

‘The tenth muse’: Sappho and the grammarians

The poetry of Sappho has always attracted interest, despite its fragmentary nature, but the intense attention paid to the extant fragments has perhaps distracted attention from where the fragments come from in the first place. Occasionally a commentator will make mention of the larger context of a quotation, but it seems that much of the work done on Sappho has simply accepted without question that we have the fragments we have from pure chance, whether they come from papyrus scraps or from another author.

I argue that it is necessary to be mindful of the fact that a later author would have his own reasons for quoting Sappho – sometimes reasons as definite as demonstrating an Aeolic form or an uncommon word, granted, but sometimes not. An intensive study of all two-hundred-odd fragments is beyond the scope of this study, but by briefly discussing the types of quotations and looking more closely at some of the sources which have given us larger Sappho fragments, I contend that Sappho is sometimes quoted as a means of presenting her as less a poet than specifically a poetess, or as Strabo (*Geog.* 13.2.3) put it, something amazing. Dionysius of Halicarnassus, “Longinus” and Demetrius cite the poetry of Sappho not simply to praise it or to exemplify a rhetorical trope, but also to lend support to their own interpretations of who Sappho was, and beyond that, what literature ought to be.