

Sappho 16

Greek Text

Οἱ μὲν ἰππῶν στρότον, οἱ δὲ πέσδων
οἱ δὲ νάων φαῖσ' ἐπὶ γᾶν μέλαι[ν]αν,
ἔ]μμεναι κάλλιστον, ἔγω δὲ κῆν' ὄττω τις ἔραται.

πά]γχυ δ' ἔυμαρες σύνετον πόησαι
π]άντι τ[ο]ῦτ', ἃ γὰρ πόλυ περσκέθοισα
κάλλος [ἀνθ]ρώπων Ἑλένα [τὸ]ν ἄνδρα τὸν [περ αρ]ιστον

καλλ[ίποι]σ' ἔβα 'ς Τροίαν πλέοι[σα
κωὺδ[ε πα]ῖδος οὐδὲ φίλων το[κ]ήων
πάμπαν ἐμνάσθη, ἀλλὰ παράγαγ' αὐταν¹

[ἄγν]αμπτον γὰρ [] νόημα
[κούφως τ[] νοήσηι
[κᾶ]με νῦν Ἀνακτορίας ὀνέμναισ' οὐ[παρεοίσας

τᾶ]ς [κ]ε βολλοίμαν ἔρατόν τε βᾶμα
κάμάρυγμα λάμπρον ἴδην προσώπω
ἢ τὰ Λύδων ἄρματα κὰν ὄπλοισι πεσδομάχεντας

[]μεν οὐ δύνατον γένεσθαι
[] ἀνθρω[π]εδέχην δ' ἄρασθαι
..... [δ' ἔμ' αὐται]

[.....]
..... βας ἐπ' ἄκρας
..... χίον' ἃ δὲ πόλλα
προς

[]ἀπέλθην
..... ὄττινας γὰρ
εὔ θέω κῆνοί με μάλιστα σίννοντ' ἐξ ἄδοχῆτω

Meter: Sapphic Stanza

¹ The new fragment shows a correction of the word from the masculine to the feminine gender (the gender attested in the earlier published fragments of this poem). The fact that there was a correction and the possibly exaggerated emphasis placed on making the correction (see the ZPE article for the discussion) suggests that it was not clear in antiquity what gender Sappho may have intended.

_ u _ x _ u u _ u _ _

_ u _ x _ u u _ u _ _

_ u _ x _ u u _ u _ _ _ u u _ _

Translation

Some men say the cavalry, some men say the infantry,
Some men say an armada of dark ships is the most
beautiful thing in the world, but I say it is what one loves.

It is very easy to make everyone see this point:
that woman, who had far more beauty
than any other person, Helen, who left a man, though a leader,

behind, and went sailing off to Troy,
not of her child, not of her parents
Had she any thought, rather [. . . **led her**]². . .

. for without influence . . . the thought
. easily³ **thinks**

I am reminded now of ‘Anaktoria,’ who is not here:

I would rather see the lovely way she walks,
the way the light plays upon her face,
than Lydian soldiers in horse drawn chariots or fighting on foot

. . . it is not possible to become
. . . people . . . but to pray for a portion
. . . **yet I myself**

. . . stepping⁴ **onto the peak**
. . . snow⁵ **but she often . . .**

² The subject of the verb ‘led’ and the gender of the object is not clear: ‘she led him’ and ‘he led her’ are both possible. As I have argued in connection with S. 1 and some other poems by Sappho it seems that at times Sappho enjoyed being deliberately ambiguous about gender and confusion about her intended usage here may reflect that.

³ The adverb **κούφως** (easily or lightly) resonates with the sentiment that opens the second stanza, **πάλλυ δ’ ἔυμαρες** (very easy).

⁴ The exact form of the verb is not clear; though it is not a participle the English participle seems to be the best way to capture the likely sense of the verb, whatever its form.

⁵ The appearance of the word for ‘snow’ (otherwise unattested in Sappho) elicited a peculiar amount of speculation, including the anecdotal information that in modern times Lesbos has had snow and ice in the winter. But when does a poet need to experience something directly to describe it? And what about the generally agreed exile of Sappho to Sicily? Located there is not only the nearly 11,000 foot Mt. Aetna

.. toward ..

to leave

For indeed those people

I treat well--they are the ones who hurt me the most, without warning

(this translation is repeated below with the stanzas numbered for ease of reference)

that at least has enough snow in modern times to support a ski area.

1⁶

Some men say the cavalry, some men say the infantry,
Some men say an armada of dark ships is the most
beautiful thing in the world, but I say it is what one loves.

2

It is very easy to make everyone see this point:
that woman, who had far more beauty
than any other person, Helen, who left a man, though a leader,

3

behind, and went sailing off to Troy,
not of her child, not of her parents
Had she any thought, rather [. . . **led her**]⁷ . . .

4

. for without influence . . . the thought
. easily⁸ thinks
I am reminded now of ‘Anaktoria,’ who is not here:

5

I would rather see the lovely way she walks,
the way the light plays upon her face,
than Lydian soldiers in horse drawn chariots or fighting on foot

⁶ Stanza numbering based on what survives. Originally the poem may have had 10 or more stanzas.

⁷ The subject of the verb ‘led’ and the gender of the object is not clear: ‘she led him’ and ‘he led her’ are both possible. As I have argued in connection with S. 1 and some other poems by Sappho it seems that at times Sappho enjoyed being deliberately ambiguous about gender and confusion about her intended usage here may reflect that.

⁸ The adverb κούφως (easily or lightly) resonates with the sentiment that opens the second stanza, πάλγχε δ’ ἔυμαρες (very easy).

. . . it is not possible to become
. . . people . . . but to pray for a portion
. . . **yet I myself**

7

... stepping⁹ onto the peak
... snow¹⁰ but she often ...
.. toward ..

8

to leave
For indeed those people
I treat well--they are the ones who hurt me the most, without warning

Commentary

This poem has been pieced together from discoveries of fragments of Sappho's poetry first published in 1914, 1951 and 2014. I have not had a chance fully to review the text as present in [the online collection of scholarly papers on issues related to the 2014/2015 fragment discoveries that is available online here](#). The portions published in the 20th century had already established it as one of Sappho's most important poems and therefore the fragments published in 2014, though relatively minor compared to the previously published fragments, are arguably as important as any because of the context in which they can be viewed. There is no definitive evidence as to where the poem ends (note the question marks of Obbink's text in the 2016 book published by Brill): some have argued based solely on stylistic grounds that perhaps it ends with the fifth stanza. After the two scrappy lines that follow the fifth stanza there appear to have been

⁹ The exact form of the verb is not clear; though it is not a participle the English participle seems to be the best way to capture the likely sense of the verb, whatever its form.

¹⁰ The appearance of the word for 'snow' (otherwise unattested in Sappho) elicited a peculiar amount of speculation from B/F/O, including the anecdotal information that in modern times Lesbos has had snow and ice in the winter. But when does a poet need to experience something directly to describe it? And what about the generally agreed exile of Sappho to Sicily, where there is not only the nearly 11,000 foot Mt. Aetna, but at least in modern times, ski areas?

at least two and possibly four stanzas before the bits of two more stanzas, the second of which is clearly marked in the ancient manuscript as being the conclusion of a poem. Because there is evidence apart from this poem that Sappho composed medleys of individual poems to be sung or recited together, it seems reasonable, absent additional evidence, to read what survives of the eight stanzas here as one poetic unit. As such it constitutes the longest and arguably most important poem by Sappho in the Sapphic stanza meter.

Form

The meter is the Sapphic stanza. Though the Sapphic stanza has traditionally been printed in Greek as three eleven syllable lines followed by a fourth five syllable line, correctly recited it is actually two eleven syllable lines plus a concluding sixteen syllable line that has at least nine and as many as ten long syllables. Nevertheless, the quatrain form is not only how all Greek texts of this meter are printed, but also imitations of the Sapphic stanza in other ancient and modern languages follow that form as well. Here only the first and fifth stanzas are substantially complete enough to discern the metrical form in the Greek.

Notes

some men: as with many languages, in ancient Greek masculine was in effect the default gender, but by beginning the poem with a masculine pronoun and repeating that pronoun two more times in the first two lines of this poem it seems Sappho meant to strongly contrast the masculine perspective with her feminine perspective. That emphasis would be lost simply using the English pronoun ‘some’ without adding the noun ‘men.’

dark ships: most read the adjective ‘dark’ with the noun translated here as ‘world’ (which also could be translated ‘earth’); ‘dark world (or earth)’ is a phrase used elsewhere by Sappho and other poets, but the adjective ‘dark’ could be a plural genitive agreeing with ‘ships.’ Alcaeus, a poet who lived on Lesbos at the same time as Sappho and who not only knew her but perhaps had a relationship of some sort with her, uses the phrase ‘dark ship’ in a famous allegorical poem about the ‘ship of state’ with ‘ship’ line initial and ‘dark’ line final, very similar to the positions of such words in the second line of this poem. Perhaps Sappho was sensitive to the fact that the adjective ‘dark’ could be understood to modify either or both ‘world’ and ‘ships.’ If the ‘dark world (or earth)’ translation is correct it is worth noting that the phrase may betray Sappho’s

Hittite cultural ancestry, as a comparable term is found in Hittite poetry. Here is an excerpt on this possibility from Bachvarova's book [From Hittite to Homer](#):

One formula that alliterates beautifully in Hittite, "Dark Earth" (*danku tekan/ dankuš daganzipaš*; Hurr. *timeri eže*⁹⁵) is found not only in Hittite epic narratives, but also in *mugawar* invocations⁹⁶ and incantations, and was used in Hattic as well (*ištarrazil*⁹⁷). Like inverted word order, it seems to be a marker of stylized speech more generally. It is found in the poetic speech of other Indo-European languages, and in Greek it is used by both Homer (*gāia melaina*, Il. 2.699, etc.) and Sappho (*gān melai[n]an*, F 16.2 Lobel-Page).⁹⁸

what one loves: In the form that the Sapphic stanza is typically printed the beginning of this clause cuts across two lines, with "ὄτ" ending the third line and "τῷ τις ἔραται," forming the adoneus in the fourth line. Both the Aeolic form here makes it hard to appreciate what Sappho is doing: κῆν' ὄττω = ἐκεῖνο ὅτου (that one, who/what-ever) and the fact that English has all but lost the subjunctive, at least in the sense of Sappho's Greek ἔραται (one way to translate it would be 'may happen to love') and does not have the middle form that suggests reciprocity (the beloved returning the affection). It is possible Sappho intended the vagueness and generality of her statement to include initially the love of inanimate objects (i.e. such as the love of military regalia implicit in the opening lines) but it is apparent in how she turns to describe Helen that she has a person in mind (she may have thus wanted that to be a bit of a surprise).

Elena: the Aeolic dialect did not have the breathing represented by the letter 'h' and thus for Sappho the Trojan war was fought over a woman named 'Elena,' a word that in ancient Greek meant 'torch.'

inexorable, for . . . the thought: the only reading that is certain is the Greek underlying 'for,' but while enough letters are legible to guess 'inexorable' and 'thought,' some scholars have not been content with that and speculated that there is a reference to Aphrodite in here somewhere.

easily thinks: this is a well attested 'formula' in ancient Greek, but who is doing the thinking here is not clear: is it Helen or Sappho or someone else? It is notable that Gorgias, in his Encomium of Helen, uses a synonym of Sappho's πᾶ]γχνυ (easily) in referring to Helen's

ability to escape the charge of sin if she left for Troy out of love: οὐ χαλεπῶς [no difficulty] διαφεύξεται [in escaping] (Section 15 Gorgias, Encomium of Helen). For the possible influence that this may betray Sappho having on what has been called a theory of poetry implicit in his Encomium see Charles Segal (specifics in the Bibliography below); also see Plato, *Phaedrus* 270b-d (the theory of rhetoric referred to there is likely the ‘theory of poetry’ Segal discusses).

Anaktoria: the name is also a feminine noun meaning ‘lordship’ and that fact suggests there may have been an allegorical meaning to this poem which we cannot now detect from what little survives of it. The only mention of Anaktoria in a poem by Sappho is here. The spelling ‘Anactoria’ found in some translations of this poem derives from a Latin poem attributed to Ovid, but which was composed as if it were a letter from Sappho. It contains numerous superficial allusions to Sappho’s poetry, as well as anecdotes about her life of little or no historical value. Nevertheless, the brief mention of Anactoria in that poem as well as other anecdotal information about Sappho from antiquity has influenced portrayals of Sappho and translations of her poetry to a far greater extent than such evidence justifies. Even before the discovery of this poem Anactoria was deemed by some to be the unnamed addressee of other poems by Sappho, including the woman in Lydia in the poem In Sardis. That led Mary Barnard, for example, to provide ‘To An Army Wife in Sardis’ as the title to this poem. It is admittedly an attractive theory, but there is no substantive evidence behind it.

Lydian: Lydia was a kingdom that in Sappho’s time governed all of what today is western Turkey, just off the coast of which is Lesbos. It is generally agreed that the historic Troy was located within what would have been Lydia in Sappho’s time, only about 50 miles north of the north coast of Lesbos. It is likely that Sappho and her audience would have considered Lydian troops of their day to be directly related to Trojan troops of the epic era. The presence of numerous Lydian artifacts in museums such as the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York testifies to its wealth and cultural sophistication.

it is not possible to become: the underlying Greek is exactly the same as a portion of the complete eighth line found of S.58b (Be zealous for the lovely gifts of the Muses with their violets in bloom); because that line marks a transition point in that poem, it is likely the language here marks not the start of a new poem (as has been argued) but a transition to another topic that then occupies the remaining stanzas.

stepping onto the peak: it is tempting to think the reference may be to Artemis, who Sappho refers to as “amidst desolate mountain peaks” in [S.44 A \(a\)](#).

snow: the only attested usage of the word in Sappho. Some scholars have argued this poem might have been composed while Sappho lived in Sicily. There is some mild support for that in this reference to snow: it makes more sense with respect to Sicily (with its often snow covered 11,000 foot Mt. Aetna) than it does to Lesbos (where the two highest mountains are just over 3000 feet).

treat well . . . hurt most: the polarity is dramatic and seems to echo the polarity of the war/love theme with which the poem begins. This dark ending is also consistent with the case for this poem being composed when Sappho was in Sicily, for there is evidence she was living in exile there. At the time a journey from Lesbos to Sicily would have been a substantial undertaking, perhaps manifesting the need to get as far from Lesbos as would have then been practical. The underlying Greek of ‘hurt’ is a verb that was often used in a martial context; that is notable because in the final line of S.1 (Deathless Aphrodite, adorned with embroidered flowers), Sappho also uses martial terminology, calling Aphrodite her ‘comrade.’

'Fragment 16'



There are those who say of a host of cavalry,
some of foot-soldiers, while others say of ships
to be the fairest thing on the black earth. But I:
whatsoever someone desires.

It is altogether simple to make this clearly known
to all: Helen, by far outstanding in beauty
of mortals, who had a husband,
the best of all men,

left him behind, and, sailing, travelled to Troy
and without any thought at all for her dear child
or her parents either; but [Kypris?] led her off-course
[...]

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for [she (sc. Kypris?) with un]bending mind
accomplishes?] easily [whatever she] thinks;
[which] now puts me in mind of Anaktoria
gone away though she is.

Sooner would I watch her desirable gait
and bright glow of her face
than all the chariots of Lydia and
soldiers in arms. ⊗?

'Fragment 16a'

⊗?

It is not possible for a human being
to be completely fortunate; but one may pray
to enjoy a share of happiness. This
I know for myself.

[2-4 stanzas missing]

...] to be
...] you walked on tip-toes
...] on the snow. But she many things
with[...]

...] being [...] to depart
...]. For whomsoever
I treat favorably, those most of all harm me
without warning. ⊗

'Fragment 16a' [continuing Line-Numeration of Fragment 16 in Parentheses]

[⊗?]

- 1 (21) [δλβιον] μὲν οὐ δύνατον γένεσθαι
 [πάμπ]αν ἄνθρωπ[ον· π]εδέχην δ' ἄρασθαι
 [ἔστιν ἔσλων μοῖραν. ἔγω] δ' ἔμ' αὐται
 [τοῦτο σύνοιδα.]

[2–4 stanzas missing]

- 5 (25) . [c.12] . . . [γέ]γεσθαι
 ο . [c.10] . . . βας ἐπ' ἄκρας
 τα[c.11] ν χ[ρον'· ἀ] δὲ πόλλα
 προς[
 ωσδ[c.9] . ων ἀπέλθην
 10 (30) τω . [c.10] . . [.] . ατ'· ὅττινας γάρ
 εὖ θέω, κῆνοί με μάλιτα σίννον-
 τ' ἐξ ἀδοκῆ[τω.] ⊗

Sources: π¹, π^{2a} (fr. 1 coll. i–ii), π^{5a} (fr. 2 coll. i–ii) 1–4 possibly a continuation of Sappho fr. 16 1 (21) incipit in 'ο'? e.g. δλβιον] (-οις) Snell) μὲν Milne (NB there is no trace of any letter before μὲν) 2 (22) ἄνθρωπ[ον (-π[οις Snell)· π]εδέχην δ' ἄρασθαι Milne 'it is not possible for a human being to be completely fortunate; but one may pray ...', cf. P. Köln II.429 Poem 2 (= Sappho fr. 58) line 18 ἀγήραον ἄνθρωπον ἔοντα; οὐ δύνατον γένεσθαι 3 (23) ἔστιν ἔσλων μοῖραν] '(but one may pray) to enjoy a share of joy/happiness' e.g. West 3–4 (23–24) ἔγω] δ' ἔμ' αὐται / [τοῦτο σύνοιδα Benelli in BFO, cf. Kypris Song 11–12 (previously Sappho fr. 26.11–12) ἔγω δ' ἔμ' αὐται / τοῦτο σύνοιδα, Sappho fr. 31.16 φαινομ' ἔμ' αὐτ[αί] 6 (26) ἔβας BFO 10 (30) ο]ὐ δ[ύ]νασθαι BFO:] . ατ' π^{5a}: [π¹ π^{2a}] 10 (30)–12 (32) (formerly in Sappho fr. 26.2–4) ὅττινας γάρ εὖ θέω, κῆνοί (corr. Blomfield: κεινοί MSS) με μάλιτα σίννονται Et. Gen. A (p. 363 Reitzenstein), Et. Mag. 499.37 ('Aelius Herodianus' Περὶ Παθῶν 3.2 p. 303.5 Lentz): ὅττινας γάρ | εὖ θ[ε] [c.9] ἄλιτα c[c.3]ον|τ π^{5a}: ||τ π¹: ||[.]ν[.]εωκη[π^{2a} 12 (32) ἐξ ἀδοκῆ[των Hunt: ἐξ ἀδοκῆ[των Vitelli in PSI 123: ἐξ ἀδοκῆ[π¹: ἐξ ἀ[π^{2a}: ἐξ[π^{5a} after v. 12 (32) coronis in margin π¹ π^{2a} π^{5a}

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Note: other than Rayor's translation all previous translations and commentaries are obsolete but I wanted to keep the bibliographic references for the convenience of researchers.

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