Sappho Fragment 17: Wishing Charaxos a Safe Trip?*

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Over the last 200 years, scholars of Sappho have concentrated on her audience and consequently her social role: according to various theories she was a teacher, a leader of a female religious group or an initiatory group, a trainer of choruses, a member of a companion group, and so on.¹ Through a comparison between her and Alcaeus, I proposed in Poeti e società (2011) that Sappho was a member of a fairly stable group that consisted of both young and adult ‘friends’.² Although the core of her audience probably consisted of these ‘friends’,³ Sappho’s audience could change when the context changed, as Antonio Aloni

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² Sappho’s scholarship often assimilates Sappho’s companions to the παρθένοι of her group: this hypothesis goes back to Welcker (1816) = (1845) 97, who regards the μαθήτριαι in Suda σ 107 Adler as identical to the ἑταῖραι. However, the word ἑταῖρος seems to imply a relationship between men who have the same social status and age (cf. e.g. Chantraine [1968–1980] 381); so, if the persona loquens in Sappho fr. 160 is the poet herself, the word ἑταῖρα in this poem may suggest that Sappho’s audience consisted of her age-mates too. Moreover, in Ovid, Her. 15.199–202 Sappho’s audience seems to consist of nuptae and nupturae, i.e. probably γυναῖκες and παρθένοι. The idea of a group consisting of adults and young persons is congruent with the male hetairaia because young men attended the gatherings of this kind of group. See Bremmer (1990) and Caciagli (2011) 97–132 with bibliography.


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suggests. Thus, a large audience could potentially be present at ‘public’ ceremonies: for example, the whole city could attend the second part of the festival of the Adonia (fragment 140), which was performed outdoors, and the same can be said for wedding processions, whose function, among other things, was to publicise the legitimate union of the bride and groom. Sappho was involved in performances that took place in sacred spaces too, as we may infer from fragment 2. Here the composition of the audience was possibly influenced by the kind of ceremony: for example, it is possible to infer the attendance of Charaxos’ family when fragments 5 and 15 were performed. Finally, the poet may engage in domestic celebrations similar to male symposia, as is suggested by fragment 22: in this context, the audience were possibly Sappho’s ‘friends’ and companions, as in other sympotic performances.

The new text of Sappho published by Burris, Fish, and Obbink (2014) provides important insights into this question. The focus of my analysis will be fragment 17, because I believe that this poem holds a liminal position in Sappho’s corpus between a sacral and a family poem. However, I will survey the entire corpus of sacral and family poems by Alcaeus and Sappho to understand the meaning, context, and audience of this poem: in fact, in a ‘pragmatic’ approach, this kind of comparison is essential to fill the gaps in our knowledge.

Geographical Setting of Sappho Fragment 17: Messon

Comparison between Sappho fragment 17 and Alcaeus fragments 129–134, as well as analysis of later testimonia, shows that Alcaeus’ divine triad in these two poems is the same (Hera karpophoros, Zeus hiketos and Dionysos omestes). In 1960, Louis Robert showed that Alcaeus fragments 129, 130b and Sappho fragment 17 were probably performed in a place called Messon, north of the Kalloni

5 The festival of the Adonia was spread over two days: the first day was set in a domestic context, while on the second the ritual was performed outdoors and was characterized by mourning like Sappho’s in fr. 140: see Atallah (1966), Weil (1966), (1970), Detienne (1972), Burkert (1985) 176–177, and Caciagli (2011) 195–196.
6 See below.