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Diane J. Rayor and André Lardinois

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## Introduction

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: Material 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 on their duty if they did not at least try to reconstruct the original context 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. This introduction is intended to provide the most plausible background to her life and work.

There are, roughly speaking, three sources that can help us to reconstruct Sappho's biography. 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. Second, there is the poetry itself, of which, however, very little survives. It is often hard to read, because of its fragmentary state, and very difficult to interpret. In addition, these fragments are the remains of songs. Sappho's poems were all intended to be performed to music. Finally, there is the historical context: all we know about

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the culture in which Sappho lived (ca. 600 BCE) 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 (1990). It is not 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 BCE, 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 songs, it should be treated at least as possibly valuable information. Two further points should be taken into account in assessing these ancient records. First, ancient scholars, like modern ones, had a tendency to identify all first-person speakers in Sappho's poetry 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. Second, 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 ancient scholars could have known certain facts.

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

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Sappho: daughter of Simon, according to others of Eumenos or of Eerigyios or of Ekrytos or of Semos or of Kamon or of Etarchos or of Skamandronymos; and of her mother Kleïs; a Lesbian inhabitant from Eressos; a lyric poet; flourished in the 42nd Olympiad [i.e., 612–608 BCE], when Alkaios, Stesichoros and Pittakos were also alive. She had three brothers, Larichos, Charaxos and Eurygios. She was married to a very wealthy man called Kerkylas, who traded from Andros, and she had a daughter by him, who was called Kleïs. 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 Miletos, Gongyla of Kolophon and Eunika 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. (test. 2 Campbell; translation adapted)

This short entry covers three aspects of Sappho's life: (1) her family and friends, (2) where she lived and when, and (3) her poetic output. The way to assess the veracity of these details is to check them with information we can gather from other *testimonia* and from the extant fragments.

For example, a daughter named Kleïs appears to be mentioned in fragments 98(b) and 132. Other ancient sources report that Sappho praised her brother Larichos, who poured the wine in the town hall of Mytilene, and censured her brother Charaxos, who spent a fortune on a courtesan named Doricha. Thanks to a recent papyrus discovery (Obbink 2014a), which includes five stanzas of a previously unknown poem (the so-called Brothers song), we know that she mentioned Charaxos and Larichos in her poetry by name. We do not know, however, if these were real brothers of Sappho or, wholly or partially, fictional characters (see appendix).

The identities of her parents and husband are even less certain. It is quite clear that the name of Sappho's father was not apparent from

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her 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, Kleis. Sappho, 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. Most likely, then, Sappho never mentioned the names of her parents in her songs.

The same goes for the name of her husband, referred to in the *Suda* as Kerkylas of Andros. This name appears to be derived from a comedy about Sappho, of which more will be said later: it literally means "Little Prick from the Isle of Man." Other accounts about her love for a ferryman named Phaon and her death by jumping off a cliff can be dismissed as later fabrications as well. We therefore can see that the information about her family provided by the *Suda* and other ancient sources is not very reliable.

Given Sappho's reputation 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: Eressos, mentioned in the *Suda*, and Mytilene, the capital of the island. 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 Alkaios and Pittakos, two renowned men from Lesbos, for which there is some evidence in her songs, helps to fix her date around 600 BCE: when the *Suda* says that she flourished in the 42nd Olympiad (612–608 BCE), they mean that this is when she was an adult. (The ancients dated the first Olympic games to 776 BCE.) Alkaios was a male poet

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from the island of Lesbos. He composed songs in the same dialect as Sappho and is often quoted together with her in our ancient sources. It is therefore sometimes hard to tell whether certain fragments are derived from his songs or those of Sappho (see especially the commentary to fragments labeled S/A and A).

Noteworthy is the distinction the *Suda* makes between Sappho's "companions and friends" and her "pupils." 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 (frs. 8, 49A, 96, 131, 214C, and A 256), Megara (fr. 68), Anagora (probably a misspelling of Anaktoria: fr. 16), and Gongyla (frs. 22 and 95). The way Sappho speaks about them does suggest that some, at least, were young women. In antiquity there was already a debate as to 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 kinds of sexual affairs, and Sappho the poet. They attest to the difficulty of later Greeks with the homoeroticism she expresses in her poetry.

For even if the ancient *testimonia* 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. They are very explicit about the physical relationships of Sappho with young women and also about their condemnation of the practice, which at least by this period was not condoned. They are also late, however, written four centuries or more after Sappho. Earlier *testimonia* portray Sappho as interested in men: in Attic comedies,

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dating to the fourth century BCE, she was imagined to have had several male lovers at the same time.

The earliest literary document that may reflect the reception of Sappho's songs is a song by the Greek poet Anakreon. In this song (fr. 358), dating to the second half of the sixth century BCE, 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 woman or another feminine object (*allên tina* 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, because the verb *lesbiazein* (to do like women of Lesbos) meant to perform fellatio in classical Greek. How precisely the meaning of this verb or Anakreon's girl of Lesbos relates to Sappho's poetry is not clear, but they most likely reflect the reception of her poetry, which was very popular in this period. The Greeks at this time imagined Sappho to be hypersexual and equally interested in men and women.

The four Athenian vase paintings I mentioned earlier, although older than our written accounts, are also only indirect witnesses to Sappho. They date from the end of the sixth to the first half of the fifth century BCE and associate Sappho with drinking parties (so-called *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 whether these portraits of Sappho resemble her real appearance in any way.

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## THE FRAGMENTS

The entry in the *Suda* quoted earlier makes clear how much of Sappho's poetry we have lost. Other sources confirm that Greek scholars from the Egyptian town of Alexandria edited around nine "books" (papyrus scrolls, actually) with poetry of Sappho in the third and second centuries BCE. The number is not entirely certain and may be slightly less (eight or seven scrolls). Since we know that the first book contained 1,320 lines, this would add up to roughly 10,000 lines, of which only 650 survive. 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 other lyric poets in this period, she performed her poetry to music or had others perform it for her. Her poems were in the form of songs, although at least from the Hellenistic period onward (third century BCE) they were also being read as poetic texts. Of the melodies accompanying these songs nothing has survived.

Among the preserved lines of Sappho there are only one complete song (fr. 1), approximately ten substantial fragments that contain more than 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.

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 century CE. Together with the relatively large number of papyrus fragments, roughly dating from the same period, they attest to Sappho's enduring popularity in antiquity. As a result her fragments are found on all kinds of materials. Papyrus, made

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from the stalks of a marsh plant from Egypt, was the most common writing material in antiquity. Many of these papyrus fragments were found in a rubbish mound in the ancient Egyptian town of Oxyrhynchos (modern Behnesa) at the beginning of the twentieth century. Other materials on which texts of Sappho are found are parchment (frs. 3–4 and 94–96; also the quotations in manuscripts of other ancient authors) and even a potsherd (fr. 2). It is important to remember, however, that we have no autograph of Sappho's songs. They are all copies written many centuries after her death with various degrees of accuracy. The relative order in which the first 117 fragments are listed also dates back to the Hellenistic period (300–100 BCE). We do not know if Sappho herself ever made a collection of her songs, let alone what it looked like.

The *Suda* further mentions “epigrams, elegiacs, iambics” (i.e., poems in nonlyric meters). Three of these epigrams are preserved (Campbell 1990: 205), but they are clearly Hellenistic poems inspired by Sappho. 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 BCE, 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.

The contents of these fragments differ greatly. Besides songs about the erotic desire for women (e.g., frs. 1, 16, 22, 31, and 96), we possess pieces of cultic hymns (e.g., frs. 2, 17, and 140), wedding songs (e.g., frs. 27, 30, and 103–117B), satirical songs (e.g., frs. 55, 57, 71, 99, and

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131), songs about Sappho's family (e.g., frs. 5, 15, 98, 132, and Brothers song), a song about old age (fr. 58), 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 suggest that Sappho was a respected member of her community. Otherwise it would be inconceivable that she 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 are mostly hymns to female deities. Ancient Greece was a segregated society, in which women publicly worshipped the female gods in particular. They were encouraged to see their own lives reflected in these deities' different manifestations: a Greek woman's life could be described as a transition from the state of Artemis (*parthenos*, or girl) to Aphrodite (*numphê*, or marriageable young woman) to Hera (*gunê*, or wife) and Demeter (*mêtêr*, or mother). Sappho composed songs for performances at festivals of all these goddesses.

Among the wedding poems there are several songs meant for performances by female choruses. Female friends of the bride typically performed them, 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 (frs. 105, 112, and 114), during the procession leading the bride from her parents' house to her husband's (e.g., frs. 110, and 111), and even the morning after the wedding night outside the bridal chamber (fr. 6).

There are other fragments that address the love between a man and a woman (frs. 102, 121, 137, and 138). To a modern reader of Sappho's poetry this may seem surprising, given her 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

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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 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 (cf. fr. 112).

The satirical songs speak about women who left Sappho or about the women to whom they turned, such as Andromeda (frs. 57, 65, 68, 90, 131, 133, and 155) and Gorgo (frs. 144, 155, and 213). A late source informs us that these women were, like Sappho, instructors of young women, but we get the impression from the fragments that they were rivals for the affection of the women as well. 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 Penthilos (fr. 71). We are acquainted with this family through the work of the Lesbian poet Alkaios. His political archenemy had entered into an alliance with this family through marriage. It is possible that complex political alliances between important aristocratic 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 of exile that Sappho allegedly spent on the island of Sicily, as mentioned by some of our ancient sources.

Sappho was best known in antiquity and still is for her songs about the erotic desire for women. These songs can roughly be divided into two groups. First there are songs that concern women who have left Sappho, either against her wishes (as mentioned earlier) or with her consent (possibly in order to marry). In these songs she mentions the women by name: Anaktoria (fr. 16), Gongyla (fr. 22), Megara (fr. 68), Mika (fr. 71), and Atthis (fr. 131). Therefore, the songs must have