

## Revolution, the Politics of *Eros*, and Sappho's Mytilene

During the cusp between the 7<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE, the Lesbian city of Mytilene suffered tremendous political instability and strife. Aristotle (*Pol.* 1311b=fr. 472), Strabo (13.2.3=fr. 468), and Diogenes Laertius (1.74= fr. 469) tell us that the Penthilidae family, the descendants of Penthilos (who allegedly chartered the Aeolic migration to the island) was overthrown by public insurrection. In the ensuing power vacuum, a series of revolutions, ascendancies, and overthrows by factional groups and monarchical tyrants besieged Mytilene.

The exact political-historical sequence of events is impossible to reconstruct with certainty. However, Dale (2011) has suggested a compelling reconstruction of the dynastic strife that may have beset Mytilene based largely on readings of Alcaeus' fragments and scholiasts: (1.) Alcaeus refers to both Melanchros and Pittacus as "Myrsilus" (whom later authors, such as Aristotle and Strabo credit as the name of an individual who assumes power in the vacuum following the downfall of the Penthilidae), a Luwian, proto-Lycian, proto-Carian term for "king/ruler" that made its way into Aeolic and, Dale argues, is used by Alcaeus synonymously with the word *tyrannos* (another word of Luwian origin); (2.) Melanchros/ "Myrsilos" rises to the position of tyrant after the overthrow of the Penthilidae; (3.) Pittacus marries into the Penthilidae, thus accruing political capital (fr. 70 L-P); (4.) Melanchros enters into some kind of political alliance with Pittacus, who then double-crosses Melanchros, conspiring with the brothers of Alcaeus to overthrow the tyrant (fr. 129 L-P); (5.) Alcaeus celebrates Melanchros' death (fr. 332 L-P), but then attacks Pittacus/ "Myrsilos" (fr. 383 L-P), who was elected by the *damos* (fr. 348 L-P) to put down the factional violence that attended the insurrections against the Penthilidae, and who did not yield up the constitutional powers given to him at the end of his elected term (fr. L-P 19 and 376); (6.) Alcaeus' involvement in factional resistance to the rule of

“Myrsilos” resulted in his exile at least once to the Lesbian town of Pyrrha, some 80 stades from Mytilene (schol. fr. 114 L-P= *P.Berol* 9569).

These same political forces, later sources would have us believe (esp. *Marm. Par.* Ep. 36), resulted in the exile of Sappho to Sicily sometime before 595/4 BCE. This paper has three purposes. The first is to re-examine and discuss the few scant and oblique references in Sappho’s poetry to the political situation in Lesbos, and particularly: (1.) fr. L-P 71, which mentions a maligned marriage alliance to the Penthilidae; and (2.) fr. L-P 36, which references the descendants of Kleanax, whom Strabo (13.2.3) associates with Myrsilos and Melanchros. The second aim of the paper is to suggest a reading of fr. 16-16a (according to the text suggested by Thévenaz, 2015), whose rejection of τὰ Λύδων ἄρματα κὰν ὄπλοισι πεσδομ]άχεντας (fr. 16. 19-20) in favor of a poetics of desire begs to be read more carefully against the back-drop of so much Lydian connection to political turmoil in Mytilene, with a sensitivity to the instability so resonant in the poetry of her contemporary Alcaeus. It is reasonable to question whether Propertius, whose allusions to Sappho have recently been identified by Heyworth (2019), saw something of the kind in Sappho’s poetics when he utilized the motifs of the *militia amoris*, the self-referential *scripta puella* (Wyke 1987), and the opposition between love and war as “ironic sub-text” to reflect on Augustan ideology after the fall of the Republic and the rise of one-man rule (Gale 1997). To what degree, if at all, do these references in Sappho’s poetry align with Dale’s (2011) suggested reconstruction? The third purpose of the paper, which will be far more brief than the first two, is to review and assess the reliability of ancient sources that claim that Sappho, like Alcaeus, was exiled from Mytilene, which some scholars (Plant 2002 and Freeman 2016, for example), appear to have taken at face-value.

## Bibliography

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