CHAPTER 8

Hera and the Return of Charaxos

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The longest of the new Sappho fragments, the ‘Brothers Poem’ or, as I prefer to call it, the ‘Charaxos Poem’, engages its twenty-first century audience with a number of questions, to which contributors to this volume propose a variety of solutions. Who is the speaker’s silent interlocutor? Are Charaxos and Larichos historical brothers of Sappho, or ‘types’ in a Lesbian poetic or ritual tradition? How does the first-person speaker relate to each of these male figures, and to the interlocutor? What is meant by the wish at the end of the poem that Larichos ‘lift his head’ and ‘become a man’?

Introduction: Hera in the Charaxos Poem

Even with so many matters still under lively debate, readers can agree that the song reflects a world of seafaring and trade, as seen in its focus on a safe return ‘here’ (τυίδε, line 11) with a ‘full ship’ (νάϊ ςὺν πλήαι, 6) by Charaxos (5 and 12), known to the biographical tradition as a trader and a brother of Sappho.

5 ἀλλ’ ἄϊ θρύληϲθα Χάραξον ἔλθηϲ 
νάϊς ςὺν πλήαι. τὰ μέγ οἶρμαι Ζεῦϲ 
οἶδε ςύμπαντεϲ τε θέοι· ςὲ δ’ οὐ χρῆ 
tαὐτα νόηϲθαι,

ἀλλὰ καὶ πέμπηϲ δὲ καὶ κέλεϲθαι
πόλλα λίϲϲεϲθαι βαϲί̣ λ̣η αν Ἤ ραν

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2 On archaic trade as related to figures such as Charaxos, see Raaflaub’s contribution to this volume.
εξίκεσθαι τυίδε σάον ἡγοντα
νάα Χάραξον

κάμμ’ ἐπεύρην ἀρτέμεας. τά δ’ ἄλλα
πάντα δαιμόνεςιν ἐπιτρόπωμεν’

εὐδιαὶ γὰρ ἐκ μεγάλαν ἀήτα
αἰψα πέλονται.

τῶν κε βόληται βασίλευς Ὀλύμπω
δαίμον’ ἐκ πόνων ἐπάρωγον ἤδη
περτρόπην, κῆνοι μάκαρες πέλονται
καὶ πολύολβοι.

κάμμες, αἰὶ κε θαν κεφάλαν ἀέρρη
Λάριχος και δὴ ποτ’ ἄνηρ γένηται,
καὶ μάλ’ ἐκ πόλλαν βαρυμιαῖαν κεν
αἰψα λύθειμεν. ✖

you keep chattering about Charaxos coming
with his ship full. Zeus knows these things,
I believe, and all the gods.
You should not think about this,

but instead send me, urge me
to pray profusely to Queen Hera
that Charaxos return here
guiding his ship safe

and find us unharmed. Everything else
let us turn over to the higher powers,
for from great gales clear skies
quickly emerge.

Whomsoever the King of Olympus wishes
a helper daimon to turn away now from troubles,
they become blessed
and very fortunate.

And we too—if ever Larichos
should raise his head and become a man—