

A new Sappho poem

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Full story displayed (for the original Greek, please see this week's issue of the TLS)

Since classical times, Sappho has been a source of fascination and romantic construction. The ancients, who had nine books of her poems at their disposal, were unstinting in their admiration. Some called her a tenth Muse. Strabo, writing in the time of Augustus, calls her a wonder, “for in this whole span of recorded time we know of no woman to challenge her as a poet even in the slightest degree”. In modern times, with only fragments of her poetry remaining, she has remained one of the most famous and evocative names from antiquity, a figure viewed by some with narrowed, by others with widened eyes; a socio- historical enigma, a *littérateurs’* Lorelei, a feminist icon, a scholars’ maypole.

It is difficult to judge her for ourselves when so little of her work remains.

What we have

consists on the one hand of quotations and more general references in ancient authors, and on the other hand of torn scraps from ancient papyrus and parchment copies, mostly from the Roman period and, more often than not, so tattered that they yield only a few words or letters from any given line of verse. In modern editions the fragments are numbered up to 264. But many of these do not contain a single original word. Only sixty-three contain any complete lines; only twenty-one contain any complete stanzas; and only three – till now – gave us poems near enough complete to appreciate as literary structures.

A recent find enables us to raise this number to four. In 2004, Michael Gronewald and Robert Daniel announced the identification of a papyrus in the University of Cologne as part of a roll containing poems of Sappho. This text, recovered from Egyptian mummy cartonnage, is the earliest manuscript of her work so far known. It was copied early in the third century bc, not much more than 300 years after she wrote.

Parts of three of her poems are represented. As usual, all are in a fragmentary state. But the second one, it turned out, had been partially known since 1922 from an Oxyrhynchus papyrus of the third century ad, and by combining the two texts we now obtain an almost complete poem.

When we had only the Oxyrhynchus portion, we had only line-ends, preceded and followed by line-ends of other poems, and it was not clear where one poem ended and the next began; the left-hand margin, where this would have been signalled, was missing. That question is now settled. We have a poem of twelve lines, made up of six two-line stanzas. The last eight lines are virtually complete. The first four are still lacking two or three words each at their beginnings. But we can make out the sentence structure and restore the sense of what is lost, if not the exact words.

Here is the poem in my own restoration and translation. The words in square brackets are supplied by conjecture.

"[You for] the fragrant-blossomed Muses' lovely gifts
[be zealous,] girls, [and the] clear melodious lyre :

[but my once tender] body old age now
[has seized;] my hair's turned [white] instead of dark;

my heart's grown heavy, my knees will not support me,
that once on a time were fleet for the dance as fawns.

This state I oft bemoan; but what's to do?
Not to grow old, being human, there's no way.

Tithonus once, the tale was, rose-armed Dawn,
love-smitten, carried off to the world's end,

handsome and young then, yet in time grey age
o'ertook him, husband of immortal wife."

We know of several poems in which Sappho spoke of herself as getting on in years. Here she addresses a group of younger women or girls, whom she calls (to translate literally) "children", contrasting their blithe singing and dancing with her own heaviness of heart and limb. It is clear from other evidence that she composed her poetry, or most of it, within an intimate circle of women whom she calls her "companions". Her house is a house of *moisopoloi*, "servants of the Muses". Later writers saw her as a chorus-leader or teacher, to whom people of class in several cities sent their daughters for a musical education. We cannot tell how accurate a construction this is, but it must have been based on the impression given by the poems, and it is consistent with what we know.

In the new poem, however, the focus is on Sappho herself. She recites the

symptoms of her aging, as in another famous poem she recites the physical symptoms of jealous love. Then comes philosophical reflection. In the love poem she tells herself that everything is enduring, because fortunes can be transformed at God's pleasure. In the new poem she tells herself that growing old is part of the human condition and there is nothing to be done about it. This truth is illustrated, as typically in Greek lyric, by a mythical example. It is a tale that was popular at the time, the story of Tithonus, whom the Dawn-goddess took as her husband. At her request, Zeus granted him immortality, but she neglected to ask that he should also have eternal youth, so he just grew ever older and feebler. Finally she shut him up in his room, where he chatters away endlessly but barely has the strength to move.

Sappho is very economical with the myth, giving it just four lines and ending the poem with it. At first sight it might seem a lame ending. But the final phrase gives a poignant edge to the whole. Tithonus lived on, growing ever more grey and frail, while his consort remained young and beautiful – just as Sappho grows old before a cohort of protégées who, like undergraduates, are always young. The poem is a small masterpiece: simple, concise, perfectly formed, an honest, unpretentious expression of human feeling, dignified in its restraint. It moves both by what it says and by what it leaves unspoken. It gives us no ground for thinking that Sappho's poetic reputation was undeserved.