks of income and clearly exceed day-to-day subsistence expenditure, pointing to a garment of appreciable value: cf. Loomis 1998; Scheidel, Friesen 2009, 83; Scheidel 2010, 441-42, 453; Ober 2015, 91-98, 341 n. 50; Taylor 2017, 69-113; van Wees 2024, 146-48. On the labour-intensive character of textile production and the high cost of raw materials and workmanship in antiquity, see Lee 2015, 96-7.

61 Ar. *Ecl.* 535-536.

62 Theophr. *Char.* 21.11.

Moreover, a particular way of wearing the *himation*—drawn down to the ankles and allowed to trail along the ground—could signal high socio-economic status, as well as a form of ostentatious display liable to provoke irritation or disapproval among fellow citizens. This is the case with Aeschines, as portrayed by Demosthenes, and with Alcibiades and, presumably, his son, as represented in comic sources.⁶³ A further insight is offered by Athenian law: the crime of *lopodysia*—robbery by violent stripping—almost always refers to the *himation* as the object of theft.⁶⁴ The consistent absence of money pouches or other valuables in these sources suggests that citizens generally did not carry such items in public. It also implies that the *himation* itself was considered a valuable good.⁶⁵ Strikingly, Athenian law treated the violent theft of a *himation* in a public space as a distinct offense from ordinary theft. This may further confirm that the *himation* held a particular symbolic significance within the civic community.⁶⁶

As for footwear, the *lakōnikai*—the shoes worn by the women in the *Ecclesiazusae* to attend the Assembly—were likely accessible to a relatively large number of citizens.⁶⁷ Nevertheless, they must also have been relatively costly. In the *Wasps*, for instance, when Philocleon prepares to attend a symposium, he is instructed to wear *lakōnikai*, which are far more elegant than the *embades* he typically wears.⁶⁸

Taken together, these sources suggest that the *himation*—like the *lakōnikai*—functioned as an ideologically charged element of the ideal civic wardrobe: a garment that signalled moderation and respectability, yet also presupposed a certain level of material comfort. At the same time, this civic dress code represents only one segment of a far more articulated sartorial landscape. The wardrobe of Classical Athens encompassed garments that were perceived as markedly more luxurious than the *himation*, others that indexed poverty or servile labour, and still others that carried ethnic or political connotations. It is precisely within this differentiated system of clothing that processes of distinction, appropriation, and symbolic conflict between elites, non-elites, and non-citizens can be most clearly observed.

Alongside the *himation*, the sartorial repertoire of classical Athens included garments perceived as markedly more luxurious, such as the *chlaina* and the *chlainis*,⁶⁹ as well as various exotic or “orientalising” items associated with Persian or

63 Dem. 19.314; Archipp. fr. 48 K-A; Eup. fr. 104 K-A, cf. Plut. *Alc.* 16.1.

64 Lys. 10.10; [Dem.] 54.32; Ar. *An.* 497–98.

65 Cohen 1983, 79–83; Matuszewski 2019, 249.

66 For this appealing interpretation see Hartmann 2010, 163.

67 Both the passage from the *Ecclesiazusae* and a further passage from the *Thesmophoriazusae* (142) indicate that this type of footwear was regarded as distinctly male: see Stone 1984, 225–26.

68 Ar. *Vesp.* 1157–1158.

69 The *chlaina* was a high-quality male outer garment, closely related to the *himation* but typically heavier and made of thick wool. It was usually worn doubled and did not require fastening, although a pin could be used. The sources suggest that it was relatively widespread, especially

Thracian dress. As already noted, these garments constituted one of the principal material and symbolic means through which elites continued to perform distinction vis-à-vis non-elites (see above). At the opposite end of the spectrum stood garments that ranked well below the *himation* in terms of prestige, most notably the *tribon*. This cloak accrued a dense and multi-layered symbolic charge. Socio-economically, it was associated with limited economic capital and low status; ethno-culturally, it evoked Spartan dress; and politically, it became linked to anti-democratic circles, insofar as several elite figures ideologically aligned with Sparta adopted it together with other visual markers, such as long hair and an untrimmed beard.⁷⁰

Other garments of lower prestige than the *himation* further reinforce this pattern. The *diphthera*, for instance, was a short garment made of untreated animal hide, typically associated with rural masculinity and worn above all by farmers, shepherds, and herdsmen and slaves.⁷¹ Similarly, the *exōmis*—a short belted chiton fastened on only one shoulder so as to leave the other arm

as a winter cloak, and that it enjoyed considerable prestige. Its use appears to have been restricted to men, with no secure evidence for female wear: see Stone 1984, 160–62. In iconographic sources, however, the *chlaina* is often difficult to distinguish from the *chlamys*, as the two garments share similar formal features and are not consistently differentiated by painters: see Lee 2015, 116–18. On the *chlanis* see n. 51 above.

70 Ar. *Vesp.* 1131: Philocleon is urged to remove his worn and shabby *tribon*; *Lys.* 278, where the *tribōnion* appears as the garment typically associated with the Spartans (cf. *An.* 1281, where the Spartans are portrayed as dirty and dishevelled); Pl. Com. fr. 132 K–A, where a character is described as being tripped up and simultaneously portrayed as wearing a *tribon*, with dirty fingers and a coarse, tow-like beard; the poet exploits the adjective *spartiōchaitēs* in a word-play that unmistakably evokes Sparta; Ar. *Lys.* 273–280, where the Spartan king Cleomenes I is represented as dirty, unkempt, and dressed in a *tribōnion*; [Dem.] 54.34, where *tribon* and *embades* are associated with Sparta; Plut. *Ages.* 14.2, where the *tribon* appears as the garment worn by Agesilaus; Pl. *Prt.* 335d; *Symp.* 219d; Xen. *Mem.* 1.6.2, where the *tribon* is the garment characteristically associated with Socrates. On the Laconising fashion adopted by segments of the anti-democratic elite, see Cartledge 1999, 313–14, who distinguishes three forms of socio-cultural philolaconism: (1) a symbolic or cultural philolaconism, expressed through the adoption of markers perceived as distinctly Spartan; (2) a pragmatic philolaconism, characteristic of political actors who regarded Sparta as a viable institutional alternative to Athens; and (3) a political-theoretical philolaconism, articulated in philosophical positions that could—but did not necessarily—overlap with pragmatic alignment. Whether this Laconising fashion should be understood as part of a broader project aimed at reshaping Athens along Spartan lines, or rather as a countercultural posture through which dissident elites asserted an oppositional identity in response to the erosion of their political primacy under democracy, remains debated: cf. Jordović 2014, who favours the latter interpretation; Gallego 2018, who instead argues for the existence of a coherent and wide-ranging political project.

71 Ar. *Nub.* 71–72; *Vesp.* 444; Theophr. *Char.* 4.15; Men. *Dys.* 415. On the *diphthera* see Stone 1984, 166–67. It is particularly telling that in Plato's *Crito* (53d), in the celebrated prosopopoeia of the Laws, Socrates is imagined escaping from prison wearing a *diphthera*. This sartorial detail is far from incidental. In abandoning the legal order of the *polis* and crossing the boundary from citizen to fugitive, Socrates is represented as shedding the *himation* and donning instead attire associated with labour, marginality, and exclusion from the civic sphere. *E*

free—was commonly associated with poverty, servile status, or physically demanding activities.⁷² What emerges from this differentiated sartorial landscape is a clear normative expectation: the ideal *politēs* was required to present himself as sufficiently well-off and, above all, as a man in control of his own time.

This expectation is articulated with particular clarity in comedy, albeit often through carnivalesque inversion. In the *Ecclesiazusae*, for instance, the chorus remarks that only those who arrive at the Assembly covered in dust and reeking of garlic will receive the *triobolon*.⁷³ At the literal level, the dust clearly alludes to the frantic rush of citizens competing to be among the first admitted and thus eligible for assembly pay.⁷⁴ Yet, within the broader symbolic economy of the play—and against the background of a tacit civic dress code that presupposed the *himation* as the appropriate attire for political participation—the motif of dust may also evoke a more charged imagery. In a context where the citizen was expected to appear as visibly unmarked by manual labour, the dusty body could implicitly recall agricultural work and its physical traces, which were conventionally perceived as incongruous with the performance of institutional roles in the urban and political space.⁷⁵ The joke thus operates on multiple levels, playfully conflating haste, bodily excess, and social impropriety.

Likewise, in Menander's *Epitrepontes*, Smikrines rebukes Syros and Davos for preparing to take part in an arbitration (*dikas legein*) while dressed in goatskins (*diphtherai*).⁷⁶ This reproach should not be read in a rather simplistic manner

contrario, the passage underscores once more the powerful symbolic association between the *himation* and the condition of the *politēs*.

72 See Stone 1984, 175-6; Lee 2015, 112.

73 Ar. *Ecl.* 289-291.

74 See Ussher 1973, 116. Payment was not distributed to all participants in the Assembly, but only to those who arrived early enough to secure the required quorum, which some scholars regard as fluctuating (Gauthier 1990, 439-43; 1993b, 239-50), while others maintain that it was fixed at 6,000 ("normal attendance": Hansen 1987, 15-17, 41, 44, 87-88, 92, 127, 129; 1999, 130-31). On the symbolic function of the quorum, and in particular of the number 6,000 at Athens, see Canevaro 2018a, 118-19.

75 For a parallel association between dirt and agricultural labour, cf. Ar. *Nub.* 44-45. Plutarch reports that at Epidaurus there existed a group known as the Konipodes ("dusty-footed"), explicitly distinguished from the political elite, the so-called Artynoi (Plut. *Aet. Rom. Et. Gr.* 291 E). The precise social status of the Konipodes is difficult to determine: they may have consisted of agricultural labourers dependent on elite households, or more broadly of the non-elite population, possibly including independent farmers: see Burford 1993, 201-2, 228-9. What seems clear, however, is that Konipodes functioned as a derogatory heteronym. The label itself suggests that, in Greek social imagery, the constellation dust-agrarian labour-exclusion from the politically dominant group was sufficiently entrenched to generate symbolic pressure. Those engaged in agricultural work who nonetheless participated in political life—as was normal in a democracy—appear to have been encouraged to conceal the visible traces of physical labour.

76 Men. *Epit.* 228-230.

as the snobbish reaction of an upper-class character to inappropriate attire.⁷⁷ Rather, following Susan Lape's influential interpretation of Menander's comedies as deeply political dramas, the scene participates in a broader ideological project that seeks to reaffirm democratic egalitarianism by representing the civic body as cohesive and symbolically levelled upwards. In Lape's reading, Menander's dramatic world promotes a renewed commitment to the principles underpinning the Periclean citizenship law, staging an idealised vision of the *polis* in which civic identity is grounded in shared status and moral equivalence rather than in overt socio-economic differentiation.⁷⁸ This ideological thrust is all the more significant given the highly unstable political context of Menander's production, a period marked by repeated challenges to democracy and by drastic, property-based reductions of the citizen body.⁷⁹ Within the play itself, the *diphthera* is shortly thereafter identified by Syros as a garment typically associated with slaves, reinforcing its connotations of servile status.⁸⁰ What is crucial in the present scene, however, is that Smikrines is unaware of the servile condition of Davos and Syros. The two are in fact attempting to usurp the right to arbitration, a procedure reserved for free persons, in the hope of appropriating a child who carries the material tokens of free civic status and thereby disguising their own condition.⁸¹ Against this background, Smikrines' rebuke

77 For this interpretation see Furley 2009, 145.

78 Lape 2001, 105-12; 2004 *passim*: she explicitly stresses that the recurrent depiction of wealthy citizens in Menander's comedies should not be taken as evidence that his drama simply amplifies elite values, as argued by Gomme 1937; Préaux 1957; Casson 1976; Hoffman 1986; 1998; Hofmeister 1997; Rosivach 2001. On the contrary, this representational choice serves a distinctly ideological purpose. By populating the stage with economically secure citizens, Menander articulates a utopian vision of the civic body as cohesive and internally levelled, one not fractured by stark socio-economic inequalities. In this imagined community, all citizens appear as comfortably well-off—or at least as less impoverished than many must have been in social reality—thereby naturalising an ideal of civic homogeneity that aligns with democratic egalitarian aspirations rather than with elite exclusivism.

79 On the restriction of the civic body in 322 BCE, imposed by Antipater, to those possessing an assessed property of at least 2,000 drachmas, see Habicht 1997, 40; Patterson 1998, 186-87. According to a substantial part of the scholarship, a further restriction of the civic body took place under the regime of Demetrius of Phalerum, when the minimum property requirement for inclusion was lowered from 2,000 to 1,000 drachmas: see *e.g.* Patterson 1998, 188-91; O'Sullivan 2009, 108-16. A more recent proposal, grounded in a different interpretation of Diodorus (18.74.3), argues that Demetrius of Phalerum's reform did not introduce a single minimum property qualification of 1,000 drachmas. Rather, it appears to have preserved a graded system of census classes, with 1,000 drachmas marking the upper tier. The wording of Diodorus points to an upper limit rather than an exclusionary minimum, thereby implying a more inclusive arrangement than is often assumed: van Wees 2011, 97; Faraguna 2018, 462-63. On the oligarchic regime established by Demetrius Poliorcetes from 295 BCE onwards, see Habicht 1997, 88-91.

80 Men. *Epit.* 325-334 with Vester 2013, 218-19.

81 See Wester 2013, 216-21, who rightly concludes that *Epitrepontes* "reflects the inability of Athens to regulate its own citizen body after 322 BCE, but does not give up on the idea

acquires a more precise ideological meaning: it implicitly asserts that participation in civic procedures—even in a private arbitral setting—presupposes an appearance consonant with freedom, leisure, and a minimum level of material respectability.

It is therefore significant that the expression *dikas legein* is used to describe the intention of the two slaves to submit their dispute to arbitration. While it is true that both *dikē* and related verbal forms can, even in oratorical sources where terminological precision might be expected, refer to private arbitration as well as to formal litigation,⁸² their prototypical meaning remains that of a private dispute formally channelled into the civic justice system—normally to be decided first by public arbitrators and, in the event of *epheisis*, ultimately brought before a panel of *dikastai*.⁸³ In this light, Menander's choice of language need not be neutral. Rather, it may be read as a deliberate strategy aimed at intensifying the thematic blurring of status boundaries that runs throughout the play. By employing a term so closely associated with the institutional machinery of civic justice—one of the primary arenas in which Athenian citizenship was enacted and performed—the playwright reinforces the extent of the usurpation being attempted: the slaves do not merely appropriate access to arbitration, but symbolically encroach upon one of the most emblematic prerogatives of the free *politēs*. The phrase thus evokes, for the audience, a judicial horizon in which civic identity found one of its most concrete expressions, thereby heightening the ideological stakes of the scene.

3. Creative “trickle down” of the masses and symbolic struggles

What emerges from a combined analysis of iconographic and literary sources is that, with the advent of democracy and the socio-economic expansion that began in the late sixth century—marked by the rise of a broad stratum of independent small farmers, merchants, and artisan-shopkeepers—ever larger segments of the population gained access to symbolic practices and modes

of the citizen or the means by which one could be recognized”. Syros’ attempt to blur the statutory boundary between his condition as a slave and that of a free citizen reaches its climax in vv. 416-418. Having delivered the arbitral decision and evidently exhilarated by this unprecedented experience, he declares that he must practise pleading cases, so that he may do so again in the future and more effectively safeguard his own interests: see Scafuro 1997, 158-59.

82 See e.g. [Dem.] 34.21; 40.16, 44. This terminological overlap reflects a basic feature of Greek legal culture, in which judges and arbitrators were regarded as functionally analogous figures, whose decisions were expected to be informed by the same principles of justice and fairness: see Arist. *Eth. Nic.* 1131b 39-1132a 32 with Harris 2013, 276-85; Lentini 2016, 22-26.

83 See e.g. Lys. 32.2; Isae. 2.28-29; 5.31; [Dem.] 41.1, where *dikē* is set in opposition to the terminology more properly associated with arbitration (*diaila*, *diailtaō*, *epitropē*, *epitropō*).

of life that enabled the performance of shared civic values. In this context, the masses came to appropriate a number of distinctive symbols that, prior to the democratic transition, had largely belonged to the elites. As van Wees has shown through his analysis of vase painting, from the mid-seventh century onward elite figures are increasingly represented wearing the *himation*, which progressively replaces armour in elite iconography.⁸⁴

This process may be described as a form of “trickle-down”, provided that the term is not understood as passive imitation. Rather, it involved a creative and selective appropriation. On the one hand, the masses internalised and reproduced a stigma attached to clothing that visibly evoked manual labour—a logic that can already be traced back to early Greek literature. In the *Odyssey*, for example, Laertes is portrayed while working his land in a manner that initially leads Odysseus to mistake him for a servant: despite recognising certain bodily features befitting a man of noble birth, Odysseus is struck by the incongruity between Laertes’ appearance and his royal status. His clothing, in particular, closely resembles what later sources would associate with rural poverty, signalling a dissonance between lineage and outward, material presentation.⁸⁵ This same symbolic logic re-emerges, with greater ideological sharpness, in archaic elite discourse, such as Theognis’ contempt for those who, through rapid upward mobility, had risen to prominence at Megara despite having once been farmers clad in goatskins.⁸⁶ On the other hand, this appropriation did not entail the uncritical adoption of the entire elite symbolic repertoire. Practices such as letting garments fall to the ankles and trail along the ground—an *habitus* highly

84 Van Wees 1998. It should nevertheless be noted that this iconographic shift does not signal a substantive transformation in elite values, as though Greek elites had moved from a warrior *ethos* to one centred on leisure: for this interpretation see Murray 1980, 80; Donlan 1999, 49–64; Węcowski 2014. Rather, it reflects a change in visual fashion and modes of representation. As van Wees and Fisher have shown, archaic Greek elites had always been characterised simultaneously by military prowess as a legitimating principle and by the display of leisure as a principle of distinction: see van Wees, Fisher 2015, 27.

85 Hom. *Od.* 24.226–231. It should further be noted that the strongly elitist matrix of Odysseus’ discourse becomes even more apparent if one accepts that Laertes’ agricultural holding was not that of a small peasant proprietor, but rather a large and prosperous estate. Laertes should therefore be understood not as a yeoman farmer, but as a landlord: on Laertes as a large landholder see van Wees 2013, 224–26 *contra* Hanson (1995, 48–51, 65–66, 87), who maintains that Laertes embodies the characteristic features of the class of small independent landowners, whose rise he dates to the mid-eighth century BCE.

86 Thgn. 1.53–58. In van Wees’ suggestive reading, these apparently upwardly mobile former farmers and herdsman do not represent a cohort of *nouveaux riches* who achieved prominence through commercial success or economic entrepreneurship at the expense of the traditional aristocracy. Instead, they are more plausibly to be seen as the armed followers of elite families who gained control of Megara in a climate of acute social instability, characterised by violence, manipulation, and intimidation rather than by peaceful economic competition: van Wees 2000, 63. For the intense social mobility characteristic of archaic Megara, see also Stein-Hölkeskamp 1989, 86–93, 134–38.

valued by Sappho⁸⁷ and, as seen above in the case of the *himation*, by segments of the classical elite or by those who sought, often awkwardly, to emulate elite postures—came to be criticised, while the ostentatious display of overly luxurious clothing was likewise ridiculed or met with civic disapproval.⁸⁸

At times, however, when representation shifts from the individual citizen to the *demos* conceived as a collective body, the symbolic register changes accordingly. In such contexts, the imagery mobilised is no longer that of measured respectability but of luxury and splendour—forms of visual excess that, in social practice, remained largely the prerogative of elite groups even in the classical period. In the *Lysistrata*, the Athenians are said to have been freed by the Spartans from the tyranny of the Peisistratids, at which point they cast off the servile *katónakē* and donned the *chlaina*.⁸⁹ A similar but more complex op-

87 Sappho (fr. 57 Lobel-Page) mocks her rival, Andromeda, portraying her as a country girl in rustic clothing who does not know how to lower her tattered garments to her ankles. Here reappears a symbolic element that, though perceived as excessively elitist also in classical Athens, remained deeply resonant: letting a garment fall to the ankles and drag behind as a mark of pretentiousness: cf. Alc. fr. 130b, 17-18. Some scholars have mistakenly taken the expression ἔλκην ἐπὶ τῶν σφύρων to mean “to lift the garment above the ankles” (e.g. Yatromanolakis 2005; Ferrari 2007, 48-9), the phrase in fact denotes the opposite, namely letting the garment fall down to the ankles and trail along the ground: see Cavallini 1998, Telò 2006, 42-4 and Neri 2021, 662-63. Moreover, Sappho cleverly plays on a dialectal ambiguity between *brakos* and *rhakos*. In Aeolic dialect, *brakos* refers to a luxurious garment, as shown in a Theocritean passage inspired by Aeolic poetry—evident from its Asclepiadean meter (Theoc. *Id.* 28.11): see Neri 2021, 662. In Homeric and later Attic Greek, however, *rhakos* means “rag”. Thus, Sappho wittily suggests that Andromeda, albeit a member of the elite, wears a luxurious robe that resembles the rags of a peasant woman. In short, the symbolic representation of the citizen in the democratic *polis* partly inherits the elite’s earlier symbolic repertoire, particularly in its stigmatization of clothing associated with poverty and humility. For a detailed discussion of the transformation of sartorial codes from the Homeric world to the lyric milieu of Sappho and Alcaeus, see van Wees 2005.

88 See e.g. Ephip. fr. 19, where a (probably Macedonian) general is depicted trailing his *chlanis* with ostentatious pomp, and Anaxil. fr. 18 K-A, in which a rustic figure is mocked for aping wealth by dragging his *chlanis* along the ground. A further—and more oblique—reflection of the disapproval that democratic culture seems to have harboured toward garments worn down to the ankles may be detected in Euripides’ *Bacchae* (935-938), where Dionysus reproaches Pentheus for letting his *peplos*, badly secured by the girdle, fall to his ankles.

89 Ar. *Lys.* 1146-1152. The *katónakē* designates a rough, heavy garment, typically edged with sheepskin, and conventionally associated with manual labour. In the literary sources it is worn above all by slaves and by individuals engaged in physically demanding work, and thus functions as a visual marker of low status and dependence: Stone 1984, 167. Several ancient sources associate the *katónakē* with the Peisistratid tyranny. According to Theopompus (*FGrHist* II 5 F 76, 3.11), Pollux (7.68), Hesychius (s.v. κατωνάκη), and the Suda (s.v. κατωνάκη), the garment was imposed upon the Athenians by the Peisistratids, with the result that, ashamed of their appearance, they avoided coming into the city. A different explanation is offered by the scholion on Aristophanes (*Lys.* 619), which claims that Hippias required the Athenians to wear the *katónakē* so that they would be unable to free their hands from the heavy garment. In the context of *Lysistrata*, however, the reference may be intended less as a literal account of dress regulation than as a symbolic evocation of the Athenians’ humiliation and subjection

eration is at work in *Knights*. The *dēmos*, after being “boiled down” and renewed by the Sausage-Seller and finally liberated from the Paphlagon—Cleon—reappears adorned with a golden cicada in his hair, precisely the emblem attributed by Thucydides to the elite men of an earlier age.⁹⁰ In the same play, the *dēmos* is explicitly described as *monarchos* and *basileus* of Hellas.⁹¹ Significantly, however, the imagery of tyranny is introduced earlier in the drama, in a different and more diagnostic register. In the scene in which the Chorus of Knights confronts Demos directly, while both the Sausage-Seller and the Paphlagonian are momentarily absent, Demos is told that he possesses immense *archē* and is feared like a tyrant. This comparison is not meant as a denunciation of popular rule as such, but functions as a metaphor on two closely related levels: on the one hand, it evokes Athens’ naval empire and its uncontested domination over the *symmachoi*;⁹² on the other, it gestures toward the extraordinary concentration of power exercised by the *dēmos* through its control of the city’s principal constitutional bodies—the Assembly, the lawcourts, and the magistracies.⁹³ The

under tyrannical rule: see Perusino 2020, 303–4. It is worth noting that in archaic Sicily there existed a group of individuals designated as *Katōnakephoroi* (“wearers of the *katōnakē*”). Much like the *Konipodes* at Epidaurus (see above n. 75), this label may have referred either to agricultural wage labourers or, more broadly, to the rural lower strata as a whole—that is, to those who stood outside the families constituting the dominant elites. It thus appears that, even in the collective imagination of the classical period, the *katōnakē* remained associated with a condition of alterity and symbolic distance from the political domain.

90 *Eq.* 1331; Thuc. 1.6.3 cf. *Ar. Nu.* 984. For a detailed discussion of the form of this gold hair clasp, the specific hairstyle associated with this archaic fashion—probably involving long hair gathered into a bun—and the position of the ornament, see Gomme 1971, 101–4. It is not clear whether a brooch or a hairband is here in question: see Rumpf 1949, 85–99. The reference to the cicada is in any case unlikely to be incidental. It was most probably connected with the notion of autochthony: according to a suggestive hypothesis advanced by Hornblower (1991, 26; see also Kitchell 2014, 31), this association may be explained by the fact that cicadas lay their larvae in the earth, from which they are born, thus offering a natural metaphor for the Athenians’ self-representation as autochthonous, born from the soil of Attica itself: on the description of the reproductive cycle of cicadas in ancient sources, see Davies, Kathirithamby 1986, 124–26; Beavis 1988, 96–97.

91 *Ar. Eq.* 1329–1334.

92 The clearest and most influential articulations of Athens’ self-representation as exercising a form of tyrannical power over its allies are found in the speeches attributed by Thucydides to Pericles and Cleon (Thuc. 2.63.2; 3.37.2). On the conceptual overlap between *polis tyrannos* and *dēmos tyrannos* as two sides of the same ideological construct, see Kallet 2003 *contra* Raaflaub 2003, 77–82; 2004b, 141–42, who insists on a sharp analytical distinction between the tyranny of the city and that of the people.

93 *Ar. Eq.* 1111–1114: ὦ Δῆμε, καλὴν γ’ ἔχεις / ἀρχήν, ὅτε πάντες ἄνθρωποι δεδίασι σ’ ὥς / περ ἄνδρα τύραννον. As Lisa Kallet has rightly emphasised, particular weight should be given to the adjective *καλή*. In this context, the reference to tyranny does not carry a negative connotation: Kallet 2003, 137–40. For the partial semantic and conceptual overlap between *monarchos* and *tyrannos*, which are often difficult to distinguish in Greek sources, see Berve 1967, 194–95, 199; Giorgini 1993, 81–82; Parker 1998, 149–54. After all, this overlap between the two figures fits squarely within the earliest Greek lexical and political tradition—a

reproach that accompanies this image is therefore not directed at the existence of such power, but at its vulnerability to demagogic mediation: despite commanding an authority comparable to that of a tyrant, Demos allows himself to be repeatedly misled, flattered, and instrumentalised by those who claim to act in his name.⁹⁴

This imagery is unmistakably embedded in a grotesque, carnivalesque, and deliberately paradoxical register. Yet it should not be read as a straightforward endorsement of elite hostility toward the urban populace. Rather, in *Knights* Aristophanes gives dramatic form to a perception widely circulating in contemporary political discourse, according to which a section of the *dēmos*—those most constantly present within democratic institutions—was particularly exposed to manipulation. The *dēmos* who initially appears as gullible, irascible, and manipulable thus corresponds not to the civic body as such, nor to the urban masses as a social group per se, but to a distorted and factionalised configuration of popular power produced by demagogic capture.⁹⁵

tradition later taken up and systematised by Plato in the fourth century (*Leg.* 3.693 d-e)—which was essentially structured around a fundamental binary scheme. This scheme admitted, on the one hand, monocratic regimes (whether conceived as monarchies or tyrannies), and, on the other, isonomic and broadly “republican” forms of rule: see Musti 1995, 281-82. For an insightful analysis of the Greek ideological rejection of monocratic forms of government, and of the argument that the radically distorted figure of the tyrant constituted the primary—if not the only—conceptual framework through which Greeks were able to articulate a discourse on monarchy, see Luraghi 2018.

94 Ar. *Eq.* 1115-1119: ἀλλ'εὐπαράγωγος εἶ / θωπευόμενός τε χαί/ρεις κάζαπατώμενος, / πρὸς τὸν τε λέγοντ'ἂεὶ / κέχηνας cf. *Ach.* 633-635.

95 Cf. Canfora 2017, 18-19, who rightly emphasises the polysemy of *dēmos* in *Knights* and convincingly argues that the rejuvenated Demos of the finale figures the civic body as a whole, rather than a merely politicised minority. I fully share this conclusion. I am less persuaded, however, by Canfora's tendency to identify the degraded Demos of the opening scenes primarily with the urban, propertyless masses most actively engaged in assembly politics. In *Knights*, the initial Demos appears instead as a deliberately overdetermined and internally contradictory figure: he is held captive by a demagogue of urban extraction (the Paphlagonian), yet he is also characterised as *agroikos* (*Eq.* 41); at the same time, he is described as chewing beans (*kyamotrox*)—an image that may evoke the fifth-century practice of allotment by lot (*klērosis*), carried out precisely through beans, and thus points to his institutional embodiment as the civic body exercising magistracies and judicial power: see Taillardat 1962, 395-96; Rhodes 1981, 149; Biles, Olson 2025, 154. In this sense, rural and urban connotations already coexist in the figure of Demos from the outset. Moreover, his “renewal” is brought about by the Sausage-Seller, himself an unmistakably urban figure. More broadly, the assumption that political absenteeism or manipulability should be mapped predominantly onto the rural population risks reproducing an ideological association widely exploited by anti-democratic elites, rather than reflecting comic practice. As *Acharnians* suggests (19-42), assembly absenteeism and political disengagement were perceived as generalised phenomena cutting across socio-economic segments, including those habitually present in the agora. From this perspective, the gullible Demos of the opening scenes is best understood not as a sociologically circumscribed subgroup, but as a distorted configuration of popular power under demagogic

This differentiation is not merely a comic abstraction. It reflects a real and increasingly visible tension within the popular bloc in the later fifth century, particularly during the Peloponnesian War, when the forced concentration of large segments of the rural population within the city walls produced material hardship, political dislocation, and resentment.⁹⁶ Temporarily urbanised peasants and farmers found themselves marginalised within institutional spaces long dominated by established urban constituencies—artisans, shopkeepers, labourers, and habitual participants in the Assembly and lawcourts⁹⁷—thus exacerbating latent fractures within the popular front.⁹⁸ Aristophanes registers these tensions, but does not mobilise them in the service of an anti-democratic programme.

The regenerated Demos of the final scenes, by contrast, does not simply idealise a rural past nor purge the urban element. Rather, it figures a recomposed popular front, in which rural and urban constituencies are brought back into alignment.⁹⁹ Crucially, this restored Demos is not represented as standing in op-

capture—one that the comedy ultimately seeks to overcome through recomposition rather than exclusion: see n. 99 below.

96 See Ar. *Eq.* 792-794; *Ach.* 32-33, 71-72, 198; Thuc. 2.14.1-2, 17.1-3, 52.2 cf. And. 1.45.

97 Farmers undoubtedly participated in the assemblies and civic institutions of the *polis*; however, they constituted only one component of their sociological composition and, in certain phases or contexts, were in fact numerically and politically subordinate to other segments of the *demos*, particularly those of urban extraction: see e.g. Ar. *Ecl.* 431-436; Pl. *Prt.* 322d-323a; Xen. *Mem.* 3.7.5-6. Their participation was, moreover, structurally more demanding, given both the more intensive and less interruptible rhythms of agricultural labour (as compared to commerce and craftsmanship) and their greater physical distance from the urban centre: see e.g. Ar. *Ecl.* 280-282. It should be noted, however, that from both an economic standpoint and that of transport infrastructure, the urban centre and the rural areas of Attica were tightly integrated, with frequent and sustained interactions: see nn. 150 and 151 below and Falco 2025b, 236 n. 50, with references to earlier scholarship.

98 And the demagogues, in persistently inciting the Assembly masses to prolong the war, did nothing but perpetuate this condition of logistical hardship, thereby further exacerbating the internal fractures within the popular front: see Ar. *Eq.* 817-818 cf. *Vesp.* 41 with Biles, Olson 2025, 486-87.

99 It is no accident that this renewed Demos presents as a cornerstone of his political programme the prompt payment of those serving aboard the triremes—more specifically, of the rowers, as made clear by the obscene and burlesque reference to buttocks worn raw by prolonged contact with the benches (*Eq.* 1366-1368). In doing so, he implicitly signals that he no longer persists in the earlier failings attributed to him, when he neglected speakers urging the strengthening of the fleet and instead favoured those who courted him through the promise of jurors' pay (1350-1353). At the same time, when Demos threatens to hang Hyperbolus around an orator's neck and fling him into a ravine should he attempt to extort a conviction by menacing the people with the loss of grain, he performs the very *agroikia* earlier praised by the Sausage-Seller: a rough, anti-rhetorical mode of judgement that repudiates demagogic coercion rather than popular power as such (805-808, 1357-1363). It is worth noting, moreover, that this full integration of the various components of the complex Athenian social formation emerges repeatedly throughout the comedy. This is evident, for instance, when the Sausage-Seller celebrates not only the victory of the *demos* at Marathon—a land battle

position to the elite as such. He is instead explicitly supported by the Knights, whose elite connotations mark their role not as antagonists of popular sovereignty but as cooperative members of the civic whole.¹⁰⁰ This alliance—between the renewed Demos, the Sausage-Seller as a paradigmatic representative of the urban populace, and the Knights as an elite group reintegrated within the civic body—signals that the figure of Demos in the finale simultaneously designates the popular bloc in its socio-economic articulation and the *demos* in its institutional capacity as the body that deliberates and rules in the Assembly, and thus, in representational terms, the citizen body as a whole.¹⁰¹

Crucially, however, this moment of recomposition does not erase the underlying symbolic antagonism that structures the play. The alliance with the Knights is intelligible only against the background of a persistent struggle between the popular masses and the elites—a struggle that informs the very logic of representation at work in the play. Even where elite figures are reintegrated into the civic whole, this reintegration takes place on terrain defined by popular hegemony, and against the background of sustained attempts by sections of the elite to fracture the popular front by exploiting tensions within it, above all between urban and rural constituencies.¹⁰²

ideologically associated with infantry warfare and, more specifically, with the rural population and the traditional elite (cf. Critias fr. B 2.14; Pl. *Lg.* 707c; Ar. *Nub.* 985-986; *Ach.* 181, 692-701 but see *Ach.* 677 with Olson 2002, 128, 245)—but also that at Salamis, conventionally linked to ships and naval power (780-785 cf. *Vesp.* 684-685, where Bdelycleon, addressing his father and the other members of the Chorus, explicitly notes that they had contributed militarily to the city either as rowers or as infantrymen). A similar logic is at work when the second semi-chorus of the Knights, in all likelihood alluding to the battle of Solymeia, conjures up the striking image of their horses transforming into rowers (601-610). For a detailed analysis of the sources in which Aristophanes expresses appreciation for both Athenian land victories and naval victories—and, consequently, for both the land army and the fleet—see Tuci 2024, 45-52.

100 Ar. *Eq.* 1329-1330, 1333-1334.

101 See Canfora 2017, 22.

102 One may think, for example, of the Old Oligarch, who explicitly excludes farmers from the *demos*—which for him consists above all of the maritime population, the true backbone of the naval empire—and instead aligns them with the elites: [Xen.] *Atth. Pol.* 1.2 with Marr, Rhodes 2008, 22; Faraguna 2011, 95. A similar association recurs in Aristophanes' *Ecclesiazusae*, where farmers and hoplites are portrayed as opposing initiatives connected with the fleet, in contrast to the rest of the *demos*, generically designated as “the poor” (197-198). It should further be noted that this ideological construction, which casts the rural *demos* as less genuinely “democratic” than its urban counterpart, constitutes a recurring leitmotif in anti-democratic literature: see e.g. [Arist.] *Rhet. ad Alex.* 1424a 13-38; Arist. *Pol.* 6.1318b 6-16, 1319a 25-38; Plut. *Them.* 19.6. It should nonetheless be borne in mind that the appreciation occasionally expressed for farmers in anti-democratic discourse rests precisely on their more limited availability for sustained political participation. This circumstance renders their position structurally ambivalent, since it could just as easily ground an alternative—and equally delegitimising—accusation against popular involvement in politics, namely that working

In this sense, the spectacular elevation of Demos—his monarchic status, tyrannical aura, and conspicuous display of wealth—retains a polemical edge. It articulates a collective self-representation forged in opposition to elite claims to exclusive access to splendour, authority, and symbolic distinction. The figure of Demos as a luxurious tyrant thus condenses both the assertion of popular sovereignty and the lived experience of social conflict that made such an assertion necessary - thereby preserving the intrinsic semantic ambiguity of the concept of *dēmos*, oscillating between its politico-institutional sense as the civic body as a whole and its sociological sense as the popular masses.¹⁰³

This symbolic condensation becomes all the more striking when set against the institutional realities of Athenian imperial rule. If one shifts the focus from the internal dynamics of civic self-representation to Athens' relations with its *symmachoi*, the image of a tyrannical *dēmos* acquires a further dimension. The Athenian empire undoubtedly provided a framework of maritime security, commercial circulation, and juridical regulation that could benefit interstate exchange;¹⁰⁴ yet it also rested on relations of political subordination and hierarchical inequality between the metropolitan citizen body and allied communities. At the same time, imperial expansion itself was not solely the project of a narrow ruling elite. From its late Archaic antecedents—where individual initiatives by leading families operated in synergy with collective Athenian interests¹⁰⁵—to the Classical empire, whose benefits extended to wider segments of the citizen body through mechanisms such as cleruchies, colonial settlements, and military employment, imperial power was also embedded in broader structures of civic participation.¹⁰⁶

Seen in this light, the representation of the *dēmos* as tyrannical should not be understood merely as an ideological projection of internal social conflict. Rather, it emerges at the intersection between internal democratic self-assertion and the external exercise of imperial domination. The image of a sovereign *dēmos* thus articulated at once the experience of popular power within the *polis* and the hierarchical political order through which Athens exercised authority over its allies.

The analogy with tyranny draws on the well-known ambivalence that characterised Greek perceptions of tyrannical power: tyranny was simultaneously conceived as an absolute evil for those subjected to it and as a condition of

citizens were too absorbed in labour to engage seriously in civic life: see n. 129 below and above all § 4.

103 On the *dēmos* to be understood as the entire civic body see e.g. Thuc. 6.39 with Canfora 1991, 134–37.

104 See Gabrielsen 2018, 29–32; Faraguna 2023a, 154–56.

105 See Kallet 2013, 52–54.

106 On Athenian settlements within the empire and their social composition see Zelnick-Abramovitz 2004.

unrestrained pleasure, splendour, and freedom from constraint for those who exercised it.¹⁰⁷ The plausibility of assimilating the *dēmos* to a tyrant rests precisely on two defining features of democratic power: *eleutheros einai* and *archein*.¹⁰⁸ Like the tyrant, the collective citizen body is represented as free from subjection to any external authority, unrivalled in its command over resources, and unmatched in its capacity for expenditure—most visibly materialised in the city’s monumental building programme.¹⁰⁹ To this must be added a further structural parallel: the effective absence of accountability (see below).¹¹⁰ In both its deliberative and judicial functions, the *dēmos* appears as a sovereign agent answerable to no higher instance, thereby reinforcing the image of a political subject whose power, autonomy, and control over wealth invite comparison with tyrannical rule.

Nor should the broader historical background be overlooked. According to a widely accepted—though not uncontested—reconstruction, the economic and commercial expansion that fostered the emergence of a class of small entrepreneurs—independent farmers, shopkeepers, merchants, and artisans—took place in the late sixth century, roughly in parallel with the formal establishment of democracy.¹¹¹ Although democracy emerged from the collapse of the Peisistratid tyranny, that same tyrannical regime had already exposed the structural vulnerabilities and limitations of the archaic elites who had long monopolised political power, thereby opening new spaces of opportunity for members of the non-elite population.¹¹² Significantly, the tyrant himself was not an outsider to the elite world, but an elite actor who rose above competing elite groups and curtailed their capacity to exercise political and social dominance, doing so—albeit only in part and in specific phases—through the mobilisation and support of the masses.¹¹³ The collective self-representation of the *dēmos* as

107 For the intrinsic ambivalence of the concept of tyranny, see Connor 1977; Raaflaub 1984, 73–7; Trampedach 2006, 3–28; Luraghi 2013b, 17. With specific reference to the Athenian *dēmos*, its naval empire, and the exercise of political dominance both abroad and at home, see Kallet 2003; Henderson 2003. By contrast, other scholars have maintained that the image of tyranny in the Athenian context is consistently and exclusively negative: see Raaflaub 2003; 2004b, 128–46; Ober 2003. For a systematic study of the occurrences of the term *tyrannos* in Attic drama and its function as a *vox media*, see O’Neil 1986.

108 See Aesch. *Pr.* 49–50; Pl. *Leg.* 661a–b; cf. [Xen.] *Ath. Pol.* 1.8. On the close association between *eleutheria* and *archē*, see also Thuc. 3.45.6.

109 See Hdt. 1.59.6; Thuc. 6.54.5; Arist. *Pol.* 5.1313b 21–24.

110 Herodotus presents non-accountability as a defining feature of the tyrant (3.80.3).

111 See van Wees 2001; 2013; 2024, 144–8 *contra e.g.* Hanson 1995 cf. n. 85 above.

112 See Stein-Hölkeskamp 1989, 149–53.

113 On the tyrant as a figure firmly embedded within the elite world, see already Heuss 1946, 26–62; further developed by Stahl 1987 and De Libero 1996. In particular, for the persistence of unmistakably elite—and in many respects aristocratic—traits in Peisistratus’ self-presentation and in the institutional practices of his tyranny, see Berve 1967, 60–63. The older and now largely abandoned view of the tyrant as a primarily “popular leader” finds classic expression in Weber 1972⁵, 784, but has been substantially revised by subsequent scholarship: see Mazzarino 1989², 185–243; Mossé 1969, 87–88.

wealthy, dominant, and even “tyrannical” thus reflects not only comic exaggeration but also the historical experience of a citizen body whose material and symbolic horizons had been significantly expanded.

If one accepts, following van Wees, that already from the Solonian period the most consequential socio-economic and political divide lay between the first three census classes on the one hand—the leisure elite—and the *thētes* on the other, it becomes easier to account for later developments.¹¹⁴ Even after the advent of democracy, the *thētes*—now comprising not only subsistence wage-labourers but also a growing stratum of independent small producers—remained excluded from the highest magistracies.¹¹⁵ Against this background, it is understandable that in the second half of the fifth century (the era of “full democracy”, see below) the *dēmos* should have felt compelled to complement the legitimating principle of equality with selected symbolic markers through which elites had traditionally asserted a claim to legitimate authority exercised for the good of the community. Among these markers, leisure occupied a privileged position, precisely because it functioned as both a prerequisite for active civic participation and a long-standing emblem of social distinction monopolised by the leisure elite.

Precisely because the *dēmos* could be imagined and represented, at the collective level, as wealthy, powerful, and even monarchic or tyrannical, the ostentatious display of wealth by individual citizens was liable to attract censure. Democratic *metriotēs* functioned in this respect as a constraint on the private deployment of economic capital: excellence was expected to find its proper expression not in personal luxury, but above all through liturgies performed for the benefit of the community.¹¹⁶ This dissociation between collective splendour and individual restraint—which amounts to a pointed polemic against elite claims to exclusive distinction—rests on the same ideological matrix as another, closely related principle: the systematic neutralisation of individual wealth within institutional and political contexts. This logic finds particularly clear articulation in comedy. In *Wasps*, Philocleon proudly proclaims his indifference not to

114 See n. 111 above. A central element of van Wees’ argument is that the property threshold required for inclusion in the zeugitic census class was set sufficiently high to create a substantial socio-economic distance between *zeugitai* and *thētes*. Far from constituting an intermediate or genuinely “middling” group, the *zeugitai* thus belonged fully to the leisure class, sharing with it not only material resources but also the social and symbolic conditions that made sustained participation in civic life possible: see van Wees 2001; 2006; 2024, 129–33 *contra* Foxhall 1997; 2002; Valdés Guía, Gallego 2010.

115 See Cecchet 2024a, 100–02, who rightly emphasises that, although census classes formally continued to exist and to operate in certain institutional contexts, in the later classical period they no longer constituted an effective barrier to the access of the *thētes* to magistracies. Self-declaration made it relatively easy to misrepresent one’s census status—a development that is readily intelligible given that the census classes had ceased to correspond to individuals’ actual levels of wealth: see also van Wees 2024, 130–31.

116 See Fisher, van Wees 2015, 33–34.

wealth as such, but to the wealth of individual rich citizens, asserting that as a *dikastes* he is omnipotent, feared even by the wealthy, and therefore effectively independent of their material resource.¹¹⁷ He also boasts of the fact that judicial power is *anypeuthynos*, not subject to accountability, thereby evoking—however obliquely—one of the defining features traditionally associated with monocratic authority.¹¹⁸ The boast thus rests on the idea that judicial power itself—reinforced by the pay attached to it—places the ordinary citizen in a position of collective superiority, allowing the *dēmos* to mock individual wealth from a stance of presumed autonomy.

Bdelycleon will shortly dismantle this self-congratulatory vision, pointing out that real enrichment accrues not to the people but to corrupt demagogues, who exploit the *dēmos*—and especially the jurors—as compliant instruments of their own gain.¹¹⁹ Yet significantly, this critique does not challenge the underlying assumption that the *dēmos* ought to be wealthy and autonomous—note that although Bdelycleon does not return explicitly to this second point, he does not call it into question; its implications will be taken up again below. On the contrary, Bdelycleon insists that, given Athens' vast imperial dominion secured by naval power, the people could—and should—live in abundance.¹²⁰ It is telling, in this respect, that among the benefits associated with politics and empire comedy repeatedly invokes *plouthygieia*, wealth and well-being. The term recurs not only in *Wasps* but also in *Knights*, where it figures prominently within the agonistic competition between the Paphlagonian (Cleon) and the Sausage-Seller to demonstrate who truly cares for Demos.¹²¹ Significantly, it is the Paphlagonian who imagines Athena pouring a libation of *plouthygieia* upon Demos' head—a transparently hypocritical gesture of demagogic flattery. Yet the very effectiveness of this image within the comic contest presupposes that *plouthygieia* resonated as a powerful and legitimate aspiration within popular political culture. Even when deployed cynically by a figure like Cleon, wealth and well-being remain presented as proper, even expected, attributes of the collective *dēmos*.

Taken together, these representations suggest that within democratic self-representation neither the wealth nor the power of the masses was treated as an embarrassment to be denied. On the contrary, Athenian public discourse consistently portrayed—and encouraged the *dēmos* to conceive of itself

117 Ar. *Vesp.* 553-554, 575, 625-627. Particularly revealing are the lines in which Philocleon insists that, thanks to his pay as a juror, he is no longer compelled to depend on the goodwill of the wealthy, nor to subject himself to the arrogance and rebukes of their *tamiai* (stewards): see *Vesp.* 612-615 with Biles, Olson 2015, 279-80.

118 Ar. *Vesp.* 587, cf. n. 110 above.

119 Ar. *Vesp.* 666-679, 698-712.

120 On Aristophanes' largely positive disposition toward the Athenian empire—and, by extension, toward naval power and the sailors who sustained it—see Henderson 2003; Tuci 2024.

121 Ar. *Eq.* 1091; *Vesp.* 677.

as—destined to prosperity and dominance, even while condemning excessive luxury at the level of individual conduct.

Such imagery was far from isolated. It resonated strongly with the democratic propaganda that flourished especially in the second half of the fifth century—a discourse marked by pronounced optimism and by an ethical valorisation of economic activity. This propaganda was not merely rhetorical, but found tangible support in the visible prosperity of Athenian markets and, more broadly, in the relatively high standards of living attained by the city's population. In this period, the markets of Athens were perceived as overflowing with goods of every kind, while imperial revenues materially translated the city's power and grandeur into an ambitious and highly visible building programme.¹²² The durability of this ideological framework is suggested by the fact that even in the fourth century Demosthenes could reproach Meidias for the excessive splendour of his private residence on the grounds that it surpassed that of public buildings.¹²³

A further reflection of this enduring conception of collective prosperity emerges in fourth-century oratory, where the alleged poverty of the *dēmos* is articulated through a clear *laudatio temporis acti*. The present condition of hardship is repeatedly construed as the loss of an earlier phase of generalised abundance, implicitly associated with the height of Athenian power. In this rhetorical framework, the *dēmos* is not portrayed as structurally destitute, but as unjustly deprived of a level of prosperity that is represented as its natural and rightful condition.¹²⁴ Crucially, the orators exploit the relativity of the notion of poverty (*penia*), defining it in contrast to the standards of the leisure class rather than as a condition of absolute deprivation.¹²⁵ What is at stake is not *ptōcheia*—that is, beggary or extreme want,¹²⁶ perceived in Athenian thought as the absolute social evil and the paradigmatic condition of exclusion¹²⁷—but a relative improv-

122 On the activist *ethos* and the optimism characteristic of Athenian public propaganda, see Musti 1995, 103-28; on the perceived abundance of the Athenian markets and the diffusion of an ideology of prosperity and luxury within the citizen body, see Braund 1994; van Alfen 2016. On the Athenian standard of living see Morris 2004; 2005; Ober 2010; 2014; 2015, who evaluates economic well-being on the basis of income estimates; Kron 2011; 2014, who privileges net wealth as a more meaningful indicator; for a comparative assessment of these models see Taylor 2017, 69-113, 249-51.

123 Dem. 21.158.

124 On this rhetorical topos see Cecchet 2015, 141-63.

125 See Cecchet 2015, 18, 20, 163, 182; Taylor 2017, 17-19 and *passim*.

126 On the definition of *ptōcheia* see Roubineau 2013, 21, who argues that *ptōcheia* may be understood both as the lower extreme of *penia* and as a qualitatively distinct condition: that of individuals who have broken with the unifying values traditionally associated with *penia*, namely labour, endurance, and thrift.

127 It is therefore no coincidence that *ptōcheia* is frequently associated with *xenia* (e.g. Antiph. 2.9), exile (e.g. Isoc. *Hel.* 8), and wandering (Soph. *OC* 444; Eur. *Med.* 512-515; *Herac.* 315-319; Isoc. *Plat.* 46), and is portrayed as radically alien to the values of *oikeiotes* and *philia* (see Roubineau 2013, 36). The *ptōchos* thus emerges as the paradigmatic outsider, excluded not only from economic security but from the social and affective bonds that defined civic belonging.

erishment, measured against expectations of security, autonomy, and access to leisure that democratic ideology had come to associate with full citizenship. In this way, rhetorical complaints about the poverty of the *demos* simultaneously presuppose and reaffirm the idea of its intrinsic orientation toward wealth and material sufficiency.

If political predominance had long been exercised by the elites, and if that predominance rested on legitimating principles of excellence and merit as well as on differentiating principles of leisure and wealth, it becomes intelligible that, once all citizens came to be recognised as *kaloi kagathoi*¹²⁸ in virtue of citizenship alone, irrespective of census status, the collective attribution of a principle of material distinction to the *demos* should follow as a logical consequence. This collective self-representation also responds directly to the recurrent accusations levelled against the popular classes by dissident and anti-democratic thought.

Such critiques typically took one of two forms: either that working citizens lacked the leisure required for meaningful political participation, being overly absorbed in labour,¹²⁹ or that the urban masses consisted largely of idle dependants seeking to live at the city's expense—an accusation that either implicitly or overtly targeted the system of public pay (*misthos*) attached to civic participation.¹³⁰ Democratic discourse did not respond to this second charge by concealing or denying the existence of public pay, but by re-signifying it. Rather than

It is particularly telling that, in his vehement prosecution of Meidias, Demosthenes characterises the latter's hybris toward his fellow citizens by stating that he treated them as *ptōchoi*, as *katharmata*, indeed as not even human beings: 21.185, 198–199. The clear ascending climax of this formulation reveals how *ptōcheia* was perceived as the negation of what a *politēs* ought to be, marking a condition of radical symbolic exclusion from civic personhood: see Taylor 2017, 39–40.

128 See e.g. Lys. 30.14 with Ober 1989, 260, see further Canfora 2025, 181–82. It should be noted that in some sources the noun *ptōcheia* and the adjective *ptōchos* are occasionally employed as rhetorically charged terms, intended to exaggerate a condition of poverty that, while severe, does not necessarily imply vagrancy or a life dependent on almsgiving: see e.g. Men. *Dys.* 280–296, 295–298.

129 E.g. Eur. *Suppl.* 420–422 cf. Thuc. 2.40.2, where Pericles—clearly responding to criticisms levelled against democratic practice—emphasises that Athenian citizens were fully capable of attending to their *erga* while at the same time taking an active part in political life; see further Pl. *Prt.* 322d–323b.

130 E.g. Ar. *Ecl.* 183–188, 289–310; Arist. *Pol.* 4.1292b 41–a 10; Pl. *Gorg.* 515e; Isoc. *Plat.* 24–27, 54 (see further n. 134 below). For a detailed discussion, see Besso *et al.* 2014, 223–28, who show that the notion that a household could subsist solely on *misthos*—whether jury pay (*misthos dikastikos*) or the later assembly pay (*misthos ekklesiastikos*)—finds little empirical support, especially for the fourth century, and should therefore be understood primarily as an anti-democratic prejudice. As several studies have emphasised, *misthos* was not conceived as a form of welfare aimed at sustaining the private individual behind the citizen, but rather as a compensatory allowance intended to symbolically indemnify any citizen for the working day sacrificed in order to participate in political life: see also Jones 1957, 17; Gauthier 1976, 247–48; Sinclair 1988, 123; Whitehead 2019, 216–18. All this does not alter the fact that, for those who lacked other sources of income—such as elderly citizens outside the elite—the *misthos* nonetheless provided

being presented as a mark of dependency or poverty, *misthos* was reframed as an enabling condition of civic autonomy: a material support that made participation possible without recourse to private patronage.¹³¹ It is against this polemical background that the public discourse of democracy articulated a symbolic imagery of the citizen centred on leisure, well-being, and, in certain representations, collective wealth. In this perspective, a qualified disdain for individual riches was integrated into the public representation of the *politēs*.

Comedy gives particularly vivid expression to this logic. As already suggested by the discussion of *Wasps* above, Philocleon does not condemn individual wealth per se; rather, he mocks its political relevance when confronted with the authority of the *dikastēs*. The comic and parodic framework of *Wasps* does not invalidate the principle articulated by Philocleon. On the contrary, his insistence on the autonomy and unaccountability of the *dikastēs* gives voice to a core tenet of democratic ideology, namely the conviction that civic and institutional authority—above all in its judicial form—ought to be independent not only from economic power and private wealth, but also from any form of political tutelage or mediation, including, naturally, that exercised by demagogues themselves.¹³² In this respect, Philocleon's claims can hardly be dismissed as merely grotesque exaggerations: they presuppose, and reflect, a widely shared Athenian belief.

At the same time, Aristophanes' critique—and, to judge from a surviving fragment, that of other comic poets such as Eupolis as well—targets a specific and structurally pernicious practice of demagogic politics, namely the exploitation of social and economic vulnerability within the citizen body. By mobilising economically precarious groups—especially elderly and indigent citizens who

a measure of material relief, and that, for those living at or near subsistence level, it constituted a non-negligible supplement.: see Canevaro 2017a, 44, 49-50, see further n. 133 below.

131 On the avoidance of patronage see Millett 1989; Dillon 1995; on the persistence of patronage in rural areas see Jones 2004 *passim*; Pacheco 2016, even though this should not, however, be taken to imply a rigid dichotomy between city and countryside: see nn. 150-151 below. It should also be borne in mind that vertical and hierarchical relationships could arise even among fellow citizens, both within associative frameworks and through certain forms of credit, such as the *eranos*: see Faraguna 2012, 139, 142.

132 A similar assumption underlies Aristophanes' *Knights*, where Demos himself, prior to his "renewal", explicitly claims to possess sovereign judicial power and boasts that he merely pretends to be deceived by demagogues, since he can at any moment bring their careers to an end through the exercise of his own judicial prerogatives. As Demos himself puts it in a strikingly graphic image, corrupt demagogues can be made to vomit back everything they have siphoned off, using the funnel of the jurors' ballot-urn as a probe: *Eq.* 1145-1150. It is not entirely clear whether Aristophanes intends this self-representation of Demos as a merely burlesque and inflated act of self-celebration. Yet the fact remains that the Athenian *demos* had, on several occasions, effectively rid itself of political leaders and was, at least in principle, able to curtail a demagogue's political influence with the same rapidity with which it had conferred it. Aristophanes thus appears to dramatise a self-image of the *demos* grounded in a broadly shared and institutionally supported belief, rather than in comic exaggeration alone: see Biles, Olson 2025, 29-30.

had a strong material incentive to participate in the lawcourts—demagogues could instrumentalise judicial mechanisms in order to harass, discredit, and ultimately eliminate political opponents.¹³³ If Aristophanes is critical of *misthos*, his target is therefore not the institution as such, nor the principle that underpinned it, but rather the role it had come to play in the hands of demagogues, who could deploy public pay as a form of political narcotic, diverting the *dēmos* from more consequential decisions and encouraging a passive, routinised engagement with civic life.¹³⁴

In light of this analysis, it becomes clear that from what may be termed the era of “full democracy” (that is, after c. 450 BCE¹³⁵), Athenian democratic discourse constructed a highly specific image of the ideal *politēs*, one that presupposed an ongoing symbolic struggle with socio-economic elites, some of whom sought to discredit and delegitimise the extension of full political rights to all citizens regardless of wealth or income. The resulting vision and division of the social world—in Bourdieusian terms—was the product of a multi-layered process of symbolic manipulation.

This manipulation operated along several intersecting axes. From a socio-economic perspective, it is true that a substantial segment of the broad class of *thētes*—namely its more prosperous members—could adhere without excessive difficulty to the officially sanctioned symbolic codes of citizenship (for instance, by affording a respectable *himation* and Laconian footwear). By contrast, wage labourers and those living at or near subsistence level must have encountered far greater obstacles in conforming to these norms. Yet this internal heterogeneity did not prevent the popular bloc opposed to the leisure class proper from successfully imposing its vision of the social order, precisely because that vision was sufficiently anchored in the contingent socio-economic realities of classical Athens. These included the massive influx of wealth—especially during the period of the naval empire—the expanded capacity of

133 See Martin 2024, 202-04 who argues on the basis of a fragment of Eupolis preserved by Plutarch (fr. 193 K-A) that the protagonist of the comedy, Marikas—thinly veiling the demagogue Hyperbolos—incites a group plausibly identifiable as elderly and indigent citizens against Nicias, whom he charges with fabricated accusations of conspiracy against the democratic order.

134 It should be noted that the *misthos* for jury service had originally been introduced by Pericles in the mid-fifth century (Pl. *Gorg.* 515e; Arist. *Pol.* 2.1274a; [Arist.] *Ath. Pol.* 27.2-4). The recurrent polemical references found in *Acharnians*, *Knights*, and *Wasps*—all produced in the 420s—cannot therefore be directed against the institution of *misthos* as such but must relate to a more recent reform. The scholia provide the relevant explanation: Cleon had increased the jurors’ pay from two to three obols (*schol. ad Ar. Vesp.* 88, 300). It follows that these comedies need not imply a tacit desire to abolish *misthos*, but more plausibly express disapproval of its populist increase.

135 For the sequence of institutional developments that progressively reshaped the Athenian polity and resulted, by around 450 BCE, in what may be described as a “full” democracy, see Raaflaub 1998.

citizens as such to pursue shared civic values through a more even redistribution of resources (above all via taxation and the liturgical duties that fell disproportionately upon the rich), the *misthos*, and public funding for institutions such as gymnasia and baths,¹³⁶ a dense and exclusionary civic network—demes and phratries, voluntary associations, and socially mediated access to credit—which was not designed to alleviate poverty as such, but to sustain civic cohesion and political participation. While these structures enabled many citizens to live above subsistence or to mitigate (albeit without erasing) dependence on the wealthy, they systematically advantaged *politai* already embedded within them and marginalised outsiders—metics, foreigners, and above all slaves—thus reproducing poverty beyond the citizen body.¹³⁷

Crucially, however, this symbolic articulation of citizenship did not operate solely along a socio-economic axis. Ethnicity functioned as an additional, relatively autonomous variable in the construction of civic identity. Certain sartorial markers—most notably the *tribōn*—formed a charged constellation in which material poverty, cultural otherness, and political deviance converged. The *tribōn* could signal low economic status, but it also carried a strong ethnic resonance through its association with Sparta and, by extension, with anti-Athenian values. As we have seen above, when adopted by figures ideologically aligned with Sparta or hostile to democracy, this attire condensed multiple forms of alterity—economic, cultural, and political—into a single, immediately legible visual code. In this way, the symbolic boundaries of citizenship were articulated not only against internal elites, but also against external and internalised “others”, whose exclusion was framed simultaneously in ethnic, civic-legal, and class-based terms.

It is hardly necessary to stress that, notwithstanding this pervasive symbolic struggle—ultimately aimed at securing *isonomia* and at insulating the political sphere as a closed, self-referential, and theoretically autopoietic system, immune to the forces operating within the broader social space (and thus to marked disparities in economic capital)¹³⁸—the elites themselves were by no means conceived as external to the civic body, as is already suggested by the alliance staged in the final scenes of the *Knights* (see above). A striking visual confirmation of this inclusion is provided by the representation of the cavalcade on the Parthenon frieze. Alongside the “civilian” figures clad in the *himation* discussed above, the frieze prominently features horsemen, many of whom display exotic or conspicuously refined items of dress.¹³⁹ Their presence makes clear that

136 See [Xen.] *Ath. Pol.* 2.10 with Fisher 1998; Christesen 2013.

137 See Taylor 2017, 160–94.

138 On Athenian politics as an autopoietic and relatively closed operational system, see Mann 2008.

139 See Cohen 2001, 259–60.

Athenian citizenship had no difficulty, as such, in accommodating elite forms of self-representation within the collective image of the *polis*.

The group from which citizens—especially those belonging to the broad popular front outlined above—felt compelled to distinguish themselves at all costs lay elsewhere. It consisted above all of those who lacked the defining prerequisite upon which democratic citizenship was founded: freedom itself. It is in relation to slaves, rather than to socio-economic elites, that the symbolic boundaries of citizenship were drawn most sharply and most consistently.

The evidence examined so far points to a highly structured symbolic economy of citizenship, in which clothing, posture, and modes of appearance functioned as key mediators between legal status and social legitimacy. While the juridical boundary of citizenship remained fundamental and non-negotiable, civic identity was not articulated through law alone. Rather, it was continuously enacted and made visible through embodied practices and material signs that encoded leisure, autonomy, and freedom from manual constraint. The *himation* and related items thus emerge not merely as elements of dress, but as components of a broader ideological grammar through which the figure of the *politēs* was defined, negotiated, and contested.

Yet this grammar did not operate in isolation. It intersected with other axes of differentiation—economic, cultural, ethnic, and political—and was shaped by long-term processes of social mobility and economic expansion that progressively widened access to practices once associated primarily with elite lifestyles. At the same time, the very consolidation of a normative image of the citizen presupposed the systematic exclusion, displacement, or masking of other figures and conditions. It is precisely at this juncture that the analysis must turn from symbols of inclusion to mechanisms of differentiation, and from the idealised performance of leisure to the social realities it obscured. A particularly revealing entry point into this dynamic is offered by representations of agrarian life and labour, which allow us to observe how work, dependency, and servility were symbolically redistributed within the civic imagination of classical Athens.

4. Citizens, labour and slaves

At this point, an important clarification is required. The symbolic economy of citizenship reconstructed so far should not be mistaken for a wholesale rejection of work as such. Athenian citizens did not deny, conceal, or disavow their occupational identities.¹⁴⁰ Farmers, craftsmen, and merchants openly acknowledged the forms of labour through which they sustained themselves and

140 For a detailed discussion of Greek—and specifically Athenian—attitudes toward labour, and of the complex ways in which work was evaluated across different social, economic, and ideological contexts, cf. Balme 1984; Descat 1986; Engels 1989; Anastasiadis 2004.

their households, and these activities were fully compatible with civic belonging. What was at stake, rather, was not labour per se, but the visibility of its bodily traces within contexts that were ideologically marked as civic and institutional.

This distinction emerges with particular clarity in comedy. At the end of the prologue of *Peace*, when Trygaios turns to address the chorus in order to introduce the parodos, he first hails them as *Hellēnes* and then proceeds to articulate this collective identity through a series of subgroups: farmers, merchants, carpenters, artisans, islanders, metics, and foreigners. The composition of the chorus thus oscillates between a Panhellenic and a specifically Athenian frame of reference.¹⁴¹ Yet the sequence itself is revealing. Metics and islanders—clearly non-citizens from an Athenian perspective—are listed only after four occupational categories that are best understood as referring primarily to citizens.

This implicit distinction is not marked through explicit contrastive particles, but it can nevertheless be inferred from the structure of the list. The inclusion of *geōrgoi* at its head is particularly significant. In Athenian ideology, farming was closely associated with citizenship, since it presupposed *enktesis gēs kai oikion*, the legal right to own land and a house—a right denied to non-citizens.¹⁴² That farmers appear first is therefore no accident. Nor does the presence of artisans and merchants undermine this reading, since such occupations were by no means the exclusive preserve of metics or foreigners.¹⁴³

Notably, Trygaios presents himself as a skilled vine-grower,¹⁴⁴ and references to rural life recur throughout the play. He explicitly identifies himself as a *geōrgos* and directly addresses the farmers among the audience. Yet he is never depicted performing agricultural labour. When rural work appears on stage, it is instead his wife and servants who are shown in direct contact with it.¹⁴⁵ Agricultural products are frequently mentioned,¹⁴⁶ but farming tools are only alluded to in passing and never in a way that evokes the physical strain of agricultural labour. At the same time, Trygaios eagerly anticipates the return of peace and the re-opening of a thriving agora, overflowing with goods—some of them rare or luxurious, such as the eel from Lake Copais.¹⁴⁷ The only explicitly agricultural activity attributed to him is projected into the future.¹⁴⁸ In this respect, his portrayal closely resembles that of the estate owner who supervises labour rather than performing it himself. It is also telling that, in praising the personified

141 See Ste. Croix 1972, 138-9; Storey 2019, 32-7.

142 See Whitehead 1977, 117-8; Falco 2024, 180. On the close relationship between land and citizenship see most recently Faraguna 2024 and Appendix, *s.v. enktesis*.

143 See Whitehead 1977, 118; Morris 1994, 60; Jansen 2012, 727.

144 Ar. *Pax* 190-191, 566-570, 702-703, 706-708, 912, 916.

145 Ar. *Pax* 1140-1171.

146 E.g. Ar. *Pax* 574-579.

147 Ar. *Pax* 999-1015. On the eels from the Lake Copais as a luxury good see Dalby 1996, 69; Davidson 1997, 8; Wilkins 2000, 37-38; 160.

148 Ar. *Pax* 569-570.

Eirēnē (Peace) at vv. 530-532, Trygaios associates her not with rural toil but with the Great Dionysia and with the poetry of Sophocles and Euripides.

Thus, although Trygaios claims the identity of farmer and vine-grower, he does so without embodying the physical realities of agricultural labour. Instead, he asserts his place within the shared mass culture of classical Athens, of which theatrical performance and festival life were central components.¹⁴⁹ This mode of self-representation should not be taken to imply a rigid opposition between city and countryside, as Jones has argued.¹⁵⁰ While some literary sources—especially comedy—do at times foreground such a contrast through exaggerated or polarised imagery, a broader reading of the evidence points in a different direction.

Both literary and archaeological data indicate a high degree of integration between urban and rural spheres. Texts attest to farmers' involvement in commerce and to the constant mobility of merchants, artisans, and cultivators between town and countryside,¹⁵¹ while archaeological research has revealed a highly articulated Attic landscape, characterised by a mix of nucleated villages and dispersed farmsteads.¹⁵² Moreover, neither textual nor material evidence requires us to assume that farmers necessarily resided on the land they cultivated. This permeability was further facilitated by a dense network of roads and infrastructure that enabled regular movement across the region.¹⁵³ This high degree of material and social integration does not contradict the tensions described above in connection with the Peloponnesian War; rather, it helps explain why those tensions were experienced not as a clash between separate worlds, but as an internal struggle over political visibility, institutional access, and symbolic legitimacy within a fundamentally shared civic space.

It is precisely within this shared space of civic interaction that symbolic self-presentation acquired heightened political stakes. What truly demands attention is then the symbolic operation through which members of the agricultural class systematically effaced the visible signs of direct manual labour. To address this issue, it is necessary to shift the focus from literary representations to documentary and archaeological evidence, and in particular to a striking and still partly enigmatic feature of the Attic countryside: rural towers. As Meave McHugh has shown, no single, uniform function can be ascribed to all towers scattered across Attica. Some were clearly incorporated into agricultural estates, while others appear to have served primarily as watchtowers or surveillance structures. In the case of towers associated with farming installations, McHugh plausibly argues that their function can best be inferred from

149 On mass culture see Canevaro 2017a.

150 Jones 2004, but see the criticism of Roy 2005.

151 See e.g. Ar. *Vesp.* 169-171; *Ecol.* 817-822; *Pax* 563; Antiph. fr. 69 K-A with Lewis 2018b, 189-90, cf. n. 97 above.

152 See McHugh 2017 *passim*.

153 See McHugh 2017, 143-48.

contextual evidence, especially the presence or absence of domestic ceramics. Where such material is attested, a residential use is likely; conversely, the presence of storage facilities or related equipment may point to their use as granaries or storehouses.¹⁵⁴

Further insight is provided by a study published in 2005 by Sarah Morris and John Papadopoulos, who observed that many towers exhibit distinctive traces of wear—cuts or fissures on the external face of door lintels that are absent on the inner side. They plausibly interpret this pattern as evidence for devices designed to prevent doors from being opened from within, perhaps through the addition of secondary metal fittings or plates.¹⁵⁵ Such features strongly suggest that these structures were intended not merely for storage, but also for the controlled confinement of people.

This material evidence is complemented by textual and epigraphic sources. In the pseudo-Demosthenic speech *Against Evergus and Mnesibulus*, the speaker recounts an attack on his rural estate during his absence: as the assailants plundered the property, the female slaves, fearing capture, barricaded themselves inside the tower.¹⁵⁶ A fragmentary calendrical inscription discovered near the so-called Cliff Tower further reinforces this picture.¹⁵⁷ Although the name of the individual is partially lost, he identifies himself as an *epitropos* (bailiff);¹⁵⁸ given the findspot, it is reasonable to assume that he was the estate manager of Timesius, the landowner.¹⁵⁹ The figure of the *epitropos* is well attested in literary sources. In Xenophon's *Oeconomicus*, Ischomachus explicitly justifies his ability to engage in civic affairs by explaining that he entrusts the supervision of agricultural labour to an *epitropos*, likely a slave or freedman charged with overseeing the workforce.¹⁶⁰ As Alison Burford has argued, even though the term itself is not securely attested in fifth-century sources, the function was clearly familiar, as suggested by figures such as Euangelos, Pericles' trusted household steward.¹⁶¹

Taken together, this evidence supports the conclusion that towers on large, wealthy estates often functioned as residential quarters for agricultural labourers and for *epitropoi*, who would also have been ideally positioned—both physically and socially—to supervise work from an elevated vantage point. Comparable arrangements are attested on the extensive estates of Rheneia, leased by the sanctuary of Apollo at Delos to absentee tenants.¹⁶² There, servile labourers

154 See McHugh 2017, 60–73.

155 Morris, Papadopoulos 2005, 189–200.

156 [Dem.] 47.56.

157 SEG 26.137 with Carlsen 2002, 120.

158 On the bailiff see Burford 1993, 171–77; McHugh 2017, 34–35.

159 See Langdon, Watrous 1977.

160 Xen. *Oec.* 12.1, 15–16.

161 See Plut. *Per.* 16.3–5 with Burford 1993, 174–75.

162 See Osborne 1987, 46–7, 71, 74; 1988, 304.

were effectively bound to the land through residential structures that anchored their presence to the estate.

Particularly revealing is an inscription regulating cases of tenant insolvency on Delian land. In the event of non-payment, the temple authorities were instructed to liquidate assets in a fixed order: first the crops, then livestock, then sheep, and finally slaves.¹⁶³ This sequence makes explicit the conceptual proximity between land and servile labour. The same logic applies to *epitropoi*. The calendrical inscription bearing an *epitropos*' signature, together with the tomb of a certain Deinias located on the same estate—whose funerary inscription specifies that his descendants were to be buried there as well—points to a condition of long-term attachment to the land.¹⁶⁴ Lin Foxhall has similarly suggested that some *epitropoi* on the Thasian estates of Adeimantos, later sold by the *poletai*, were effectively inseparable from the properties they managed.¹⁶⁵

Conceptually, then, slaves and *epitropoi* were treated as integral components of landed property itself. It is precisely this structural and ideological fusion of labour, supervision, and landownership that helps explain why agricultural work came to be so readily associated with servility in the civic imagination. At the same time, it illuminates the complementary process by which visible markers of manual farming labour were systematically excluded from the symbolic representation of the citizen. The concealment of work was not accidental, but a necessary condition for sustaining the ideological image of the *politēs* as free, autonomous, and in control of his own time.

Naturally, maintaining a sizable group of slaves led by an *epitropos* was a luxury available only to members of the elite. However, the steady economic growth Athens experienced from the late Archaic period onward brought to the city a wide range of goods, including slaves.¹⁶⁶ Throughout the Classical period, the Piraeus functioned as the largest re-export and redistribution hub in the Aegean.¹⁶⁷ This led to a relatively widespread degree of affluence. It has been estimated that most small landowners lived well above the subsistence threshold. While elite individuals typically owned an average of 50 to 60 slaves—and some, as Xenophon testifies, owned none at all¹⁶⁸—small landowners generally possessed at least two or three slaves each.¹⁶⁹

Slave ownership—often supplemented by the employment of *misthōtoi* (wage labourers), who were most likely freedmen or foreigners, given the well-attested reluctance of Athenian citizens to work under the authority of their

163 *ID* 503, ll. 33–34.

164 *SEG* 32.313.

165 *IG* I³ 426 fr. C coll. II, ll. 43–46 with Foxhall 2007, 40, 44, 81.

166 See Lewis 2016, 323–25, 327–30.

167 See Xen. *Vect.* 3.1–2 with Bresson 2015, 373–74.

168 Xen. *Mem.* 2.3.3, see also *Lys.* 24.6.

169 See Lewis 2018b, 171–72, 189–91.

fellow citizens¹⁷⁰—made it possible for landowners to devote time to political participation. This social arrangement is vividly illustrated by the *agroikos* in Theophrastus, who, upon returning from the Assembly, delivers a detailed report of the proceedings to his slaves and *misthōtoi*.¹⁷¹

Such evidence helps to explain why agricultural labour, and especially physically demanding manual work, came to be ideologically associated with slavery or with forms of dependence incompatible with full mastery over one's own time. This association recurs frequently in comedy. While many relevant examples are drawn from Menander and therefore postdate the height of Athenian democracy, a similar logic is already discernible in Aristophanes. In a fragment concerned with differentiating sociolectal variants of the Attic dialect, one variety is characterised as *hypagroikoteron* and *aneleutheron*—explicitly marked as unworthy of a free man. In context, the terms refer to a coarse, unrefined, and grammatically incorrect manner of speaking.¹⁷² Yet their etymological and semantic force extends beyond linguistic register: they designate, first and foremost, a condition incompatible with freedom and therefore implicitly appropriate to slaves.

At the same time, the sources are clear that citizen-farmers could and did work alongside their slaves. This emerges most clearly in Menander. In *Georgos*, the young son of Myrrhine is compelled by *Penia* (Poverty) to labour in the fields together with his slave.¹⁷³ Similarly, in *Dyskolos*, a servant declares that he must accompany his master in agricultural work, invoking *Penia* as the force that drives both of them to toil.¹⁷⁴ By contrast, Knemon in *Dyskolos* is portrayed as grotesque and aberrant precisely because he works the land entirely on his own, without even the assistance of a slave—despite the widespread suspicion among the other characters that he possesses a fortune of two talents.¹⁷⁵ The comic effect hinges on this inversion: what renders Knemon socially anomalous is not poverty, but the failure to conform to the expected organisation of labour, in which even modest prosperity implied the delegation of the most onerous tasks to slaves. Complementary to these passages are those in which agricultural labour is explicitly characterised as servile work.¹⁷⁶

170 On the low social esteem accorded to wage labourers see e.g. Isae. 5.7; Xen. *Mem.* 2.7.3–4, 8.1–5 with Ehrenberg 1962, 162; Hopper 1979, 140; Garland 1980; Welskopf 1980; Finley 1981, 99; Wood 1988, 126–45; Leese 2021, 206; Cecchet 2024a. It should nevertheless be noted that Athenian citizens were not categorically excluded from engaging in occasional or supplementary labour. Citizens' participation in short-term or ad hoc work—especially in contexts of economic pressure or seasonal demand—was by no means exceptional and does not contradict the broader ideological patterns discussed here: see Feyel 2006; Harris, Lewis 2016, 16–17. On the employment of wage labour in agriculture, see Burford 1993, 186–93.

171 Theophr. *Char.* 4.4–5.

172 Ar. fr. 706 K–A with Falco 2025b, 245–46.

173 Men. *Georg.* 18–19, 30–32.

174 Men. *Dys.* 206–210.

175 Men. *Dys.* 326–330.

176 E.g. Men. *Dys.* 201–202; fr. 783 K–A.

This association between labour and servility is further illuminated by the way comedy negotiates the concept of *penia*. As noted above, Athenian discourse does not operate with rigid or stable categories of poverty, but exploits the semantic elasticity of *penia*, whose meaning is defined relationally rather than in terms of absolute deprivation. In this framework, *penia* designates a condition measured against the standards of leisure and autonomy that underpinned full civic status, not the extreme destitution denoted by *ptōcheia*, consistently construed as the absolute social evil.

This logic emerges with particular clarity in Aristophanes' *Plutus*. There, the personified *Penia* explicitly draws attention to the slippage between *penia* and *ptōcheia*, while at the same time defending the necessity of labour as a structuring principle of the social order.¹⁷⁷ Crucially, Chremylus' response—that once citizens became wealthy all labour would be relegated to slaves¹⁷⁸—renders explicit the ideological horizon already implicit in earlier examples: manual work is conceived as properly belonging to slaves, while freedom from labour functions as a marker of civic autonomy. In this sense, the comic exchange does not contradict the evidence discussed above, but rather exposes the tension at its core: citizens may work, and even be compelled to do so by *penia*, yet the symbolic economy of citizenship continues to project labour—especially agrarian labour—towards the domain of servility.

The theme of leisure reappears with particular force when representations of the citizen intersect explicitly with political participation. This is already apparent in Euripides' *Suppliant Women*, where the Theban herald's critique of democracy hinges on the figure of the *gaponos*—a man compelled to work the land with his own hands—who is said to lack both the time and the competence required for engagement in public affairs.¹⁷⁹ Although Athenian public ideology consistently rejected this argument, insisting that even those engaged in manual labour were full members of the political community,¹⁸⁰ the passage is nevertheless revealing. It signals the emergence of a tension between labour necessity and political activity that would become increasingly explicit in later political reflection.

Within this framework, the *antourgos*—the worker who must rely exclusively on his own labour, presumably without the assistance of slaves¹⁸¹—gradually comes to function as an antithetical figure to the normative image of the

177 Ar. *Pl.* 550–554 with Cecchet 2015, 171–82.

178 Ar. *Pl.* 517–519.

179 See n. 129 above.

180 See n. 129 above.

181 For the definition of the *antourgos* as an individual who works the land with his own hands and without the assistance of slaves, see *schol. ad* Thuc. 1.141 and *schol. ad* Eur. *Or.* 920 with Willink 1986, 234, even if—as Carter (1986, 77) rightly observes—the term could also apply to individuals who possessed one or two slaves. What is essential, however, is not the complete absence of servile labour, but the fact that the *antourgos* personally took part in the work of the land. For an overview of the *antourgos* in the Athenian sources see Carter 1986, 77–98.

citizen. This model is taken up and radicalised in Plato's *Republic*, where democratic society is described as resting on three groups: the wealthy; the idle urban masses who dominate the Assembly; and the *autourgoi*, the rural *demos* whom Plato pointedly characterises as rarely participating in politics.¹⁸² A similar logic underpins Aristotle's discussion of democracy. He repeatedly maintains that the most stable form of popular government is the rural democracy, in which *autourgoi* attend the Assembly only infrequently,¹⁸³ and he further suggests that a genuine "friend of the people" should distribute resources in such a way as to enable the lower classes to remain occupied with agriculture or commerce, thereby limiting their presence in the political institutions concentrated in the urban centre.¹⁸⁴ In this perspective, even commerce is subsumed under the same logic of occupation and political restraint, as when Aristotle observes that constitutional stability is secured when power rests with farmers and individuals of modest means who are compelled by necessity to work for their livelihood.¹⁸⁵

The figure of the *autourgos* is also taken up by Euripides, who in *Orestes* and *Electra* elevates it to a model of virtue precisely because it embodies modest living, hard work, and minimal involvement in public affairs.¹⁸⁶ I do not intend here to engage with the complex and still lively debate over Euripides' stance on democracy, nor with the question of whether the *autourgos* ideal praised in these tragedies coheres with or contradicts the critique voiced by the Theban herald in *Suppliant Women*, who stigmatises the *gaponos* as emblematic of the shortcomings of the democratic regime.¹⁸⁷ What is significant, however, is that Euripides, too, identifies this ideological prototype as the antithesis of the dominant Athenian model of citizenship—a model whose normative claims and social implications appear, in his tragic exploration, as quite problematic rather than self-evident.

Across the sources in which it appears, the figure of the *autourgos* displays a remarkably coherent set of traits: he is neither wealthy nor destitute; he is characterised by prudence, practical wisdom, and moral restraint; and, above all, he stands at a deliberate remove from the frenetic political and economic activism of urban and institutional life. His defining dispositions are *apragmosynē* and *sōphrosynē*,¹⁸⁸ not participation, ambition, or competitive display.

At the same time, this figure should be understood less as a faithful reflection of social reality than as an idealising construct. Although the term *autourgos*

182 Pl. *Resp.* 565a.

183 Arist. *Pol.* 6.1318b 10.

184 Arist. *Pol.* 6.1320a 32-b4.

185 Arist. *Pol.* 4.1292b 25-29.

186 See Cecchet 2015, 92-100.

187 On this issue cf. Di Benedetto 1971, 193-211; Musti 1995, 43-49; Cecchet 2015, 99-100.

188 See e.g. Eur. *El.* 53; *Or.* 917-922; Arist. *Rhet.* 2.1381 a 23-25: Aristotle includes the *autourgoi*, together with the *apragmones* and the *sōphrones*, among those men whom he regards as liberal, courageous, and just.

itself is not attested in Aristophanes, comic representations repeatedly evoke small-scale farmers who—despite being presented as nostalgic champions of rural tranquillity—are revealed by scattered textual clues to be relatively well off.¹⁸⁹ Their longing for the countryside responds to a concrete social and logistical disruption, namely the aforementioned forced concentration of rural populations in the urban centre during wartime. As already suggested, this projection operates through a symbolically charged and deliberately overdetermined contrast between city and countryside, rather than through a representation of genuinely separate social worlds. It is therefore no coincidence that the idealised *autourgos*, imagined as resisting the pressures generated by the relentless economic and political activism promoted by democratic ideology, exerted a powerful appeal on antidemocratic elites, who explicitly elevated *sôphrosynê* and *apragmosynê* as their own ideological watchwords.¹⁹⁰

This opposition between the dominant democratic ideal of citizenship and the ideological figure of the *autourgos* is articulated with particular clarity in the words attributed to Pericles by Thucydides on the eve of the Peloponnesian War. Urging the Athenians not to yield to Spartan demands to repeal the Megarian decree or abandon Aegina and Potidaea, Pericles reminds them that Athens commands far greater resources than the Peloponnesians—precisely because the latter are *autourgoi*.¹⁹¹ Modern commentators have long debated the meaning of this characterisation. If the term is taken simply to denote populations primarily engaged in agriculture, its application to the Spartans has appeared problematic, since Spartan citizens relied on helot labour and were therefore not compelled to work the land themselves.¹⁹² Others, by contrast, have argued that the label fits the Spartans precisely insofar as they were largely self-sufficient in food production, unlike many other Peloponnesian communities dependent on imported grain.¹⁹³ Yet the most persuasive reading understands *autourgos* here in its stricter sense, as denoting those compelled to cultivate the land without the

189 See Carter 1986, 81–87.

190 Cf. Bultrighini 1999, 47–90; Jordovic 2014, 145; Gray 2015, 240–47; Gallego 2018, 51–58.

The appropriation of *sôphrosynê* by antidemocratic elites was facilitated by the prototypical meaning of the term itself, which denotes self-mastery—a quality that these elites denied to the masses and claimed as a distinctive marker of their own moral and political superiority: for a general discussion on the concept of *sôphrosynê* see North 1966, 1–257; Rademaker 2005; Moore 2023. On elites' *apragmosynê* see Carter 1986, 26–75. It should nonetheless be noted that the concept of *apragmosynê* could, when circumstances required, also be strategically mobilised by citizens within contexts that were fully and structurally democratic, such as the lawcourts. This occurred in situations where a litigant had a clear interest in presenting himself as detached from institutional life, thereby deflecting the suspicion that he was exploiting legal procedures in order to pursue private enmities or personal vendettas: see Gray 2015, 227–29.

191 Thuc. 1.141.2–4.

192 Gomme 1945, 455.

193 Hornblower 1991, 228.

mediation of slave labour—a condition that the Spartans themselves did not share. In this respect, the term may apply more plausibly to many of Sparta's allies than to the Spartans themselves, as suggested by Thucydides' report that a Peloponnesian campaign was interrupted because allied contingents needed to return home for agricultural work.¹⁹⁴

What ultimately matters, however, is less the precise sociological accuracy of the label than its rhetorical function. Pericles' aim is to present the Peloponnesians as a whole as resource-poor and structurally constrained, casting them as the antithesis of Athens. In this respect, the passage aligns seamlessly with Periclean democratic propaganda more broadly, as exemplified in the Funeral Oration, where wealth, economic dynamism, and intense productive activity are foregrounded as defining features of the Athenian community.¹⁹⁵

Read against this background, the symbolic insistence on leisure acquires a sharper political and social significance. The two accusations recurrently levelled by antidemocratic elites against the popular classes—that working citizens lacked the leisure required for political competence, and that the urban masses were idle dependants living off public pay—were mutually contradictory, yet ideologically convergent. Both aimed to deny the *dēmos* full political legitimacy by challenging its capacity to embody the normative attributes of the citizen.

It is precisely this double bind that helps explain why the broad popular front opposed to the socio-economic elites had every interest in publicly asserting, performing, and even exaggerating its possession of *scholē*. Leisure was not merely a by-product of wealth; it was a condition of political legitimacy. To appear as free citizens fully entitled to rule, members of the *dēmos* had to demonstrate mastery over their own time—mastery that was materially secured, to a significant extent, by slave labour. In this sense, the symbolic economy of citizenship did not oppose citizens to elites alone, but hinged above all on a sharp distinction between free persons and those excluded from freedom. Slaves thus occupied a structurally central position in this ideological configuration. They were simultaneously the material precondition that enabled large segments of the citizen body to participate in political life and the primary negative foil against which freedom, autonomy, and leisure were defined. The need felt by ordinary citizens to distinguish themselves decisively from slaves—more urgently, at times, than from wealthy elites—helps to explain why manual labour, especially in its most visible agrarian forms, was so consistently displaced onto the domain of servility within civic representation.

From this perspective, the symbolic struggle analysed throughout this study appears not simply as a confrontation between elites and masses, but as a conflict internal to what may be described as an “élite of the free”:¹⁹⁶ a civic body

194 Thuc. 3.15.2.

195 See n. 122 above.

196 See Canfora 2025, 181–81.

unified by legal status yet deeply stratified in its access to wealth, leisure, and symbolic capital. It was within this space that democratic ideology sought to neutralise socio-economic inequalities by elevating leisure to a collective norm, while simultaneously reproducing exclusion by relegating labour, dependency, and temporal unfreedom to those denied citizenship altogether.

5. Conclusions

Read in this light, the symbolic economy reconstructed throughout this study confirms the usefulness of a relational and multidimensional approach to class. The struggles surrounding leisure, labour, and civic appearance were not reducible to economic position alone, but unfolded at the intersection of multiple forms of capital—economic, social, cultural, and above all symbolic—whose uneven distribution structured distances within the citizen body itself. What was at stake was not the ownership of values, which remained broadly shared, but control over the legitimate forms through which those values could be materialised and publicly recognised. The evidence examined here illustrates with particular clarity the dynamics described by Bourdieu as symbolic struggle: competing groups sought to impose their own vision and division of the social world by naturalising specific classificatory principles—leisure versus labour, autonomy versus dependence, freedom versus servility—as self-evident attributes of citizenship. At the same time, the appropriation of elite-associated symbols by non-elite citizens confirms the heuristic value of McCracken's critique of the classical trickle-down model. These processes were neither passive nor unidirectional. Rather, they involved selective, creative, and politically charged reinterpretations of material signs—above all clothing—through which non-elite citizens could claim proximity to legitimating ideals while simultaneously redefining their social meaning.

In the Athenian context, where legitimating values were widely shared and “aristocratic” cultures were not institutionally sealed off, symbolic contestation did not concern the values themselves but the repertoire of signs through which they were enacted. The emergence of a normative image of the *politēs*—marked by leisure, autonomy, and freedom from manual constraint—thus reflects the partial success of a broad popular front in naturalising its own symbolic vision within the civic field. Yet this success was structurally dependent on exclusion: the displacement of labour onto slaves, the relegation of servility outside the civic imagination, and the continuous marking of boundaries within what was, formally, a unified citizen body.

The construction of the Athenian *politēs* therefore appears not as a static ideological artefact, but as the outcome of an ongoing symbolic negotiation, in which material goods functioned as historical operators and class-related distinctions were reproduced, contested, and reconfigured. It is precisely through

this lens that the present study has sought to answer its guiding questions, showing how the symbolic manipulation of consumer goods—rather than the articulation of explicit social doctrines—played a central role in shaping, stabilising, and politicising the boundaries of democratic citizenship.

