

A Reassessment of the New Sappho (The “Brother’s Poem”)

Recently, Dirk Obbink published a new fragment of Sappho along with a translation and commentary. I disagree with his interpretation of the poem on three philological points. The purpose of this paper is to outline these three points, and then to give the poem as a whole a new interpretation in light of them. This new interpretation holds that the poem directly contrasts her younger, more promising brother Larichos with her older, more disappointing brother Charaxos.

The first consideration is the infinitive ἔλθην, “to have come/gone,” which appears in the first full surviving line (ἀλλ’ ἄϊ θρύλησθα Χάραξον ἔλθην ...). I argue that Obbink’s translation (p. 42) “came” does not provide adequate sense in the context. Rather, the infinitive in indirect discourse should mean “left.” The fact that Charaxos has left sets up the stanza that follows (lines 5-8), in which Sappho expects to pray for his safety in the future. The translation “he came” renders this second stanza without logical connection to what precedes. My interpretation of the infinitive is also consistent with the doxographical tradition that Charaxos was an *exporter* of Lesbian wine, since in line 2 the narrator says that Charaxos went “with his ship full” (νᾶϊ σὸν πλήαι). If Charaxos was an exporter, then his ship would be full when he departs, not when he returns.

The second consideration is the phrase κάμμεξ (“we also,” line 17) that introduces the fifth stanza. The element καὶ (“also”) shows that the fifth stanza should be taken much more closely to the fourth than Obbink recognizes. As Obbink’s translation stands, the fourth stanza, in which Zeus alleviates the cares of the blessed, has little connection to the rest of the poem. He does not see that the “also” in line 17 directly compares the “we” of line 17 to the word “they” (κῆνοι, line 15) of the previous stanza, i.e. those from whom

Zeus averts troubles. The fourth stanza, in which Zeus sends *daimones* to avert “troubles” (line 14) and the fifth stanza, in which Sappho’s other brother Larichos is expected to alleviate “despondencies” (line 19, see Obbink p.40) should, I argue, be read together as an implied plea for her younger brother not to disappoint her, and just as Zeus alleviates the cares of the blessed.

The third consideration is the interpretation of Sappho’s desire for Larichos to “lift up his head” (τὰν κεφάλαν ἀέρρη). Obbink’s interpretation (p. 45) that the phrase expresses hope that Larichos will “preserve” his “life” is unsatisfactory because it does not explain why Larichos is introduced in a fragment that begins with Charaxos. In addition, nowhere else in Greek literature does phrase “to lift up the head” appear with the meaning “to preserve the life.” Comparison of the expression “lift up his head” here with similar expressions elsewhere in Greek literature shows that Larichos is asked to take pride in his aristocratic background.

I propose a new understanding of the fragment, in which Sappho contrasts her disappointing merchant brother with her promising gentleman brother. Sappho’s alienation from Charaxos is palpable. This fragment, then, is consistent with ancient testimony that Sappho expresses a preference for her younger brother and a falling out with her elder brother, though in these lines over the former’s career choice, and not his love affair with a high-priced prostitute, as Herodotus claims (Herodotus 2.135, cf. Obbink 32).

Work Cited

Obbink D. 2014. "Two New Poems by Sappho." *ZPE* 189: 32-49.