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A new Sappho poem is more exciting than a new David Bowie album

The discovery of a gorgeous lost poem by the Greek poet Sappho is thrilling for poetry-lovers



Portrait of Sappho by unknown artist in Campania, Italy C First century Photo: Rex Features



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Sappho has a new poem out. This news is even more exciting than a new album by **David Bowie**. Sappho was born on the Greek island of Lesbos in the late seventh century BC, after all, and not much of her work has survived. Like Bowie, though, she has gained a reputation for playing with voices and manipulating our views of gender – which is one reason why so little of her work survives. Her best-known lines are filled with longing for

another woman. Monks didn't preserve her poetry, and manuscripts of her work that were held in the Vatican burnt in purifying flames.

These gaps are all the more tormenting because what poetry we have from Sappho is so gorgeous. The best-known is addressed to a girl whom the poet sees forlornly through the eyes of the girl's boyfriend. Its description of the lurch and palpitations lovers feel is so physically acute that some commentators read it as a medical diagnosis.

The last discovery of a **Sappho poem was in 2005**, when new techniques of analysing marks on discarded papyrus dumped in Oxyrhynchus, in Egypt, revealed another poem, in which Sappho bemoaned her old age (again with attention to symptoms). Lachlan Mackinnon translated it in his collection *Small Hours*. More could come from that source. This latest poem emerges from elsewhere – an anonymous collector – and it is the scoop of Dr Dirk Obbink, a Classics fellow at Oxford, who when he saw it declared that it was by Sappho. It's highly unlikely that he's wrong. They are written in her distinctive meter, with the long vowels of the Lesbian dialect. Best of all, one poem mentions Sappho's brother, Charaxos.

In the poem Sappho chastises an audience for assuming Charaxos will return from a trading journey safely. It's not clear whether this man ever existed. **Herodotus** mentioned him, and Ovid picked up on his story, too.

Here, as convincingly as possible, is a glimpse at the story the ancients knew – a story that has been lost since their time. This is exciting enough for antiquarians, but the question remains: how does it read as poetry?

The first marvel is the fragment's completeness. What we have of Sappho has often survived because ancient critics and philologists quoted her, so that we have a word here and a line there. (This has a musical quality of its own: Hugh Kenner called it "the poesis of loss", and **Anne Carson** evoked these beguiling gaps in her 2003 edition of *Sappho: If Not, Winter*.) This poem comes with nine lines of another one, which would have been exciting enough on their own – they show Sappho using words typical of her other poems such as longing and desire, and addressing Aphrodite.

It's also exciting to have something like a story. It is a formula of sorts, and its wish that her brother sail back safely from his mission is a frequent trope in the verse of the stormy ancient Mediterranean. But it has an urgency that makes us sense the real Sappho. The word order emphasises the "me" to whom the brother must return and the vocabulary pleads that her heavy-heartedness find release. It also leaves other concerns to lesser gods. That's a sentiment that sounds standard coming from Horace. Here, we can hear the plea as if for the first time.

And that's why new glimpses of Sappho will always be thrilling. It's not just that it's new ancient poetry; it's poetry that the ancients loved because it felt so new.

Tom Payne's verse translation of the Sappho fragment

Still, you keep on twittering that Charaxos
comes, his boat full. That kind of thing I reckon
Zeus and his fellow gods know; and you mustn't
make the assumption;
rather, command me, let me be an envoy
praying intensely to the throne of Hera
who could lead him, he and his boat arriving
here, my Charaxos,
finding me safely; let us then divert all
other concerns on to the lesser spirits;
after all, after hurricanes the clear skies
rapidly follow;
and the ones whose fate the Olympian ruler
wants to transform from troubles into better –
they are much blessed, they go about rejoicing
in their good fortune.
As for me, if Larichos reaches manhood,
[if he could manage to be rich and leisured,]
he would give me, so heavy-hearted, such a
swift liberation.

Tom Payne has translated Ovid's Art of Love