

## Sappho Ψάπφω



A mosaic fragment with Sappho's name on it, from Sparta (3-4 CE).

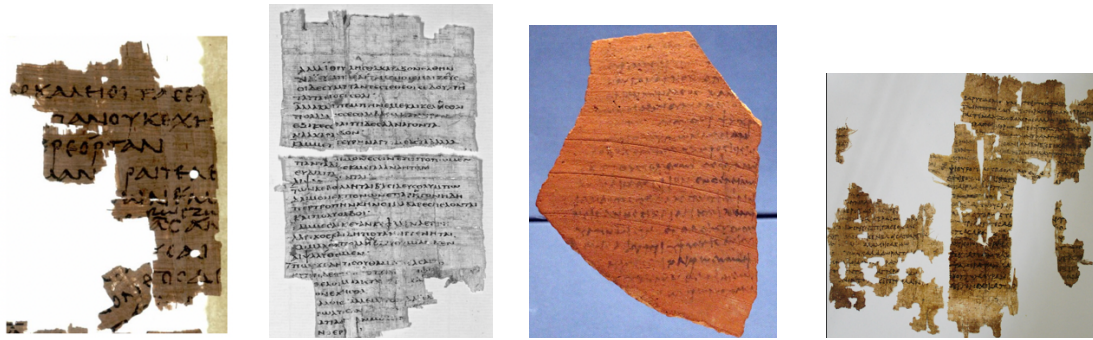
“For various reasons, many of them neither literary nor trustworthy, Sappho has always exerted a magnetic yet frustrating attraction on later generations.” So wrote the classical scholar Peter Green in his review of *Sappho: A New Translation of the Complete Works* by Diane Rayor in the *London Review of Books* in 2015. Part of the frustration can be attributed to how little we know about her; famously her entry in *Lesbian Peoples: materials for a dictionary* (Wittig, M. & Zeig, S., 1979, Avon, New York) is a single blank page. Into this vacuum has sprung a whole litany of traditions and stories: she was the daughter of Skamandros or Skamandronymos and his wife Kleis; her brothers were Eurygios, Larichos, and Charaxos; she married Kerkylas and had a daughter Kleis; she committed suicide by hurling herself off a cliff due to unrequited love of a ferryman; she was a lesbian. Sadly, none of these stories can be confirmed. At least 8 names are suggested for her father. Her mother’s name is assumed on the basis that she named her daughter after her. Her brother Eurygios is mentioned in some ancient sources but nowhere in any of Sappho’s works (unlike the other brothers). The name of her assumed husband is likely to be a rather crude pun originating in an ancient comic play. The hurling-off-a-cliff story is a direct lift from the legend of Aphrodite (but came in useful in the 19<sup>th</sup> century to assure readers of Sappho’s heterosexuality), and the question of her sexuality is mired in the complexity of translation, mistranslation, and the customs of the times. The latter may be summed up by the enigmatic quote from Ovid “*Lesbia quid docuit Sappho nisi amare puellas?*” which may be read as either “‘Lesbian Sappho’ taught girls how to love, or how to love girls”.

So, what can we say about her? It’s generally agreed that she lived towards the end of the 6<sup>th</sup> and beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> centuries BCE on the island of Lesbos. Her poetry is astonishingly lovely, and she was both acknowledged and admired in her own time for the quality of her writing. Plato was one of several ancient sources to refer to her as the Tenth Muse and she was regularly referenced in plays, poetry and in the visual arts. While later generations have rather taken her to be the epitome of ancient Greek grace, we do have something close to a contemporary description of her in a papyrus fragment which speaks of a woman who ‘seems in appearance to have been contemptible and unprepossessing, swarthy of complexion and very short.’ Short with dark hair worn in a bun could easily describe many women on Lesbos in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and the image at the top of this page may be the closest we get to seeing the real Sappho; it is a mosaic fragment in Sparta from the 300s AD and specifically names her.

If Sappho was so celebrated in her lifetime and afterwards, why, then, is there so little of her writing extant? It partly comes down to the fact that she wrote in a particularly difficult dialect called Aeolic Greek and in the very particular style developed on Lesbos. As this

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style and language became more archaic, so the demand diminished and eventually she essentially 'fell out of print' despite her continued reputation as one of the finest lyric poets. The destruction of the library in Alexandria is also likely to have resulted in the loss of much of her work. Piecing together references from ancient sources it is reckoned that she wrote about 10,000 lines spread over 9 books; from the various fragments still in existence it is reckoned that we might now have a maximum of 5% of her output. Many of these survivors are tiny papyrus fragments discovered in ancient rubbish heaps or even tucked between the folds of shrouds in Egyptian mummies or painted on a potsherd.



Fragments of Sappho – fragments indeed

One thing generally agreed upon is that Sappho's poetry was written to be performed with music. Some sources suggest that she used the mixolydian mode which was considered sorrowful, but as no record of notated music has survived, this is conjecture. We do know that in Sappho's time, instruments were used to accompany the voice, most particularly the lyre which is referenced a number of times in her poetry. As to when and where performances took place, various theories have been proposed. In the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries it was popular to view Sappho as, essentially, the headmistress of a school for girls, though this is now discounted and viewed as a suggestion to explain away the various references to erotic love in some of her poetry. It is possible that she was involved as a trainer of choruses of girls but this again is conjecture.

### Sappho Fragments

Lane



Born in 1958, Jonathan Lane grew up in London in a house full of music. He took up the piano aged 5 and sang, played and accompanied through his school years.

4 years at Oxford, music-making, listening and composing (where a Biochemistry degree also featured) nurtured his choral interest, and whilst he made his career in Business and Finance, he has continued singing and composition, typically of unaccompanied choral works.

These have been performed widely particularly in the UK and US – with noteworthy performances at Kings Place, St. John's Smith Square, Canterbury Cathedral, Canongate Kirk and St. Mary's, Edinburgh; and in Dallas, Houston, New York and Washington DC (at the Basilica of the National Shrine).

He continues to sing for a variety of choirs – symphonic to chamber to quartets – but for the last 30 years, the Joyful Company of Singers under the musical direction of Peter Broadbent, has been his main focus. He also sings with a number of ad hoc choral groups including Vox

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Coelestis (which raises money for a variety of charities), Indulgence, Ramsay Singers, The Oxford St John Voices, Highgate Singers and Bedford Chorale and is the Chairman of multi award-winning [Tenebrae](#), directed by Nigel Short. On the composition of Sappho Fragments he writes:

“The brief for this commission was framed by 2 ½ millennia of history and most of the then known world, and I was struggling for a text to set, until Tricia suggested looking at Sappho: and the more I looked into the her, the more I got hooked.

I hadn’t realised how prolific she was, how celebrated, and how influential to western literature and poetry, but just how little remained of her work. And for me, the fragments were perfect to set:

*“ .....characterized by clear language, vivid imagery, and direct emotional expression...and for sharply-drawn images and immediacy”*

I shortlisted around 10 who’s subject matter appealed (I didn’t feel capable of setting her more erotic texts), and five really chose themselves, with connected themes flowing from one to another in an obvious order: from the cool murmurs of water in an orchard; to the imagery of the moon and starts to evoke loneliness and solitude; to the Lyre - using the instrument as a symbol of poetic voice and beauty (in fact, the Greek for lyre can also be translated as voice); to the immortal power of words.

I also liked the fact that for this concert, and in the future, they could either be sung through as 5 short pieces, or interspersed with other music or readings. The choice of related keys for each fragment helps if they are sung as one. I hope you like them.