

CHAPTER 18

Sappho¹

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It has become commonplace among classical scholars when asked to assess the life of Sappho to refer to the entry on her in *Lesbian Peoples: Materials for a Dictionary*, edited by Monique Wittig and Sande Zeig (1979). They devote a full page to her but leave it blank. The situation is in fact not so dire and classicists would be renegeing in their duty if they did not at least try to reconstruct the original contexts of her poetry to the best of their ability. Still, the empty page in Wittig and Zeig's dictionary serves as a cautionary reminder that little of what we know about Sappho is certain and that people can and will disagree with almost everything said in the following pages.

There are, roughly speaking, three sources that can help us to reconstruct Sappho's life and work. First there are a series of *testimonia*, ancient records about her life, including four Athenian vase paintings on which she is depicted playing the lyre or reading from a scroll (Figures 1 and 2). Secondly, there is the poetry itself, of which, however, very little survives.² It is often hard to read, because of its fragmentary state, and very difficult to interpret, the more so since these fragments are the remains of songs and originally intended to be performed to music. Finally there is the historical context: all we know about the culture in which Sappho lived (ca. 600 BC) that can help to elucidate her work.

Testimonia

The so-called *testimonia* ("witnesses") are a collection of accounts, truths, and half-truths reported about Sappho in antiquity. The most important ones are collected and provided with an English translation by David Campbell (see list of abbreviations and editions).³ It is not

1 This chapter is partly based on the introduction I wrote to *Sappho: A New Translation of the Complete Works* by D.J. Rayor and A. Lardinois, Cambridge Univ. Press 2014, 1–16.

2 The fragments and testimonia of Sappho are cited according to Campbell, unless noted otherwise.

3 For more complete collections of Greek and Latin *testimonia* about Sappho, see Gallavotti 1962, Voigt 1971 and Neri 2021.



Figure 18.1 Attic red-figure kalyx-krater: Side A, Sappho (named in inscription). Attributed to the Tithonos Painter, ca. 500-475 BCE. In Bochum, Ruhr-Universität Kunstsammlungen, inv. S 508. Drawing by Jill Curry Robbins, courtesy of the Center for Hellenic Studies.

easy to assess the truthfulness of these accounts. Most of them date from many centuries after her life and the Greeks and Romans who wrote them probably knew little more than we do about events on the island of Lesbos in the sixth century BC, since no public records existed from this time. They had, however, one distinct advantage over us: they still possessed a substantial portion of Sappho's poetry. Therefore, whenever they mention a detail that could stem from her poetry, it should be treated as possibly valuable information; "valuable" in the sense that it may tell us something about her poetry, though not necessarily about Sappho herself, because two further points have to be taken into account when assessing these ancient records. Firstly, ancient scholars, like modern ones, had the tendency to identify all first-person speakers in Sappho's poems with the poet herself and to read her work autobiographically. We will see that there are good reasons to be skeptical about such a reading of Sappho's songs. Secondly, again like modern scholars, they hated not to be able to give an answer and therefore deduced unknown details from better known ones. One should therefore always assess how likely it is that the authors of the *testimonia* could have known certain facts.

As an example of an ancient testimony about Sappho, I cite the first entry to her name in the *Suda*, a Byzantine encyclopedia, dating to the tenth century AD but based on earlier accounts of ancient scholars:

Sappho: daughter of Simon, according to others of Eumenus or of Eerigyius or of Ecrytus or of Semes or of Camon or of Etarchus or of Scamandronymus; and of her mother Cleis; a Lesbian inhabitant from Eresus; a lyric poetess; flourished in the 42nd Olympiad [i.e., 612/608 BC], when Alcaeus, Stesichorus and Pittacus were also alive. She had three brothers, Larichus, Charaxus and Eurygius. She was married to a very wealthy man called Cercylas, who traded from Andros, and

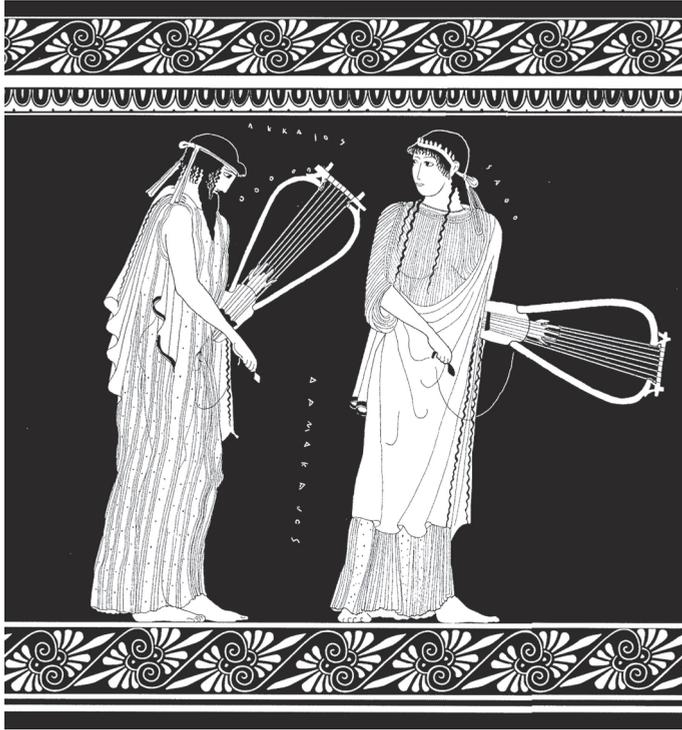


Figure 18.2 Red-figured kalathos attributed to the Brygos Painter: obverse, Sappho and Alcaeus, each with barbiton and plectrum, ca. 470 BC. Munich, Antikensammlungen 2416. Drawing by Valerie Woelfel, courtesy of the Center for Hellenic Studies.

she had a daughter by him, who was called Cleïs. She had three companions or friends, Atthis, Telesippa and Megara, through whom she got a bad name because of her shameful friendship with them. Her pupils were Anagora of Miletus, Gongyla of Colophon and Eunica of Salamis. She wrote nine books of lyric songs, and she was the first to invent the plectrum. She also wrote epigrams, elegiacs, iambics and solo songs.

(*Suda* Σ 107 = test. 2; translation adapted)

This short entry covers three aspects of Sappho's life: her family and friends, where and when she lived, and her poetic output. The way to assess the veracity of these details is to check if they possibly could be derived from Sappho's poetry and, if so, if they plausibly relate to the poet herself.

A daughter named Cleïs, for example, appears to be mentioned in fragments 98b and 132, although the Greek word used for "child" in fragment 132 (παῖς) need not refer to a biological child but, like the English term, can also refer to someone of this age group (Williamson 1995: 2). Other ancient sources report that Sappho praised her brother Larichus, who poured the wine in the town hall of Mytilene, and to have censured her brother Charaxus, who had an affair with a prostitute named Doricha (test. 203 and 254 Voigt). Thanks to a recent papyrus discovery (Obbink 2014), we now know for certain that she mentioned Charaxus and Larichus in her poetry by name. We do not know, however, if these were real brothers of Sappho or fictional characters (Dale 2011b; Lardinois 2016).

The identity of her parents and husband is even less certain. It is quite clear that the name of Sappho's father was not apparent from Sappho's poetry; otherwise ancient scholars would not have come up with a list of no less than eight possible names. Perhaps different families

on the island of Lesbos claimed to be descendants of Sappho, since she was greatly honored on her native island in later times. The name of Sappho's mother looks suspiciously like the name of her daughter, Cleïs. Sappho does mention mothers in her poetry (e.g., fr. 98a, 102), and she, of course, may have named her daughter after her own mother, but this could also be an example of filling in the blanks from better known facts: some ancient scholar may have deduced the name of Sappho's mother from that of her daughter. It is quite possible, then, that Sappho never mentioned her parents by name in her songs.

The same goes for the name of her husband, referred to in the *Suda* as Cercylas of Andros. It has plausibly been argued that this name derived from a comedy about Sappho, about which more will be said below: it literally means "Prick from the Isle of Man" (Campbell 5n. 4). Similarly, accounts about her love for a ferryman named Phaon and her death by jumping off a cliff (test. 3 and 23) can be dismissed as later fabrications. The information which the *Suda* and other ancient sources provide about her family, is therefore not very reliable.

Given Sappho's fame as a poet in antiquity, it is not surprising that there was some discussion about her provenance. Two towns on the island of Lesbos claimed to be her hometown: Eresus, mentioned in the *Suda*, and Mytilene (test. 1, 3, and 11). It is possible that she was born in one town and settled in the other, or that both towns tried to claim this famous inhabitant, as they still do today. That she is reported to be the contemporary of Alcaeus (see Spelman in this volume) and his political rival Pittacus, for which there is some evidence in her songs, helps to fix her date around 600 BC.

Noteworthy is the distinction that the *Suda* makes between Sappho's "companions and friends" (ἑταῖραι καὶ φίλοι) and her "pupils" (μαθήτριά). Some of the names mentioned here also appear in the extant fragments, but we cannot detect any difference in the way she treats these women: Atthis (fr. 8, 49, 96, 131, 214C), Megara (fr. 68a), Anagora (probably a misspelling for Anactoria: fr. 16), and Gongyla (fr. 22, 95). The way Sappho speaks about them does suggest that some of them, at least, were young women.⁴ In antiquity there was already a debate whether Sappho had sexual relationships with the women she sang about in her poetry or was their teacher. The *Suda* tries to settle the issue by making her the "friend" of some and the "teacher" of others. Similarly, there were attempts to distinguish between a "courtesan" named Sappho, who indulged in all kind of sexual affairs, and Sappho the poet (test. 4). They attest to the difficulty of later Greeks with the homoeroticism she expresses in her poetry.

For even if the ancient testimonies about Sappho's life are factually incorrect, they do tell us something about the way in which her poetry was received in antiquity. Right from the beginning it was the erotic content of (some of) her songs that struck the ancients most. The first explicit statements about Sappho's involvement in female homoeroticism date from the Hellenistic and Roman period (test. 1, 17, and 19). They are clear about the physical relationships of Sappho with young women and also about their condemnation of the practice, which at least by this period was no longer condoned. They are also late, however, written four centuries or more after Sappho. Earlier *testimonia* portray Sappho as interested in men: in Attic comedies dating to the fourth century BC, she was imagined to have had several male lovers at the same time (test. 8).

The earliest literary document that may reflect the reception of Sappho's songs is a song by the Greek poet Anacreon. In this song (fr. 358 *PMG*), dating to the second half of the sixth century BC, a male speaker complains that a girl from Lesbos whom he desires pays him no attention because of his white hair (a feminine noun in Greek) and instead gapes at another

4 Lardinois 1994 and Klinck 2005 *contra* Parker 1993 and Stehle 1997: 262–278.

woman or another feminine object (ἄλλην τινά in Greek). Classical scholars have extensively debated what precisely draws the attention of the Lesbian girl away from the speaker, but the whole point of the song is that this is left ambiguous: the “other feminine object” can refer to another woman, the black hair of another (younger) man, or even the other (pubic) hair of the man himself, since the verb λεσβιάζειν (“to do like Lesbian women”) meant to perform fellatio in classical Greek (Henderson 1991: 183–184). How precisely the meaning of this verb or Anacreon’s girl of Lesbos relate to Sappho’s poetry is not clear, but they most likely reflect the reception of her poetry, which was very popular in this period.⁵ The Greeks at this time imagined Sappho to be hyper-sexual and equally interested in men and women.

The four Athenian vase paintings I mentioned above, although older than our written accounts, are also only indirect witnesses to Sappho (Figures 1 and 2). They date from the end of the sixth to the first half of the fifth century BC and associate Sappho with *symposia* or picture her in the private quarters of women, in which her poetry was apparently performed in classical Athens (Yatromanolakis 2007). We do not know how these performances relate to the original performance of her songs, let alone that these portraits of Sappho resemble her real appearance in any way.

The Fragments

The entry in the *Suda*, quoted above, makes clear how much of Sappho’s poetry we have lost. Other sources confirm that Greek scholars from Alexandria edited around nine “books” (papyrus scrolls) with poetry of Sappho in the third and second century BC. The exact number is not entirely certain and may be slightly less: eight or seven scrolls.⁶ Since we know that the first book contained 1320 lines, this would add up to roughly 10,000 lines. None of the books of Sappho was passed on directly to us through medieval manuscripts. Instead we have to rely on quotations in other ancient Greek authors whose work did survive, and on papyrus finds (see below). As a result only about 650 of the 10,000 lines have survived.

It is further worth noting that the *Suda* ascribes the invention of the plectrum (string pick) to her. Sappho was indeed known not only as a poet but also as a musician. Like the other lyric poets in this period, she performed her poetry to music or had others perform it for her. They are songs, although at least from the Hellenistic period onward (third century BC) they were also being read as poetic texts. Of the melodies accompanying these songs nothing has survived.

Among the preserved lines of Sappho there is only one complete poem (fr. 1), approximately twelve substantial fragments that contain over half of the original number of lines, a hundred short citations from the works of other ancient authors, sometimes containing not more than one word, and another fifty scraps of papyrus. That is why it is more accurate to speak about the preserved fragments of Sappho than about her poems or songs.

5 Chamaeleon (fr. 26 Wehrli = Athenaeus 13.599c = Anacreon fr. 358 Campbell), who wrote a biography of Sappho in the fourth century BC, reported that some people believed that Anacreon had addressed these verses to Sappho, but this is for various reasons, including chronology, all but impossible.

6 See Acosta-Hughes 2010: 92–104, with earlier bibliography.

Most of these fragments are found as citations in the works of later Greek authors, grammarians, and rhetoricians, dating from the second to the fifth centuries AD. Together with the relatively high number of papyrus fragments roughly dating from the same period, they attest to Sappho's enduring popularity in antiquity. Many of the papyrus fragments were found in a rubbish mound of the ancient Egyptian town of Oxyrhynchus (modern Behnesa) at the end of the nineteenth century. More recently, a new set of fragments derived from recycled papyrus texts was discovered (Obbink 2016a and 2016b). Other materials on which texts of Sappho were written are parchment (fr. 3–4, 94–96; also the quotations preserved in the manuscripts of other ancient Greek authors) and even a potsherd (fr. 2). It is important to remember, however, that we have no autograph of Sappho's songs. All we have are copies written many centuries after her death with various degrees of accuracy. We do not know if Sappho herself ever made a collection of her songs, let alone what it would have looked like.

Further complicating the reconstruction of Sappho's poetry is the fact that Alcaeus composed lyric songs in the same dialect as Sappho and, unless their authorship is clearly stated, it is sometimes hard to tell whether certain papyrus fragments or quotations are derived from his songs or from those of Sappho. Hence the section "uncertain fragments of either poet" in most editions of Sappho and Alcaeus, but even among the "certain" fragments, now attributed to either Sappho or Alcaeus, there are fragments that may be derived from the other poet.⁷ One gets the impression that modern editors attribute poetic lines to Sappho if they sound vaguely "feminine" and to Alcaeus if they deal with "male" topics, and the ancient editors may have followed a similar logic when they assigned old Aeolic songs either to Sappho or to Alcaeus. A red-figure kalathoid vase (Figure 2) attests to their close connection in Athens already at the beginning of the fifth century BC. It may well be that their poetry was regularly reperformed together (Nagy 2007).

The *Suda* further mentions "epigrams, elegiacs, iambs" (i.e., poems in non-lyric meters). Three of these epigrams are preserved (Campbell 205), but they are clearly Hellenistic poems, inspired by Sappho but not from her hand (Acosta-Hughes 2010: 82–84). The same is probably the case with the elegiac and iambic poetry mentioned by the *Suda*. Among the lyric fragments preserved under her name, songs by other poets may figure as well. We know very little about the transmission of Sappho's poetry between the sixth and third centuries BC, but it was in all likelihood very haphazard and partly oral. Finally, it is interesting that the *Suda* mentions "solo songs," also known as monodic songs, separately. This may be an indication that Sappho's collection of lyric poetry was best known for its choral songs. Nowadays, we find choral and solo songs, and various combinations of the two, distributed among the fragments of her lyric poetry (Lardinois 1996).

The contents of these fragments differ greatly. Besides songs about erotic desire for women (e.g., fr. 1, 16, 22, 31, 96), we possess pieces of cultic hymns (e.g., fr. 17, 140a), wedding songs (e.g., fr. 27, 30, 103–117B), satirical songs (e.g., fr. 55, 57, 71, 99, 131), songs about family (e.g., fr. 5, 15, 98, 132 and the Brothers Song), a song about old age (the Tithonus song), and even an epic-like fragment (fr. 44). What many of these songs have in common is their focus on different aspects of the lives of women.

The cultic hymns, songs composed for performance at religious festivals, suggest that Sappho was a respected member of her community. Otherwise it is hard to imagine that she

7 Note, for example, the uncertain attributions of Sappho fr. 44A and 99 or Alcaeus fr. 253–264 Campbell (Voigt 1971: 281; Boychenko 2017; De Kreij 2020; Neri 2021: ad loc.).

was granted the honor of writing songs for the gods. Most of these hymns were choral songs, meant to be performed in public. It is notable that they deal mainly with female deities. Ancient Greece was a segregated society, in which women publicly worshipped the female gods in particular (Bremmer 1994: ch. 6). They were encouraged to see their own lives reflected in their different manifestations: a Greek woman's life can be described as a transition from the state of Artemis (παρθένος or girl) to Aphrodite (νύμφη or marriageable young woman) to Hera (γυνή or wife) and Demeter (μήτηρ or mother). Sappho composed songs about all these goddesses, either because she chose to or she was restricted to composing songs about female deities because of her gender.

Among the wedding poems there are several songs meant for performances by female choruses. Female friends of the bride typically performed such songs, although some of them may have been sung together with a chorus of young men (friends of the groom) and others as monodic songs by Sappho herself or another soloist. They could be performed at various moments in the ceremony: at the wedding banquet (fr. 105, 112, 114), during the procession leading the bride from her parents' to her husband's home (e.g., fr. 110, 111), and even the morning after the wedding night outside the bridal chamber (fr. 6).⁸

There are other fragments that deal with the love between a man and a woman (fr. 102?, 121, 137, 138). To a modern reader of her poetry this may seem surprising, given Sappho's reputation as a celebrant of lesbian love. Not so to an ancient Greek. Homosexuality and heterosexuality were not opposed to one another, as they are often perceived to be in modern times. A distinction was rather made between marital love (Hera) and passionate love (Aphrodite), which included homo- and heterosexual affairs, and Sappho was considered to be the spokesperson of passionate love. In both her homoerotic poetry and in her wedding songs Sappho celebrates the power of Aphrodite, because as a young bride a woman was still considered to be under the spell of the goddess of love. In fragment 1 Sappho calls on Aphrodite to lead a woman back to her love, but in fragment 112 the singer congratulates a groom, because "Aphrodite honoured you outstandingly" through the beauty of his bride (Meister 2017).

The satirical songs criticize women who left Sappho against her wishes or about the women to whom they subsequently turned, such as Andromeda (fr. 57, 65?, 68a, 90, 131, 133, and 155) and Gorgo (fr. 144, 155, and 213). A late source informs us that these women were, like Sappho, instructors of young women (test. 20), but we get the impression from the fragments that they were also rivals for the affection of these young women.

The names of these rivals mean little to us, but in one fragment a girl is mentioned who preferred the friendship of a woman belonging to the house of Penthilus (fr. 71). We are acquainted with this family through the poetry of Alcaeus, whose political arch-enemy, Pittacus, had entered into an alliance with this family through marriage. It is possible that complex political alliances between important families, including Sappho's own, played a role in the establishment of relationships between Sappho and her friends, whatever they may have been. In addition, such political rivalries may have resulted in a period she had to spend in exile on the island of Sicily, as mentioned by the Parian Marble, a famous inscription with (pseudo-) historical information.⁹

8 On Sappho's wedding songs, see Bowra 1961: 214–223, Contiades-Tsitsoni 1990: 68–109, Lardinois 2001 and Ferrari 2010: 117–133.

9 Test. 5. Martin West has suggested a possible allusion to this exile in the newly reconstructed fr. 16a (West 2014: 3).

Besides hints about the political situation on the island of Lesbos, Sappho's poetry also informs us about its cultural climate, in particular its close connections to Asia Minor (Thomas 2021). The kingdom of Lydia, across the strait from Lesbos in modern day Turkey, is singled out in her poetry for its opulence and as a source for luxury goods (fr. 16, 39, 98, and 132). Thus in fragment 98b the first person speaker complains that, because of the political situation on the island, she cannot obtain a decorated headband from Lydia for her daughter. Such a headband (μίτρα Λυδία) is also mentioned as a precious object by the Spartan poet Alcman (fr. 1.67–68).

Sappho was best known in antiquity, and still is today, for her songs about the erotic desire for women. These songs can roughly be divided into two groups (West 1970b). First there are songs that concern women who have left Sappho, either against her wishes (see above) or with her consent (possibly in order to marry). In these songs she mentions the women by name: Anactoria (fr. 16), Megara (fr. 68a), Mica (fr. 71) and Atthis (fr. 131). Therefore they must have been occasional verses, in the sense that they concern one particular woman on one particular occasion, unless the names of these women represent fictional characters. The same cannot be said about the songs in which Sappho speaks about a woman whom she still desires (fr. 1 and 31). No specific person is mentioned in them and they could have been recited on various occasions. In these two songs in particular, while clearly expressing her feelings for another woman, Sappho seems less concerned with homoerotic desire *per se* than with the effects of love in general. She illustrates these effects with the example of the desire of the female speaker for a nameless woman.

A good example is her so-called Hymn to Aphrodite (fr. 1). This poem takes the form of a typical Greek prayer, including an invocation, a narration, and a request, but it is not a real prayer but a song, composed in stylised poetic language and meter and intended for an audience of mortals. It qualifies as an *erōtikon* (a song about passionate love), not a *hymnos* (a song for a god). The fictional character of the song is clear because the beloved of the first-person speaker, who is identified as “Sappho” (line 20), is not named: this makes the poem as a prayer highly ineffective, but works well for a song, making it easier to perform on different occasions.

In the song the character of “Sappho” prays to Aphrodite to help her with a woman who does not reciprocate her love, as she had promised to do in the past. Interpreters of this song have rightly questioned, however, what it is that Aphrodite exactly promised to “Sappho” in lines 21–24:

καὶ γὰρ αἱ φεύγει, ταχέως διώξει,
αἱ δὲ δῶρα μὴ δέκετ', ἀλλὰ δώσει,
αἱ δὲ μὴ φιλεῖ, ταχέως φιλήσει
κωὺκ ἐθέλοισα.

If now she flees, soon she'll chase.
If rejecting gifts, then she'll give.
If not loving, soon she'll love,
even against her will. (trans. Rayor)

The object of the woman's chase, gift giving, and love is not expressed. Aphrodite therefore does not necessarily promise that the woman will chase, give gifts to, or love “Sappho” again in the future; she could also be saying that the woman will chase, give gifts to, and love *someone else* against her will, just as “Sappho” loved this woman in vain (Carson 1980). This interpretation helps to explain why Aphrodite is described as “weaving wiles” (δολόπλοκε, line 2) at the beginning of the poem.

What fragment 1 talks about is the capriciousness of love, both on the human-level (“Sappho”) and on the divine-level (Aphrodite). Although Sappho voices this idea artfully, it

was not new: this is generally how the Greeks looked at *erôs* and the workings of Aphrodite.¹⁰ What is remarkable, however, is that Sappho illustrates these workings through a woman passionately desiring another woman. Since antiquity, this choice has generally been attributed to her personal preference for women, but another explanation is possible as well. As Eva Stehle has remarked:

The formal problem facing Sappho was to find a way of presenting the female persona as an erotic subject. Culturally acceptable models presumably did not include woman's pursuing man. Sappho's solution, to direct the erotic impulse toward other women, was perhaps a traditional one.

(Stehle 1981: 45)

Furthermore, by using as her example a homoerotic relationship, Sappho, like other archaic Greek poets, made it clear that she is talking about the passionate love of Aphrodite, not the measured form of marital love that was the domain of Hera. Even so, it cannot be denied that Sappho's poetry marks a memorable moment in the history of sexuality and testifies to the fact that the ancient Greeks not only recognized the possibility of love between two women but were not shy of hearing or singing songs about it.

A complicating factor for the interpretation of Sappho's poetry is that we do not know if she always performed the songs herself or if she had other soloists and choruses perform them as well. In fragment 1 she identifies herself as the speaker (not necessarily the performer!), but such self-identifications are rare (cf. fr. 65, 94, and 133). Scholars have tried to find stylistic differences between Sappho's choral and monodic songs, but this has proven to be impossible, and even if one could determine that a song was definitely a monodic composition, it does not mean that Sappho was the original performer. Fragments 21, 22, and 96 inform us that other women in Sappho's presence dedicated songs to each other: did they compose these songs themselves or did Sappho compose the songs for them, just as she composed religious hymns and wedding songs for others to perform? Ultimately, however, it does not make much of a difference for the interpretation of her songs whether Sappho, a chorus or another soloist performed them, as long as one accepts that all three would be speaking with a public voice. In fragment 16, for example, when the first-person speaker says that she misses Anactoria and desires to see her again, she probably acts as a representative of the audience, inspiring the same longing in them. In that case, it does not make much difference for the understanding of the song who the speaker is: Sappho, a chorus or another soloist.

Many of the questions surrounding the interpretation of Sappho's fragments can be illustrated by the so-called Tithonus poem. Parts of this song were known already from an older papyrus find, but a more complete text was discovered and published in 2004.¹¹

[I bring] the beautiful gifts of the violet Muses, girls,
and [I love] that song-lover, the sweet-toned lyre.
My skin was [delicate] before, but now old age
[claims it]; my hair turned from black [to white].
My spirit has grown heavy; knees buckle

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10 Calame 1999: 3–9 and *passim*. Compare, for example, Aphrodite's treatment of Helen in *Iliad* 3.383–442.

11 Gronewald and Daniel 2004a and 2004b. For the final publication, see Gronewald and Daniel 2007. For a picture and discussion of this papyrus, see the contribution of Sampson to this volume.

that once could dance light as fawns.
 I often groan, but what can I do?
 Impossible for humans not to age.
 For they say rosy-armed Dawn in love
 went to the ends of earth holding Tithonos, 10
 beautiful and young, but in time gray old age
 seized even him with an immortal wife. (transl. Rayor)

The Cologne papyrus stops the poem at line 12, but another papyrus fragment (fr. 58 Campbell) seems to add four more lines, in which the speaker reconciles herself with the fact that she has grown old. It is possible that two versions of this song existed in antiquity, one with and one without the consolatory ending, as may have been the case with other songs of Sappho as well (De Kreij 2015; Pitotto and Raschieri 2017).

In the song the speaker, who may well have been Sappho herself, at least in the first performance of the song, addresses a group of girls.¹² These girls may have constituted the audience of this song, but they could also have accompanied its performance by dancing. Sappho may be calling on them, while performing the song for a wider audience. The song therefore illustrates two possible scenarios for the performance of Sappho's songs: in a small, intimate circle of young friends, or in public, accompanied by a dancing chorus. In this case I find the second option more plausible: Sappho complains that she is too old to dance, but she can still sing and play the lyre, while a chorus of young women accompanies her song by dancing "light as fawns" (Lardinois 2009).

Ten years after the Tithonus poem, yet a new set of fragments was published.¹³ The new discovery consists of five papyrus fragments, preserving the remains of six columns. P. GC Inv. 105 frs. 1–4 preserves small parts of five columns, which provide significant new readings and additions to five previously known songs of Sappho (fr. 5, 9, 16, 17, and 18), as well as traces of two previously unknown songs (fr. 16a and 18a). Most spectacular, however, was the discovery of another papyrus fragment with five complete stanzas of a previously unknown song, which Obbink has labelled the Brothers Poem or Brothers Song.¹⁴ This song is followed on the papyrus by the first two stanzas of a less well-preserved poem, the Cypris Song, an appeal to Aphrodite under her cult title Cypris, which overlaps with a fragment from the Oxyrhynchus papyri (fr. 26 Voigt) and has a join with P. CG Inv. 105, fr.4 (Burris 2017).

This new find has significantly improved our understanding of Sappho's poetry, especially of those poems that were written in the Sapphic strophe and that Alexandrian scholars had collected in Book I of their editions, from which the new set of papyrus fragments is derived. It is clear now that the poems in this book were arranged alphabetically (by first letter only) and probably comprised far fewer love poems than previously thought. We now possess a stretch of fragments of ten poems of Sappho, covering the letters O to Π, of which only two are obvious love poems (fr. 16 and the Cypris Song), while no fewer than three (fr. 5, 15, and Brothers Song) and possibly four (fr. 9) are devoted to family members. This is not the

12 The Greek actually speaks of "children" (παῖδες), but in the context of Sappho's poetry it is not unlikely that "girls" is meant by this (cf. fr. 27.4, 49.2, 113.2, 122, 132.1, 155).

13 Obbink 2014, Burris, Fish, and Obbink 2014. For an updated version of the fragments with critical apparatus and translation, see Neri 2021. In the meantime Burris' discovery of a join between P. Sapph. Obbink and P. GC Inv. 105 fr. 4 has allowed for a better reconstruction of the two opening strophes of the Cypris song: Burris 2017, Neri 2017, Lardinois 2018 and Obbink 2019. Unfortunately the provenance of these new fragments is disputed and the whereabouts of P. Sapph. Obbink is currently unknown.

14 P. Sapph. Obbink: see Obbink 2014, 2015a, 2016a and 2016b.

impression we get from the indirect transmission, which clearly favored Sappho's love poetry: before the discovery of the Oxyrhynchus papyri the only two substantial fragments, preserved through the indirect transmission, were both love poems (fr. 1 and 31).

This new group of fragments has also helped to demonstrate the great variety of tone and perspectives within the different genres of her poetry (Lidov 2016). Within the family songs, for example, fragment 5 takes the form of a prayer (cf. fr. 1), in which Sappho asks the Nereids for a safe return of her brother Charaxus, while in the Brothers poem she has a conversation with another family member (probably her mother or her third brother Eurygius, who is mentioned in the quotation from the *Suda* above) about the absence of Charaxus and the hope that her younger brother, Larichus, will grow up to become a man. In yet another poem (possibly fr. 15), she is said to have abused Charaxus for having spent great sums of money on a Greek prostitute in Egypt, according to Herodotus (2.134–135).

The Cypris song, at the same time, shows that among her love poems there were some that described a much more hostile relationship between Sappho and Aphrodite than fragment 1, discussed above, reveals (in the second stanza she accuses the goddess of physically harming her), and the discovery of two new words at the end of lines 13 and 14 of fragment 16, the song for Anactoria (νοήμια and νοήση: “thought” and “thinks”), confirms the cerebral quality of this love song, as opposed to the raw passion expressed in fragment 31 or in the Cypris song. Finally, new readings of fragment 17 (a prayer to Hera) have confirmed that this was most likely a choral song, since the first-person speaker uses a we-form (“we perform”) in line 11 (Burris, Fish and Obbink 2014: 5), further demonstrating that choral and monodic songs were mixed in together in Book 1 of Sappho.

The Historical Context

In order better to understand the poetic activities of Sappho and the relationships she describes, scholars have resorted to comparisons with other communities and known, archaic Greek practices or at least with what they believe to be archaic Greek practices. Such comparisons are always subjective, because scholars select from the scattered information about archaic Greece those elements that correspond best to their own perception of Sappho's world. This does not mean that the information is incorrect or the comparison necessarily invalid, but it is important that one first determines, independently of the other evidence, what there is in the fragments of Sappho's poetry. We have seen in the previous section that Sappho in her songs speaks about women for whom she or other performers express erotic desire and that she composed at least some songs for choral performances. I will discuss parallels for these two aspects of her work in the following paragraphs.

One comparison that has been suggested is that between Sappho and noble women in Sparta who, according to Plutarch (*Lyc.* 18.9), had sexual relationships with young women similar to those of men with boys. There is no reliable evidence to support this claim of Plutarch, however, and it appears very unlikely, given the restrictions Greek society placed on female sexuality in general (Lardinois 2010). A more promising parallel is that between Sappho's erotic poetry and certain songs of the Spartan poet Alcman, in which a chorus of young women expresses their desire for their chorus-leader. As an example I cite from Alcman's third *partheneion* or maiden song: “she looks (at me?) more meltingly than sleep or death, and not in vain is she sweet... I were to see whether perchance she were to love me. If

only she came nearer and took my soft hand, I would immediately become her suppliant” (Alcman fr. 3.61–63, 79–81 *PMGF*). Although such statements look like they are personal declarations of love, they are in fact public forms of praise of the general attractiveness of the girl: the chorus expects the whole audience to feel what they feel. (The girl in Alcman’s song is said to run through the crowd as the “darling of the people.”) It could be that some of Sappho’s comments about the erotic appeal of specific young women were intended to have a similar effect.

Another comparison worth considering is that between Sappho and Alcman as instructors of young women’s choruses. Alcman not only composed songs for Spartan choruses of young women, but he also trained them and accompanied them during their performances, as did most Greek poets who composed choral songs. Since we know that Sappho composed such songs, notably for religious rituals and weddings, she may well have been involved in similar activities. This could help to explain the mentioning of “pupils” in the *Suda* and in other sources: they could be anachronistic references to the young women she trained in her choruses.

The next question is if we can reconcile Sappho’s choral activities with the erotic relationships she sings about. Some scholars have suggested that Sappho had a homoerotic relationship with one girl in the chorus, which somehow would be the model for the whole group and in which the group could share by singing her love poetry (Gentili 1988; Calame 1996). They point to groups of boys that formed around one aristocratic boy and his adult lover on ancient Crete as a possible parallel. Another possibility is that the homoerotic feelings Sappho and the other female performers of her songs sing about do not reflect actual relationships, but are intended as statements about the attractiveness of these young women and the power of love in general.

Modern Views of Sappho

There are four interpretations of Sappho that dominate the modern literature about her: Sappho the chorus organizer, Sappho the teacher, Sappho the priestess, and Sappho the banqueter. Of these four the suggestion that she led young women’s choruses is the most plausible, because it agrees best with a number of her fragments and the historical period in which she lived. It cannot explain all of her poetry, because there are among her poetry also solo songs, but they, too, were probably performed in public, either by Sappho herself or by others.¹⁵ Even her so-called “biographical” poetry, like the songs about her brothers, could have been performed in public (Bierl 2016b; Nagy 2016).

Many modern scholars still assume, however, that Sappho performed her songs herself in the privacy of her home to a small circle of (young) friends. There are two pieces of evidence that are cited in support of this. In fr. 160 the speaker says something like “I shall now sing these songs beautifully to the delight of my companions” (τάδε νῦν ἐταίραις/ταῖς ἔμαις ἴτέρπναϊ κάλως ἀείσω). We cannot be sure that this is what the poem actually said (τέρπνα does not fit the meter) or that Sappho herself is the speaker, but even if this were the case, to whom is she addressing these words? She does not use a second-person address, as the speaker does, for example, in fr. 41, and therefore may be speaking about her companions to a wider audience. I proposed a similar interpretation of the performance context of the Tithonus song above.

15 Lardinois 1994 and 1996, Ferrari 2010 and 2021.

Another fragment that is regularly cited in support of Sappho's performance in the privacy of her home is fr. 150, in which Sappho calls a house (if δόμῳ is the correct supplement for the unmetrical οἰκίαι which is transmitted) that of "the servants of the Muses" (μοισσοπόλων).¹⁶ According to Maximus of Tyre, who has preserved the fragment for us, Sappho spoke these words to her daughter, which is probably why most scholars assume that she is speaking about her own house. Yet, even if this were the case, the fragment does not say that it was in her house, and her house alone, that she performed her songs. We do not know what she means by the word μοισσοπόλων, but in a Boeotian inscription of the third century BC it refers to a theater group (Lanata 1996: 14).

The reconstruction of Sappho as a teacher who performed songs to young girls at her home was particularly popular in Germany in the nineteenth and early twentieth century (Welcker 1845; Wilamowitz 1913). It was based on repeated references in the testimonies, such as the *Suda*, to "pupils" of Sappho. We have seen, however, that these are more likely anachronistic reinterpretations of the relationships Sappho had with members of her choruses. Some testimonies speak of women who came from all over Greece to study with her—note that the *Suda* (above) remarks that her pupils came from a number of Greek cities,—but these reports are also unreliable (Parker 1993: 320–321). As far as we know there existed no schools for women in archaic Greece. The only "education" young women received outside their homes was in choruses where they were taught songs and dances and, at least in Sparta, gymnastics. They also worshipped the major female deities and underwent certain initiation rituals together. In fragment 94 one can perhaps catch a glimpse of the kind of activities Sappho engaged in with the women in her care.

In the twentieth century, it became more popular to assume that Sappho had gathered a religious community (*thiasos* in Greek) around her and that she herself was a priestess of Aphrodite.¹⁷ We have seen that there are religious hymns among the remaining fragments of Sappho, several of which are dedicated to Aphrodite, and in the testimonies, too, she is sometimes portrayed as being involved in performances at temples (test. 59). This does not make her different, however, from other Greek poets who composed hymns and accompanied choruses at religious festivals. There is no evidence that Sappho held a religious function, such as priestess. It is true, of course, that an archaic Greek chorus did have a religious purpose (see above). In this sense the idea that Sappho led a religious community is compatible with her role as composer and instructor of young women's choruses, but that is different from saying that her so called "circle" was organized as a *thiasos*.

More recently the idea that Sappho was a poet who composed songs that she performed at banquets or drinking parties (*symposia*) for other adult women has gained some adherents (Parker 1993; Stehle 1997). It is true that Sappho's songs were later performed at *symposia*, but these were drinking parties of, predominantly, men. Some of Sappho's songs appear to have been composed for the wedding banquet, which, in the case of aristocratic marriages, would have comprised a sizeable audience of adult men and women. There is no evidence, however, for banquets or drinking parties exclusively for women in archaic Greece, except at some religious festivals.

In a modification of this idea of Sappho as a singer at symposia for women, Renate Schlesier has suggested that she composed songs for and about courtesans to be performed at regular,

16 Page 1955: 132 n.1 is probably correct in assuming that οἰκίαι ousted another word and originally was a gloss to ἐν μοισσοπόλων, meaning by itself "in the abode of the servants of the Muses."

17 For a list of representatives, see Parker 1993: 339. Add Gentili 1988.

male symposia (Schlesier 2013 and 2014). Similarly, Ewen Bowie has proposed that she was a virtuoso singer at male symposia (Bowie 2016). Schlesier's main argument are the speaking names of the women mentioned in Sappho's poetry, but we know little to nothing about the nomenclature of women on Lesbos in the sixth century BC, outside of Sappho's songs, and we find speaking names, for example, in Alcman's first *partheneion* as well (fr. 1.70–77). They could also be nicknames or the names of fictional characters. This reconstruction further helps to explain only a small set of her poetry (mainly the love songs) and is hard to reconcile with Sappho's wedding poetry, her religious hymns or the songs about her family. It is more likely that the sympotic elements we do find in Sappho's poetry are the result of her composing songs for the wedding banquet, including her love songs.¹⁸

However, one wishes to reconstruct Sappho's life or the performances of her songs, above all she is a poet and the earliest Greek woman of whom at least a substantial body of poetry is preserved. Other Greek women poets date mainly from the Hellenistic period and much less of their work survives (Snyder 1989). The power of the language of Sappho's poetry, the directness of its style and richness of its imagery, is apparent even in its present, fragmentary state. They have kept her name alive and continue to raise our curiosity about the circumstances of the life and work of this remarkable lyric poet.

FURTHER READING

The standard text edition of Sappho is now Neri 2021, which includes an extensive commentary and translation in Italian. For an English translation of all fragments, including the most recent finds, see Rayor and Lardinois 2022. Good introductions to Sappho and her work include Williamson 1995, Greene 1996a and 1996b, and Finglass and Kelly 2021. Discussions of the new discoveries are collected in Greene and Skinner 2009 (on the Tithonus poem) and Bierl and Lardinois 2016.

18 Lardinois 2021. According to Aristoxenus, a pupil of Aristotle, “serious love songs” (ἐρωτικὰ σύντρονα) were performed at Greek wedding banquets (Aristoxenus fr. 125 Wehrli = Scolia test. 2 Campbell 1993: 176).