

# Indications of Stability of Occurrence of Halcyon Days in the Ancient Greek Drama

C. Chronopoulou and A. Mavrakis

**Abstract** The aim of this paper is to examine the stability of the presence of the Halcyon days in the fifth and fourth century B.C. at Attica through the study of Greek tragedy and comedy. The dramas were being taught during the Lenaia – a celebration to honor Lenaius Dionysus, during the winter attic month Gamelion (15 January–15 February) – in open space firstly and then at the open theatre of Dionysus south of the Acropolis. The dramas did not saw references of sudden meteorological phenomena. On the contrary, they remark references of the clear weather of Attica and they notice the helpful presence of Halcyon days. In conclusion, the stable appearance of Halcyon days allowed Athens of classical years to organise dramatic festivals regularly, during the Gamelion without any signs of postponement or cancellation due to sudden weather phenomena, like sudden rainfall.

## 1 Introduction

This paper concerns the indications of stable weather conditions during the performance of dramatic festivals in Gamelion, attic month (15 January–15 February) in Athens of fifth and fourth century by studying the ancient Greek drama. The dramas of Aeschylus, Sophocles Euripides and comedies of Aristophanes provide testimonies about the clear, cloudiness, without indications of sudden weather phenomena and signs of stability in the appearance of the Halcyon days, in order

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C. Chronopoulou (✉)

Theatre on Education, Educational Department of Primary Education, National and Kapodestrian University of Athens, 13A Navarinou Street, Athens 106 80, Greece  
e-mail: [chris\\_chron@yahoo.com](mailto:chris_chron@yahoo.com)

A. Mavrakis (✉)

Department of Economic and Regional Development, Institute of Urban Environment and Human Resources, Panteion University, 136 Syngrou Avenue, Athens 176 71, Greece  
e-mail: [mavrakisan@yahoo.gr](mailto:mavrakisan@yahoo.gr)

the dramatic festivals of the Lenaia to be performed in an open space like the theatre of Dionysus. The Halcyon days were named from the myth of Greek mythology “The halcyon breeds at the season of the winter solstice. Accordingly, when this season is marked with calm weather, the name of ‘halcyon days’ is given to the 7 days preceding, and to as many following, the solstice” (Aristotle’s, *Histories about animals*, 5.8, 350 B.C., (Wentworth Tompson (trans) 2007)).

“Halcyon days” is a phenomenon that happens in Greece till the latitude of southeast Europe between 15 December and 15 February but more frequently 15–31 January (HNMS 2011). This happens because it is observed the same barometric pressure (equality pressure) and so there are no winds due to anticyclonic condition and the weather is cold but sunny (Ziakopoulos 2008).

We reckon that the dramas of classical years can be used as eyewitness, giving information which can be useful to the study of the climate in Attica of the classical era and others paleoclimatological studies. The writer of these plays provide us with descriptions of weather conditions which are objective testimonies seen through the eye of a simple observer.

## 2 Data and Methodology

Study of classical dramas of Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes. In the 43 plays, 7 of Aeschylus, 7 of Sophocles, 18 of Euripides and 11 of Aristophanes (Lesky 1988) we notice seven references which they give information about the weather in Athens from 458 B.C. until 401 B.C., providing direct and indirect indications which are related to the clear weather and the beneficial Halcyon days in midwinter.

## 3 Results

The ancient Greeks used to forecast, looking at the signs the *diosimies* = phenomena caused by Zeus. Meteorological calendars the *parapigmata* were being circulated in ancient Agora (a place of gathering and market) since the fifth century. Philosophers, combining meteorology and astronomy were observing from high mounts like Mithimna, Idi and Lycabettus (Theophrastus, third–fourth century) and they composed *Parapigmata*, a kind of forecast report. In *Agamemnon* (4–7) 458 B.C., (Sommerstein (trans) 2008), Aeschylus refers;

I’ve spent my nights on the Atreides roof – resting on my elbows like a dog, and come to know – thoroughly the throng of stars of the night, – and also those bright potentates, conspicuous – In the sky, which bring winter and summer to mortals <observing> them as some set and others rise (Fig. 1).

Dramatic festivals were being organized at the Lenaia in the winter specifically in the 12th day of Gamelion (26th of January). Besides this particular month was

φρουράς ἐτείας μήκος, ἦν κοιμώμενος – στέγαις Ἀτρείδων ἄγκαθεν –  
 κυνός δίκην – ἄστρων κάτοιδα νυκτέρων ὀμήγουριν – καί τούς φέροντας  
 χεῖμα καί θέρος βροτοῖς – λαμπρούς δυνάστας – ἐμπρέποντας αἰθέρι –  
 ἀστέρας, ὅταν φθίνωσιν, ἀνατολάς τε τῶν.

Fig. 1 Aeschylus in *Agamemnon*, 458 B.C.

Ὁ δ' ἀμφιθαλής Ἔρως-χρυσόπτερος ἠνίας-ἠϋθυνη παλιντόνουσ-Ζηγός  
 πάροχος γάμων-τῆς τευδαίμονος Ἥρας.- Ὑμήν ὦ, Ὑμέναι' ὦ- Ὑμήν ὦ,  
 Ὑμέναι' ὦ!

Fig. 2 Aristophanes in *Birds*, 414 B.C.

ἄλκυονίδας τ' ἄν ἦγεθ' ἡμέρας αἰεί.

Fig. 3 Aristophanes in *Birds*, 414 B.C.

the month of holy marriage of Zeus and Hera and thus the ideal month for the mortals to marry under the full moon of Gamelion. Aristophanes in *Birds* (1737–1743) 414 B.C., (Sommerstein (trans) 1987) refers;

And blooming young Eros – of the golden wings guided – the tautened reins – as groomsman at the wedding of Zeus – and the blessed Hera. Hymen O, Hymenaeus O! – Hymen O, Hymenaeus O! (Fig. 2).

Because the Attic weddings were lasted for 3 days and the ceremony was usually happening in an open area in order the newly weds to harmonize their life to nature, we conclude that in particular days of Gamelion offered suitable weather conditions (Michailidou 1997). Aristophanes referred to the beneficial Halcyon days for the couple who had been married in Gamelion, (Aristophanes, *Birds*, 1591).

Enjoy Halcyon days the whole time (Fig. 3).

The ancient Greeks used to observe the stability of the presence of summery days in the winter, so they decided to include dramatic festivals at Lenaia, one of the four celebrations to honor Dionysus, which was one of the most famous deities not only at Attica but in many other places in Greece. Three of the four celebrations were combined to dramatic festivals; City Dionysian, Rural Dionysian and Lenaia which they related to the maenads “λήναι” and “ληναῖζω” and that means that I participate to the dance of Bacchus (History of Greek Nation 1972). The dramatic festivals were accompanied by dramatic contests probably in 440 B.C. (Pickard-Cambridge 1988) in which many poets participated. We cannot be sure when the Lenaia celebrations first began, but the fact that the dramatic contests were included many years after the beginning of these celebrations indicates that the winter month Gamelion offered the security in the stability of weather conditions which allowed people to watch theatre performances somewhere in the ancient Agora and then at the theatre that Lycurgus was built in the south slope of the Acropolis on the fourth century B.C. There is no evidence of existence of some kind of covered place in Agora for the dramas to be

Ἰεγὼ δὲ λέξω δεινὰ μὲν δίκαια δε – Οὐ γάρ με νῦν γε διαβαλεῖ Κλέων ὅτι –  
 ξένων παρόντων τὴν πόλιν κακῶς λέγω – αὐτοὶ γὰρ ἔσμεν οὐπὶ Ληναίῳ  
 τ' ἀγῶν, κοῦπω ξένοι πάρεισιν. Οὔτε γὰρ φόροι – ἤκουσιν οὔτ' ἐκ τῶν  
 πόλεων οἱ ξύμμαχοι – ἀλλ' ἔσμεν αὐτοὶ νῦν γε περιεπισημένοι – τοὺς γὰρ  
 μετοίκους ἄχυρα τῶν ἀστῶν λέγω

Fig. 4 Aristophanes in *Acharnians*, 425 B.C.

taught according to American excavations (Pickard-Cambridge 1988). Also, we have no serious evidence about some kind of shelter close to the theatre of Dionysus in case of sudden rain during these years. The stoa of Eumenus at the south of the theatre was built at about the second century. We could assume that the weather did not troubled people of the earlier years who used to organise dramatic contests at the Lenaia and the reason was surely not that they did not care about the performance. Lenaia was less highly regarded than the City Dionysian because there were not foreign but only the citizens of Athens and resident allies due to stop sailing from December until February (Pickard-Cambridge 1988). Aristophanes in *Acharnians* (501–507), 425 B.C., a lenaian play refers;

And what I say will be shocking, but right. – This time Cleon will not accuse me of – defaming the city in the presence of foreigners; – for we are by ourselves; it's the Lenean – competition, and no foreigners are here yet; – neither tribute nor troops have arrived from the – allied cities. This time we are by ourselves. – Clean – hulled for I count the resident – foreigners as the bran of our populace (Fig. 4).

Despite the above, contests of the Lenaia were important because they were organized under the Archon Basileus, the supreme religious officer in the city, and so the rich citizens as the resident allies were *khoroigoi*, they sponsored these dramas, and they surly did not want their offering to loose its glamour because of postponement or cancellation. The competitive spirit was very important for them in order to achieve prestige and glory (Bardy 1971). Evidence that makes Lenaia a festival of significance is that excavations south of Acropolis have found marble slabs with graven names of the winners of the dramatic contests in Gamelion (Pickard-Cambridge 1988). Lenaia seemed to be the second more populate celebration after Great Dionysian. Famous plays especially comedies like those of Aristophanes won the first or second prize at the dramatic contests at Lenaia like *Acharnians* (425 B.C.) first prize, *Knights* (425 B.C.) first prize, *Wasps* (422 B.C.) second prize, *Lysistrata* (411 B.C.) no information for prize, *Frogs* (405 B.C.) first prize. The weather was mild and stable enough to allow these performances to be presented in the midwinter. Euripides in *Medea* (824–833) (Kovacs (trans) 1994) talks about the clear, pleasant and harmonic climate;

From ancient times the sons of Erechtheus have been favored; they are children – of the blessed gods sprung from a – holy land never pillaged the enemy. – They feed on wisdom most glorious, always stepping gracefully through the bright air, where once, it is said, he nine Pierian Muses gave birth to fair haired Harmonia. – Men celebrate in song how Aphrodite, filling her pail at the streams of the fair flowing Cephisus, blew down upon the land temperate and sweet breezes (Fig. 5).

Ἐρεχθείδαι τὸ παλαιὸν ὄλβιοι – καιθεῶν παῖδες μακάρων, ἱερᾶς – κλεινοτάταν σοφίαν, αἰεὶ διὰ λαμπροτάτου – Βαίνοντες ἀβρῶς αἰθέρος, ἔνθα ποθ' ἀγνάς ἐννέα Πιερίδας Μούσας λέγουσι – ξανθὰν Ἀρμονίαν φυτεύσαι. – τοῦ καλλιναίου τ' ἐπὶ Κηφισοῦ ῥοαῖς – τὰν Κύπριν κλήζουσιν ἀφυσσαμένην – Χώραν καταπνεύσαι μετρίας ἀνέμων ἠδυπνούς αὔρας.

Fig. 5 Euripides in *Medea*

Ἄλκυόνες, αἱ παρ' ἀενάοις θαλάσσης κύμασι – κύμασι στωμύλλετε

Fig. 6 Aristophanes in *Frogs*, 405 B.C.

Εὐίππου, ξένε, τάσδε χώρας ἴκου τὰ κράτιστα γὰς ἔπαυλα, in white τὸν ἀργῆτα Κολωνόν, ἔνθ' – ἃ λίγεια μνύρεται θαμίζουσα μάλιστ' ἀηδῶν χλωραῖς ὑπὸ βάσσαις, – τὸν οἰνώπα νέμουσα κισσὸν καὶ τὰν ἄβατον θεοῦ φυλλάδα μυριόκαρπον ἀνήλιον – ἀνήνεμόν τε πάντων χειμώνων.

Fig. 7 Sophocles in *Oedipus at Colonus*, 410 B.C.

Aristophanes implies that he is particularly grateful for the presence of the Halcyon days because his comedies especially those who criticize the Athenian democracy were mainly presented in Lenaia and that is the reason why he invokes their appearance in his comedy *Frogs* (1309–1310) 405 B.C., (Henderson (trans) 2002).

You halcyons, – who chatter by the everflowing – waves of the sea (Fig. 6).

Moreover, there are indications of low rainfalls in Attica. There was ability to predict rainfalls by observing the small Hymettos (a mountain of Athens). Small Hymettus used to be called as “Ἄνδρος”, dry Hymettus. Theophrastus refers; If the lesser Mount Hymettus, which is called the Dry Hill, has cloud in its hollows, it is a sign of rain. *On the signs of Waters, Winds and Storms* 20. Athens seemed to have mild weather and it was “the best place on earth that never meet heavy winter” as the tragic poet Sophocles refers to *Oedipus at Colonus* (668–678), 410 B.C., (Banks (trans) 1956).

Noble the breed of horses here – in white Colonus, the land of our birth. The loveliest land in all the earth. – A distant music, pure and clear. Rises from green, secluded vales. – The constant trill of the nightingales deep in their haunts of tangled vine, – of sacred ivy, dark as wine, thick is the god's inviolate wood, – rich in berries and rich in fruit. The sun is curtained; the wind is mute in winter (Fig. 7).

## 4 Conclusions

In this work we attempted to extract information about the stability of the weather phenomena in the Athens of the classical years by studying the fully surviving theatrical plays of the three tragic poets Aeschylus, Sophocles, Euripides and the comedian writer Aristophanes and particularly about the stability in the presence of Halcyon days. The comedies of Aristophanes especially those who they have been taught at Lenaia they often invoke the presence of the Halcyon days. Combining the fact that dramatic contests were held in the midwinter without any indications of postponement and references from the dramas about the clear weather and mild winters in Attica we could assume that particular days of almost every January were summery in the fifth and maybe in the fourth century. All these references are concerning indications of the fifth century. We found no weather indications in the fourth century's dramas but dramatic contests continue to happen and in this century because when Aristotle talks about Lenaia, he refers to the fourth century.

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