Knees and Fawns in the New Sappho

The Cologne papyrus (PKöln inv. 21351 + inv. 21376) recently published by Gronewald & Daniel (2004a, 2004b) has provided us with a new poem composed by Sappho (lines 9-20). A few scraps of the same song have been preserved on another papyrus published in 1922 (POxy. 1787, lines 11-22 = fr. 58 Voigt).1) The poem begins with an invocation to a chorus of young girls (lines 1-2). Then the persona loquens, Sappho herself, bemoans her old age (lines 3-4). The left part of these lines is missing. By contrast, lines 5-6 (the third couplet of verses) are virtually intact:

βάρυς δέ μ᾽ ο[θ]ύμος πεπόηται, γόνα, δ' ού φέροισι,
τά δή τοια λαίψηρ' ἐστιν ὀρχήσθαι ἵσα νεβρίοισι.

In the following remarks I will concentrate on the comparison ἵσα νεβρίοισι. The form ἵσα (Ionic ἴσα) is potentially ambiguous. It could be an adjective agreeing with relative τά (nom. pl. n.), which refers to γόνα 'knees . . . similar to . . .'.2) A few examples may illustrate the predicative use of ἴσας: κατ' ἄρ' ἔζειν ἴσας ἀντιόδο (Od. 10.378), τίσω δέ μιν Ἰσιων Ὀρέστη (Il. 9.142), κώμη περιστάθη οὐρεῖ ἴσον (Od. 11.243), ἀνέμων ἀητώμενα χεῦε / κώματα τε . . . ἵσα ἄρεσσιν (Od. 3.290); for Sappho cf. also γάμβρος ἔρχεται ἴσος Ὄρευ, fr. 111.5 Voigt (the text transmitted is problematic, cf. Tzamali 1996, 415-7).

Still, a predicative construction does not fit well into a copulative clause. For this reason, in Sappho’s song, ἵσα is more likely to be an invariable adverb (‘like’) not dependent on any nominal. The adverbialization of nom.-acc. pl. ἵσα is well-documented from Homer onwards: e.g. ὃ δὲ μιν τίνων ἴσα τέκεσι (Il.

1) I thank Marco Antonio Santamaría for providing me with copies of some articles. I also thank David Konstan, Pura Nieto, and an anonymous referee for stimulating comments and suggestions on previous drafts of this miscellaneum.

2) The α of ἵσα scans short. This rules out the possibility of reading a nom. sg. fem. ἴσα (Ionic ἴση).
If we take Sappho’s words at face value, she seems to state that, when she was young, her knees were nimble for dancing like fawns. Consider the following translations (emphasis mine):

‘my knees . . . / That once on a time were fleet for the dance as fawns’ (West 2005, 5)
‘die Knie . . . / die doch einstmals flink waren zum Tanzen gleich Rehen’ (Latacz 2005)
‘le ginocchia, che un tempo erano leggere e come cerbiatte mi permettevano di danzare’ (Tedeschi 2005, 44)

As Jack Mitchell, a Ph.D. candidate at Stanford, noted in his blog (http://traumwerk.stanford.edu/philolog/, May 26, 2006), “the metaphor of knees as fawns is strange enough anyway”.

Paradoxical as it may seem, none of the numerous scholars who have dealt with the poem has felt the need to comment on this image. For reasons that will become apparent below, Gronewald & Daniel (2004a, 8) contented themselves with referring to different loci:

a) h.Cer. 174-5: Celeus’ daughters are compared to does or calves leaping on a meadow (αἱ δ᾿ ὡς τ᾿ ἢ ἔλαφοι ἢ πόρτιες . . . ἄλλοντ᾿ ἀν λειμῶνα).

b) B. 13.83 ff.: a girl is compared to a fawn free from grief (Ἡὕτε νεβρὸς ἀπεν[θής]).

c) E. El. 860-1: the chorus invite Electra to join them ὡς νεβρὸς οὐράνιον / πῆδημα κουφίζουσα σὺν ἀγλαίαι.

d) E. Ba. 865-7: the chorus of bacchants want to dance ὡς νεβρὸς χλοεραῖς ἐμπαίζουσα λείμακος ἡδοναῖς.

3) For convenience, I cling to the traditional labels ‘adverb’ and ‘adverbial’, although I am fully conscious that they are a misnomer. Actually, ‘adverbial’ ἴσα behaves more like a preposition in that it is constructed only with a dative and cannot introduce subordinate clauses with an explicit verb. The syntax of near-synonymous, more conjunction-like ὡς is more flexible: e.g. θεὸς ὡς / ἔστησε(ε) (Il. 3.230-1), οἷς σε θεόν ὡς / τίσασε(σι) (Il. 9.301-2), τοῦ νόι θεοῦ ὡς τερπόμεθ᾿ αὐδὴ (Od. 4.160), ὁ Τριδέας . . . θεῷ ὡς εὐχέτοιντο (Il. 22.394), and ὡς δὲ λέβης κεί ἐνδον (Il. 21.362); cf. also the combinations ὡς ὅτε, ὡς εἰ.

4) H. 7h. 1180 is beside the point, since ὡς ἑλαπρός is the Scythian archer’s mispronunciation of ὡς ἑλαφρή ‘How swift she is!’ (a female dancer is compared to a flea leaping on a fleece).