“New Philology” focuses on texts in their material and unique forms. The name comes from a movement initiated by American philologists working on mediaeval texts, who in the 1990 issue of Speculum argued for a more systematic analysis of the many different versions of mediaeval texts that have been transmitted.¹ This focus on the divergence of texts, as opposed to the emphasis on reconstruction of an original Urtext, had already been advocated by Zumthor and Cerquiglini in the preceding decades, but was only now applied to a range of actual corpora.² After an endorsement by the German mediaevalist Stackmann, “New Philology” became known to a wider audience, who realized its applicability to corpora other than mediaeval epic songs.³ The panel at the Text, Transmission, Reception conference in Nijmegen showed how New Philology may illuminate issues in textual corpora ranging from early antiquity to the twentieth century. After all, instability of texts is of all times, whether it manifests in different versions on a papyrus and in a manuscript, in multiple editions and translations of an eighteenth century novel, or in contemporary paper and digital editions.

Though the approach and main tenets may be similar for each period and genre, the salient issues differ significantly. In classical studies, the strength of New Philology lies in its ability to reveal the effects of different stages of textual transmission.⁴ This approach places the texts – that is the multiple actualizations of a text in all possible forms – first, in a more radical way than the majority of researchers in classics tend to do. From ancient papyri and inscriptions to late mediaeval manuscripts and fragments quoted within other works,
the field of classical studies has a wealth of material at its disposal for this kind of research.

Historically, the tendency in classical philology has been to approach its rich corpus with the intention of reconstructing original texts. Each instantiation of a certain text is thus appreciated only insofar as it is helpful to that enterprise. However, it is almost impossible to reconstruct the original version of any text, and in the case of archaic and classical Greek texts there is no hope at all of establishing the original form; a situation that arises due to the non-existence of literature (as we know it today) before the fifth century BC. If texts were written down, they were not intended for publication and reading, but rather for conservation and re-performance. The texts that we regard as the “classics” of classical literature in this period were primarily works to be performed; be it the Homeric epics, the dramas by Aeschylus, Sophocles, and Euripides, or the lyric songs composed by Pindar, Alcaeus, or indeed Sappho, who composed songs on Lesbos in the sixth century BC.5

Modern editions of Sappho’s songs have been pieced together from quotations in the works of other, later, authors and – more recently – from scraps of papyrus. The sources at our disposal, then, were written down no earlier than three hundred years after the supposed composition, while the majority dates from the Middle Ages. Moreover, they are no more than the textual component of a larger whole that once included music, a specific venue, and probably dance. Generally, the only residue of the songs’ original nature is their metrical pattern, and sometimes not even that.6 The texts in our possession are very fragmentary, represent only one facet of the original performance of Sappho’s songs, and are separated from the date of composition by a physical gap of at least three centuries, which raises the question: How may such inevitably compromised sources for Sappho’s songs serve classical philologists? A tentative answer requires first a survey of the traditional philological research on the fragments of Sappho. Adducing two quotes of Sappho in second-century AD


6 Greek metre is based on the division of heavy and light syllables (or “long” and “short”). This fact may help our understanding of Sappho in two ways. Firstly, knowledge of the metres she used may help identify a specific metrical pattern even if we only have a fragmentary text. Secondly, some of Sappho’s music was stanzaic, built out of repeated metrical – and probably melodic – patterns. If we have a large enough part of the song, it is possible to establish if the metrical pattern recurs consistently – even if we have never encountered that specific metre before. With these two tools, it becomes possible in some instances to establish the original metre, and note where the text departs from the pattern; these places then invite discussion.