

## Lesbians and lesbians in the Garden of Sappho

Skala Eressou is a small village on Lesbos whose main claim to fame is its identity as the birthplace of Sappho. Women have made pilgrimages there for at least a century, but the past 30 or so years have seen greatly expanded access to female visitors as Eressou has gained increasing prominence, uniquely in Greece, as a community welcoming lesbians, both as year-round inhabitants and as holidaymakers. Sappho's name appears all over the village – street signs, names of commercial and artistic establishments, graffiti and the village is home to an arts centre entitled "Sappho Garden of the Arts", whose focus has been strongly influenced by a persistent and powerful image of Sappho as the head of a cultic and educationally and artistically-oriented band of women. As Holt Parker<sup>1</sup> has shown, the image is a fictional construct, born of a complex mixture of wishful thinking and nineteenth century prudishness, among other influences. Meanwhile, in 2008, three natives of Lesbos filed a lawsuit with the aim of limiting use of the term "lesbian" to residents of their Eastern Aegean island and not to women who love women. The main plaintiff cited supposedly "new historical research" showing that Sappho had a family, and committed suicide for the love of a man. Evidently Sappho's reputation is still highly contested, and even today is pulled in several directions, between a tradition which seeks to remove her from any association with erotic love between women, a tradition that tries to explain her apparently anomalous status in the ancient world, while offering her added respectability as a teacher, and a tradition which seeks to mould the native of Lesbos into a "founding mother" for contemporary lesbians.

This paper will offer some reflections on the image of Sappho in the ancient world in the context of some realities of lesbian lives in contemporary Greece, and the social and economic effects that the symbolic figure of Sappho have had on her native village. I suggest that Skala Eressou, while being in a sense typical of what happens to places in Greece which attract a large number of foreigners, has a whole other dimension of difference, because of the inextricable connection of Sappho and her popular image on the changes that have taken place. The paper combines standard scholarly sources with anonymous voices from the internet and the writer's personal experience in the village and it is illustrated.

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<sup>1</sup> "Sappho Schoolmistress." *TAPA* 123 (1993): 309-51