

**Sappho And Ma'at.  
Religious And Philosophical Ideas And Societal  
Realities Of The Sixth And Fifth Centuries  
B.C.E. Pharaonic Egypt As Reflected In  
Sappho's Poetry**

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**Abstract**

This paper explores the historical realities and the international cultural context which lays hidden behind the veil of Sappho's poetry. Its aim is to show that it is not by accident a possible connection between Sappho's legendary fame as the "tenth muse" (as Plato named her in the *Antologia Palatina*) and the influence of the Egyptian cultural context, particularly the literary genres and love theme upon her poetry.

The historical dimension evidences that the ancient civilizations that flourished on Greek and Egyptian soil, although separated by the Mediterranean and Aegean Seas, had long been aware of each other, and at times had entertained significant levels of contact. In this respect the approach and correspondence in the title between Sappho and Ma'at – outside a rather speculative connotation on the esoteric level - do not represent a resemblance between the famous historical attested woman lyricist from Ionian Lesbos, Sappho, and the Egyptian goddess Ma'at, as one might understand on a superficial level. Rather *Ma'at* is here an umbrella term covering a broad interval of Egyptian pharaonic cultural and mental items, which, due to their influence exerted upon the Greek culture, have contributed to the development of the original character of the Helladic civilization, particularly on the literary level during Sappho's time.

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Egyptian Pharaohs of the Saite dynasty, newly established since 664 B.C.E., increasingly engaged with neighbouring cultures motivated by shared interests in prestige, trade and military security. This exchange left a visible mark particularly on Greek culture. Greek art, technology, religious ritual all incorporated in the period mentioned, to varying degrees, Egyptian elements. The appeal exerted by Egyptian ideas may be demonstrated by the Egyptian ideas which entered Greek cosmology or philosophy.

Furthermore, contact and exchange between Egypt, Greece and other civilisations involved a range of different people. Translocal elites, traders, aristocratic travellers, mercenaries, sailors, craftsmen, courtesans, translators, administrators, etc. – all played their part in Eastern Mediterranean networks of contact and exchange. In addition to passing traders and visitors, large numbers of foreigners also lived in Egypt for extended periods of time.

This is the case of Sappho too, who although is said to have lived in approximately 600 B.C.E., on the Aegean island of Lesbos, actually was very connected to Egypt's traditions and philosophical ideas. Not only because her brother was a merchant captain trading in Egypt, but also due to her name which, in the original Greek, was Psappho, though we know her today by the Latinized version of it. There are voices that suggest that her name might have been synonymous with, lapis lazuli, a stone of magical and religious significance. As one of the first commercially traded gemstones in ancient Egypt lapis was valued equally with gold. It was commonly associated with water, the primordial element of creation, and in Egypt was known as the Stone of Truth and sacred to the goddess of Truth and Justice, Ma'at. Then, Sappho may have been praised as connected to the goddess's true nature, who therefore allows poetry to be written, and the songs of the cosmos to be sung. This is why a poem attributed to Dioscorides hails Sappho with an invocation that says "*greetings to you lady, as to the gods; for we still have your immortal daughters, your songs*".

As for her poetry it is not by chance as well that since the 1890s, our access to Sappho's poetry has been greatly increased; in the first decades of the twentieth century around 100 poetic fragments attributed to her and written on papyrus (one on a potsherd) have been unearthed by archaeologists mostly in Egypt and then gradually deciphered, edited, and

published. All these lead us to presume the great role Egypt have played on Sappho's life and poetry.

**Key-words:** *Egypt, poetry, Sappho, Ma'at, lapis lazuli, Lesbos*

### 1. Introduction

The topic addressed in this paper lies primarily in the author's intention of highlighting the historical realities and international socio-cultural trends of the broader Eastern Aegean-Mediterranean context which can be revealed behind the veil of Sappho's poetry, in order to throw light first on the Egyptian-Greek influences, and then on the contacts between Greeks and Egyptians during the 7<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries B.C.E. These realities may be subsumed to a complex process of that time, coined in the 1992 Walter Burkert's famous study<sup>1</sup> as the "orientalizing revolution". Therefore, upon her poetry, it would not be fortuitous a possible connection between Sappho's legendary fame as the "tenth muse" (as Plato was supposed to hail her in the epigram 506 ascribed to him in the *Anthologia Palatina*<sup>2</sup> of the 10<sup>th</sup> century) and the influence of the Egyptian cultural context (particularly the literary genres and love theme) upon her poetry, as expressed by the Nilotic philosophical concepts, literary styles and genres, and trending expressions, which, in the Semito-Hamitic and Indo-European dialogue of minds and mentalities, became common places.

The historical dimension evidences that the ancient civilizations that flourished on Greek and Egyptian soil, although separated by the Mediterranean and Aegean Seas, had long been aware of each other, and at times had entertained significant levels of contact. In this respect the approach and correspondence in the title between Sappho and Ma'at – outside a rather speculative connotation on the esoteric level - do not represent a resemblance between Sappho, the famous historically attested

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female lyrist from the Ionian Lesbos, and the Egyptian goddess Ma'at, as one might understand on a superficial level. Rather Ma'at is here an umbrella term covering a broad interval of Egyptian pharaonic cultural and mental items, which, due to their influence exerted upon the Greek culture, have contributed to the development of the original character of the Hellenic civilization, particularly on the literary level during Sappho's time.

The historical and archeological levels of investigation certify that the ancient civilisations that flourished on the Egyptian and Greek soils, although separated by the (Eastern) Mediterranean and Aegean Seas, had long been aware of each other, and at times had even entertained significant levels of contact.<sup>3</sup>

Starting with the Bronze Age this fact was actually evidenced mainly by the amply attested<sup>4</sup> relations between Minoan Crete and Pharaonic Egypt. Then, from the 7th century B.C.E., substantial and close direct relations started to develop. After a period of internal turmoil and relative isolation, Egypt once more began to open itself to contact with the wider Mediterranean world. Thus, since 664 B.C.E., the contacts reached new dimensions with the increasingly engaging of the Egyptian Pharaohs of the new Saite Dynasty (established by Psamtek – Psammetichos – I, 664–610 B.C.E.) with the neighbouring cultures, justified among others, by shared interests in prestige, trade, and military security, and particularly by the aim of the Egyptians to find new ways of regaining the lost fame and international status.<sup>5</sup> This situation led to a fertile exchange which left a visible mark on the Greek way of thinking and culture particularly. Thus the Greek art, technology, religious ritual, all now incorporated, to varying degrees, Egyptian elements.<sup>6</sup> The appeal exerted by the Egyptian ideas may be evidenced by those which entered the Greek cosmology and/or philosophy<sup>7</sup>, as well as the phenomenon of the popularity of Egyptian

scarabs and amulets in the Mediterranean world.<sup>8</sup>

However, the developments did not affect the Greek civilization only, but left their marks on the Egyptian way of life and thinking also. Thus, as a consequence of the growing contact with the foreigners, the 7th century B.C.E. Egypt was characterized by a complex and dynamic shift of no return. This phenomenon manifested itself in several major developments: the spread of demotic script<sup>9</sup>, the monetisation of the Egyptian economy,<sup>10</sup> the increasing role of religion ('sacralisation') for the construction of Egyptian identity and the associated crystallisation of an encyclopaedic canon of knowledge.<sup>11</sup>

Furthermore, contact and exchange between Egypt, Greece and the neighbouring Anatolian and Levantine civilizations involved a wide range of different people: translocal elites, traders, aristocratic travelers, itinerant philosophers, mercenaries, sailors, craftsmen, courtesans, translators, administrators etc. – all played their particular roles in the Eastern Mediterranean networks of contact and exchange.

From the 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. onward particularly, along with the traders and visitors, other categories of a large number of foreigners also lived in Egypt for long periods. Here comes Sappho into play. The poetess is said to have lived around 600 B.C.E., on the Aegean island of Lesbos. However, due to both the intensive and extensive trade carried out by the Greek Ionian cities of the Aegean with the neighboring populations, Sappho - whose brother Charaxus was trading with Lesbian wine – is reported to have since early on been acquainted with the pharaonic traditions and the Egyptian way of thinking of that time. From that moment on, in terms of intellectual development as well as of personal growth much of her evolution will be marked by the 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. Nilotic civilization and traditions.

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The favorable conditions were due in part to the fact that her brother was a merchant captain, trading in Egypt; and in part due to the contacts and relationships between Naukratis - the newly established center of Greek spirituality in the proximity of the Nile Delta, on the Canopic branch of the river - and the flourishing city of Lesbos (particularly its capital and original harbour, Mytilene).

### **2. Lesbos and Mytilene – elements of historical and cultural geography**

If someone of our world today would hypothetically travel along the Aegean Sea, accustomed with the prevailing barrenness of the Greek Islands, when in sight of Lesbos, one would find all of the sudden an astonishing scenery - the small village of Mitylene, built upon a rocky promontory, with a harbour on either hand. Behind it there are wooded hills, clothed in a dense forest of olive and pomegranate. If the traveler would like to ascend the paths of the hills, s/he would have the opportunity to experience the essence of Lesbos' natural beauty: the myrtle delicate white blossoms, exhaling a sweet perfume, the upper mountain-heights rising above the vegetation. From the summits of their passes the traveler might look eastward upon the pale distances of Asia Minor, or down upon the calm, intensely blue Aegean Sea, amid which Lesbos rests as if inlaid sometimes in *lapis lazuli*, sometimes in *dark sapphire*.

The current Turkish village of Mitylene marks the very site of what was, more than twenty-five centuries ago, one of the greatest centres of ancient Greek civilization, Lesbos. It was at that time that the city was so extended that covered the whole peninsula. Legends say that the great theatre of Mitylene was such a masterpiece of architecture that the Roman General Pompey wished to copy it at Rome, the metropolis of the world. To

the Roman poet Horace the city was as beautiful and culturally effervescent as other great centres, such as Rhodes, Ephesus, and Corinth.<sup>12</sup>

The memory of humanity preserves unaltered the amazing images of those places for themselves only. While one thinks of Lesbos, the image one may associate with is as home of a remarkable character, the poetess Sappho, seen by some of the famous ancient Greek thinkers as the greatest female lyrist and poet (or better say *singer*, taking into account that the poetess sung her lyrics). It was in the city of Mitylene that Sappho lived, taught and sang. Yet her precise birthplace was on the southwestern part of Lesbos, in the current small Greek village of Eressos or Ereso.

People say that among Eresus's villagers one can perceive more traces of the ancient beauty of the race, as the women on festal days may look like the ancient processional figures. Also, they say, the same women make for their husbands such excellent bread, that it has preserved its reputation for more than two thousand years.<sup>13</sup>

### **2.1. The ancient Lesbos**

Lesbos (Lesvos) is the third largest Greek island, located in the northeastern Aegean Sea, separated from Turkey by the narrow Mitylene Strait. The rich archeological findings show that the island was inhabited from early prehistory and mostly since antiquity due to its fertile hinterland and its advantageous geographical position. For the development of Lesbos as a significant commercial and cultural centre it is important to note that since the Mesolithic Age, "the Aegean islands used to form a single entity in combination with the coastal region of Asia Minor on the opposite side".<sup>14</sup> Lesbos is part of this entity and built its own characteristic identity through the past centuries. Particularly, abundant pottery findings and the worship of Cybele suggest cultural continuity of the population from

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Neolithic times. The first organized communities developed about four thousand years ago and soon enough trading began with Asia Minor, other islands of the Aegean Sea and the wider Greek area. It is likely that starting with the Late Bronze Age Greek emigrants arrived, mainly from Thessaly. Faraway from the Greek continent and adjacent to the coast of Asia Minor, Lesbos's geographical location allowed it to develop a peculiar culture with the strong influence coming from Orient, that rebounded on the choice of political systems, leaning mainly to oligarchy.<sup>15</sup> Also the nature and position of the island often made it a target for the powers of those times, but also contributed to the development of that particularly distinguished civilization culturally and primarily marked by the poetess Sappho, and also by numerous other famous people among whom must be mentioned the poet Alcaeus, the philosopher Theophrastus, and the historian Theophanes, which are the most emblematic of this positive period of great achievements. Historically and chronologically speaking it is admitted that the city-state of Lesbos was founded in the 11th century B.C.E. by Aeolic Greeks particularly the family Penthilidae, who arrived from Thessaly, and ruled the city-state until a popular uprising (590–580 B.C.E.) led by the statesman Pittacus of Mytilene ended their rule. It is important to say that between the 8th and the 5th century B.C.E., with an acme in the 7<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E., the population spread and the island became an important alive centre where economic, trading, artistic, philosophical activities flourished. The most powerful Lesbian cities were Mytilene and Methymna. Mytilene, particularly due to its high degree of growth, successfully compete with Methymna in the north of the island for the leadership of the island in the 7th century B.C.E., thus becoming the centre of the island's prosperous eastern hinterland. In addition to the local coins bearing the names of the various Lesbian cities, there were two important



coinages, one in billon and another in electrum, both of which doubtless had a general circulation throughout the island. Lesbos became also a great maritime power, able to settle cities in Asia Minor.<sup>16</sup> This was even called “Lesbia Chora” and “Mytilenians Aegialos”, i.e., the Coast of the Mytilenians, extending its power until the current Dardanelles, and even to some centres in Thrace and Egypt. It is known that in the 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E. the city states around the coast were under the control of a King and formed an amphictyony or league, lead by Mytilene. Their fortifications served for defence not only against attacks from the sea, but also from the other city states of the island, because of their constant rivalry. Later the power passed from Monarchy to Oligarchy. In Sappho’s time, five generations after Homer, it had a flourishing economic, religious, and artistic culture, connections throughout the Eastern Mediterranean, and a vibrant local poetic tradition of longstanding and wide fame.

When Cyrus defeated Croesus in 546 B.C.E. the island became subject to Persia, until the Persians were defeated by the Greeks at the Battle of Salamis in 480 B.C.E. The island was governed by an oligarchy in archaic times, followed by quasi-democracy in classical times. For a short period it was a member of the Athenian confederacy, its apostasy from which is described in a stirring chapter of Thucydides history of the Peloponnesian War. In Hellenistic times, the island belonged to various successor kingdoms until 79 B.C.E., when it passed into Roman hands.<sup>17</sup>

### **3. Sappho’s fame and name**

A poem in the Greek Anthology mentions that of a long list of Greek poetesses, there were precisely seven who were “divinely tongued” (or those who “spoke like gods”)<sup>18</sup>. Undoubtedly, of those seven Sappho was recognized as the greatest. For the Greeks “the poet” meant Homer, while

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“the poetess” usually designated Sappho. Writing a little before our era, the Greek geographer Strabo reported that “there flourished in those days” [...] “Sappho, a wondrous creature; for we know not any woman to have appeared, within recorded time, who was in the least to be compared with her in respect to poesy.”<sup>19</sup> In his *Critical Essays*, Dionysius of Halicarnassus labeled her compositions masterpieces of the “smooth style,” and in one of Lucian’s works she is described as “the delicious glory of the Lesbians.”<sup>20</sup> In addition, the Alexandrians included her as the only woman worthy of being in the list of the nine great lyric poets of archaic Greece; while an elegiac poet of the first century B.C. named Antipater of Thessalonica catalogued the most respected women poets and called them the nine earthly muses, mentioning Sappho among these special beings. Indeed, her poetry was so highly regarded, that she was even accorded a numismatic tribute by her native city of Mytilene.<sup>21</sup>

Further, one must take into account Sappho’s name which in the original Greek, was Psappho (Attic Greek Σαπφώ, Aeolic Greek Ψάπφω, *Psappho*), although we know today the Latinized version of her name. According to Edwin L. Brown<sup>22</sup>, the attempt to explain Sappho’s meaning should start with the appeal to a prominent family of archaic Lesbos, including the adjective σαφής. The development of this adjective began from the adverb σάφα, transformed first to σαφέως, and reaching the full status of σαφής by the fifth century.<sup>23</sup> The existence of σάφα itself, however, Brown points out further, remained unaccounted for until Szemerényi proposed to add it to the ever growing number of Greek words traceable to an Anatolian origin.<sup>24</sup> Some scholars derived therefore Sappho’s name from Hittites word meaning either “numinous,” or from the name for a holy mountain. Hence, Szemerényi’s proposed source is the Hittite adjective *suppi-* whose meaning he gives as “pure,” “clear” and

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whose adverbial form would therefore be *suppa* from *suppaya*. In this logic, the name of the greatest Hittite ruler, Suppiluliuma, which may be rendered “Clearwell” (“Pure-spring”), includes *suppi-* as its first element. That the Hittite word means specifically “ritually pure” follows not only from the ritual context of its regular uses, but from the coexistence of Hittite *parku-* for “physically clean”. From the information above one can conclude that as fellow poets on high archaic Lesbos, Sappho and Alcaeus were heirs of a culture which had survived the Bronze Age's end possibly intact, like that of another offshore island, Euboea, whose now revealed prosperity none would have guessed a generation ago.<sup>25</sup> Mellink and Güterbock have renewed Lazpas's identity with Lesbos placing it on a higher level; hence this could furnish the Hittite king a healing cult-image already in the late fourteenth century B.C.;<sup>26</sup> in any case, Homer's references to well-developed Lesbos (ἐϋκτίμεnoj) are borne out by the rich findings in Bronze-Age levels there.<sup>27</sup>

On the other hand, should not be overlooked a second region, taking into account that the island had early and long-continuing links with Iron-Age Lydia as well. Hence, one should at least note the possibility that a name ultimately traceable in the Hittite lexicon could have reached Sappho through her family's commercial or other ties with Lydia,<sup>28</sup> an Iron-Age state whose language preserved a dialect of Anatolian Indo-European.

Of course, beside the linguistic and historical analysis, still there is a lot of speculation around Sappho's name, however with no real evidence. Some suggest that it may have derived from the Greek *sappheiros* meaning sapphire or lapis lazuli, a stone of magical and religious significance. Metaphysically, it was believed that lapis lazuli had the secret capacity to connect the physical and celestial kingdoms. In addition, in popular beliefs it was thought that if one touches this stone, one may speak with the little

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peoples whom populate the imagination of one's subconscious. As one of the first commercially traded gemstones in pharaonic Egypt, lapis lazuli was valued equally with gold. Symbolically, it was commonly associated with water, the primordial element of creation, and in Egypt was known as the Stone of Truth and sacred to the goddess of Truth and Justice, Ma'at. In the absence of any proof, however, as a result of the extensive and intense history of frequent contacts between the three major Bronze Age civilizations – i.e., Indo-European, Semitic and Nilotic - which bordered at that time the Aegean basin, Anatolia, Levant and Egypt, it is not unlikely that Sappho may have been praised as connected to the true nature of the main female deity of those lands, which encouraged the poetry to be written, and the songs of the kosmos to be sung. This is why a poem ascribed to Dioscorides hails Sappho with an invocation that says *“greetings to you lady, as to the gods; for we still have your immortal daughters, your songs”*.<sup>29</sup> Importantly, too, the Sumerian goddess of death and the underworld, Erishkigal, slept naked in a vast palace of lapis lazuli. In the early translations of the Bible into English, the word *sappur* was mistranslated as sapphire, but originally this word meant holy-blood. This *sappur* referred, not to the stone we know today as the sapphire, but to the lapis lazuli, as a symbol of the blueblood of the Dark Goddess, and of Her protection of matrilineal inheritance. Farther, in China, lapis lazuli was considered to be one of the Seven Precious Things. As lapis lazuli, then, Sappho was symbolically equated to an incarnation of the goddess and all beauty.

### 4. What do we know about Sappho

We have very little information and evidence about Sappho's life, although there are many anecdotes. They say her birth was sometime

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between 630 and 612 B.C.E.,<sup>30</sup> and it is said that she died around 580/570 B.C.E., but nothing is known for sure so far. Historically speaking this was the period of the sage Thales, considered, by Aristotle, the founder of natural philosophy, and of Solon, the law-giver of Athens. In Rome's history, this was the time of the legendary kings.

Interest in searching for evidence on Sappho's life and poetry is all the more important as the classical scholars have long noted the many misogynistic restrictions imposed upon women in ancient Greek society. The degree to which women suffered these indignities varied in terms of social status and specific time period. However it is fair to say that women were consistently assigned an inferior role in this male-dominated culture. The roots of the patriarchal attitude and cultural mentality of this world originated in both their traditionalist Indo-European ancestry and in their Eastern Semitic neighbourhood. Generally, the woman's function in society was to supervise the domestic affairs of the household and to produce legitimate heirs — specifically, male children. Needless to say, this was not an environment in which a woman might easily develop and express her gifts. Yet in the time of Sappho the women of Lesbos were exceptionally liberated and moved freely in social and religious circles.<sup>31</sup> Therefore, her lyric came to enjoy an acclaim comparable to that of Homer and Hesiod. The boundless admiration and praise accorded to Sappho's verse in antiquity speaks to her irrepressible talents.<sup>32</sup>

Sappho was born on the island of Lesbos<sup>33</sup> probably in the town of Eresus, but spent most of her life in Mytilene, the most important of the island's five cities. Chronologically, she was a contemporary of poets such as Alcaeus and Stesichorus, and of the Mytilenean tyrant, Pittacus. The bulk of her poetry, which was well-known and greatly admired throughout antiquity, has been lost unfortunately. However her immense reputation has

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endured through surviving fragments. Her mother's name was Kleis; Herodotus, who wrote about 150 years after Sappho's death, said that her father's name was Scamandronymous. She was orphaned at the age of six. It is known that her family was socially prominent and politically active because of her reputation as some of the wealthy merchants of the island. Thus Sappho must have been a member of the nobility — a conclusion drawn from the fact that she had the leisure to compose her poetry as well as a brother whose status allowed him the position of cupbearer at the town hall. Positions such as these were reserved exclusively for young men of proper birth. We are also told she was married, allegedly to a rich man named Cercylas from the island of Andros.<sup>34</sup> She is said to have had a daughter named Cleis, who is mentioned in her poetry (e.g., Fr. 98b). According to the Parian Marble,<sup>35</sup> Sappho was forced to flee Mytilene in the early sixth century B.C.E., almost certainly for political reasons. It is said she resided during this period on the island of Sicily.<sup>36</sup> Presumably, it was upon her return from this exile that she composed the poetry that made her famous. These are the "facts," as best we know them, concerning Sappho's biography.<sup>37</sup>

In the sixth century B.C.E. Lesbos was very prosperous, and one of the three major centers of a flourishing school of lyric poetry. Some of the other poets of this period were Terpander and Alcaeus, and there were several other women poets. Allusions in the fragments that have remained from her lyric creation, have led to the conclusion that she lived a life of luxury, and loved beautiful clothes and ornaments. It was already known that

We know that Sappho had three brothers, named Charaxus, Larichus, and Eurygius. From Athenaeus we learn that Larichus had the post of cupbearer at Mytilene, which was an honorary office only open to the aristocracy. It is therefore assumed that Sappho and her family were of the

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upper class. The eldest of Sappho's three brothers, Charaxus, was a merchant captain trading in Egypt; there, to his sister's displeasure, he became involved with an Egyptian courtesan whom Sappho calls Doricha (her real name may have been Rhodopis) and eventually married that wealthy Egyptian woman who is mentioned in Herodotus. As a merchant Charaxus exported the renowned wine of Lesbos to Naucratis in Egypt. Nothing is known of her third brother.

Aside from writing a large amount of exquisite poems, it is difficult to tell what Sappho's actual occupation was. There is evidence in several of the poems that Sappho may have been part of a circle of women who were priestesses of the goddess Aphrodite, which in that time and place may have implied ritual prostitution. In another poem she boasts of having trained a champion runner (Fr. 68). One of the commentators says that she invented a particular kind of garment, the chlamys. In yet another (Fr. 87), her daughter (or perhaps Sappho speaking to *her* mother), complains that she can't focus on her weaving because she's, to put it bluntly, horny. Priestess? Sacred Whore? Athlete? Fashion designer? Weaver? Sappho may have been any or all of these at some point in her life. We simply don't know.

Moreover, there are no contemporary portraits of Sappho; it is said that she was short and dark. After her death she was portrayed on coins, medallions, vases and in statuary. There were two famous statues of Sappho in antiquity, both which have disappeared. We know of a portrait of her dedicated on the Athenian Acropolis and of a statue raised in her honor at Syracuse.<sup>38</sup>

It is said that she flung herself off of the Leucadian promontory over unrequited love for a beautiful boatman named Phaon. This is completely unsubstantiated (if not out of character). This myth formed the basis for

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several romantic poems about her as late as the Renaissance.

### 5. The lyric of Sappho

As we have mentioned above in the ancient world Sappho was considered to be on an equal footing with Homer, acclaimed as the “tenth muse”. Her poetry was collected three hundred years after her death at Alexandria in nine books. Some of her poems were known to be hundreds of lines long.

Sappho the poetess was an innovator. At the time poetry was principally used in ceremonial contexts, and to extoll the deeds of brave soldiers. Sappho had the audacity to use the first person in poetry and to discuss deep human emotions, particularly the erotic, in ways that had never been approached by anyone before her. As for the military angle, in one of the longer fragments (#3) she says: “Some say that the fairest thing upon the dark earth is a host of horsemen, and some say a host of foot soldiers, and others again a fleet of ships, but for me it is my beloved.”

In her time the centre of the Greek world was Delphi, where it was said that the Pythian oracle was able to speak directly to men, and through whose influence Greece kept the allegiance of her colonies. The oracles of Delphi and Dodona in Greece took precedence of local authorities, although Lesbos had many temples of her own famous oracles, and the archaic temple of Diana at Ephesus had been erected near by on the shore of Asia Minor, and already wielded an influence that was felt on the life of the whole region. It was an age deeply permeated by religious feeling, as architecture, music, poetry, and social customs all testify.<sup>39</sup>

However, centuries later the memory about Sappho’s both personality and lyric creations has been preserved though altered. The Hellenistic reception of her poetry made her a figure for voice in a lyric



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tradition that marks the loss of song. A body of writing that memorializes lyric voice and immortalizes Sappho as “the tenth Muse” was collected into nine books at the Alexandrian library, canonized as one of the nine Greek lyric poets, the very embodiment of lyric as a genre: an exemplary lyric figure, despite the increasing fragmentation of her texts over the centuries. The reclamation of Sappho’s voice increasingly depends on the archeological evidence, precisely on the scattering of the fragments of her poems. In the process of transmission, the view on Sappho and her poems continually changed<sup>40</sup> over centuries and millennia, depending on the way in which society has perceived and understood her lyric creations in the process of transmission. Through multiple reconstructions and translations, versions and revisions, speculations and reinterpretations, Sappho of today proves to be nothing more than a mere imitation for which there is no original. Thus, as Joan DeJean has argued, “fictions of Sappho” are a function of their own historical moment and no longer to be measured against the time of Sappho.<sup>41</sup>

Since the 1890s, our access to Sappho’s poetry has been greatly increased by the discovery of around 100 more fragments on papyrus (one on a potsherd), unearthed by archaeologists mostly in Egypt, during the first decades of the twentieth century and gradually deciphered, edited, and published. All these lead us to assume the great role Egypt have played on Sappho’s life and poetry.

### **6. Egypt and the Greeks in the 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E.**

Although separated by the Mediterranean Sea, the ancient civilizations that flourished on Greek and Egyptian soil had long been aware of each other, and at times had entertained significant levels of contact. For instance, during the Bronze Age, the relations between Minoan

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Crete and Egypt are amply attested. However, it was only from the 7th century B.C.E. that substantial and close direct relations developed. Thus, after a period of internal turmoil and relative isolation, Egypt once more began to open itself to contact with the wider Mediterranean world. Egyptian kings of the XXVIth or "Saite" Dynasty (664 - 525 B.C.E.), newly established under Psamtek (Psammetichus) I (664–610 B.C.E.) – an able statesman - increasingly engaged with neighbouring cultures both close by and far away, motivated by shared interests in prestige, trade and military security. The new Pharaoh reunited Egypt and immediately revitalized the Egyptian form by relying on the vast cultural heritage and its recorded memory. A short renaissance saw the light.

Another significant event is connected to that period: the Greeks recontacted the Egyptians for the first time since generations. For example, Carians and Ionians were enlisted by Pharaoh, who made his scribes study Greek.

*"Saitic Egypt, with her turning back to the great pharaonic times and her consciousness of a great cultural past, the memory of which reaches back to a time long forgotten ('Saitic Renaissance', Assmann, 2000), is seen as the teacher of knowledge and wisdom, for she is recognized for her old age and for her wisdom that derives from that antiquity. It seems to be especially this 'cultural memory' (Assmann, 2000) of Saitic Egypt that determines the image of Egypt in later Greek generations."*<sup>42</sup>

In Egypt, the Saite Dynasty sought to maintain the great heritage of the Egyptian past. Ancient works were copied and mortuary cults were revived. Demotic became the accepted form of cursive script in the royal chanceries. The Saite Pharaohs focused on keeping Egypt's frontiers secure, and moved far into Asia, even further than the New Kingdom rulers

Thutmose I and III.

The exchange between Egypt and the Greeks left a visible mark particularly on Greek culture. Greek art, technology, religious ritual and also burial customs all now incorporated, to varying degrees, Egyptian elements; while some may have come to Greece through Phoenician mediation, others were occasioned by direct contact. As Villing suggested, first-hand experience is most likely responsible notably for the creative adoption of Egyptian architectural and sculptural schemes (and perhaps techniques), some of which became integral to local discourses of elite (and civic) competition: a taste for monumental sculptures and temples and the development of the quintessential young Greek male statue type, the kouros.<sup>43</sup>

The extent to which Egyptian ideas entered Greek cosmology or philosophy is debatable. Yet, phenomena such as the popularity of Egyptian scarabs and amulets in Greece and in the wider Mediterranean world clearly reveals the appeal exerted by Egyptian ideas. The time from the 7th century B.C.E. onwards is characterized in Egypt by profound change, occasioned to a large degree by the growing contact with – and intermittent rule by – foreigners. Recent scholarship based on archeological evidence has been increasingly aware of this phenomenon, which has manifested itself in major developments such as the spread of demotic script, the monetisation of the Egyptian economy, the increasing role of religion for the construction of Egyptian identity and the associated crystallisation of an encyclopaedic canon of knowledge.<sup>44</sup>

The contact and the types of exchange between Egypt and Greece (and other civilizations as well) involved a range of different people and, undoubtedly was played out on a variety of platforms. In the (Eastern) Mediterranean networks of contact and exchange, military pacts, gift-

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giving and guest-friendships, immigration and migrant work, translocal elites, traders, aristocratic travellers, mercenaries, sailors, craftsmen, wives and courtesans, translators and administrators etc., all played their part.<sup>45</sup>

Herodotus (*Histories* II.177,1) comments that during Pharaoh Ahmose II (or Amasis) (570 - 526 B.C.E.), Egypt attained its highest level of prosperity both in respect to crops and the number of inhabited cities (indeed, an estimated 3 million people lived in Egypt). It was under this Pharaoh that the Greeks were allowed to move beyond the coast of Lower Egypt. Trade was encouraged and the sources, mostly Greek, refer to trading stations such as “The Wall of the Milesians”, and “Islands” bearing names as Ephesus, Chios, Lesbos, Cyprus and Samos.

### 6.1. Naukratis

A lot of Greek centres emerged, in Egypt as well as the Aegean and Mediterranean regions. However, among the Egypt-based ones, the best-documented trading centre was Naukratis on the Canopic branch of the Nile, not far from Sais and with excellent communications. It was founded by Milesians between 650 - 610 B.C.E. (under Pharaoh Psammetichus I). From ca. 570 B.C.E., all Greek trade had to move through Naukratis by law. Therefore, before the end of the 6th century B.C.E., the Greeks had their own colony in Egypt. The travels of individual Greeks to Egypt for the purpose of their education, as well as Greek immigration to Kemet, the ‘black’ land, is usually dated at the time of the Persian invasion (525 B.C.E.). However, it can not be excluded that Pharaoh Psammetichus I allowed Greek intelligentsia to study in Memphis. It is here that one finds the most important ancient account of Naukratis (Herodotus, 2.178–9). According to Herodotus, the establishment of Naukratis as a settlement and trading post was a joint venture by Greeks from twelve different places:

Ionians from Samos, Miletos, Chios, Teos, Phokaia and Klazomenai; Dorians from Rhodes, Knidos, Halikarnassos and Phaselis; Aiolians from Mytilene on Lesbos and the people of Aigina, the island close to Athens. Naukratis contained their sanctuaries and for a time acted as a privileged gateway for trade between Greece and Egypt.<sup>46</sup>

### **6.2. The people of Naukratis: debating the Egyptian presence**

One of the issues that has long been a bone of contention, particularly between Classicists and Egyptologists, is the question of the date and extent of Egyptian Naukratis. Was Naukratis a Greek foundation on virgin soil, to which later, in the 4th or 3rd century B.C.E., an Egyptian ‘suburb’ and sanctuary was added? Or was it the ‘Greek suburb’ of a pre-existing Egyptian town? Scholarship on this topic reveals a significant (ideological) divide between the disciplines, with many Classicists favouring a foundation on ‘virgin soil’, and Egyptologists an earlier Egyptian presence exerting firm control over the foreign settlers. Relatively little work, however, has to date been done on Egyptian Naukratis and particularly on the Egyptian finds from the site, thus leaving much open to speculation.

The fact that Herodotus does not mention anything Egyptian in his description of the site might create the impression that Naukratis was a purely Greek city at least in the Archaic and Classical periods. However, this is contradicted by Egyptian epigraphic evidence. Already in the third quarter of the 6th century B.C.E. an Egyptian inscription clearly refers to Nokradj, the Egyptian name of Naukratis, naming an Egyptian resident there, while another inscription notes the renewal of a donation connected with the temple of Amun-Re of Baded, located at Naukratis.

The large Egyptian temple precinct discovered at the site thus must

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date back to the early 6th century B.C.E. at least, even if the surviving securely datable elements all seem to be connected with rebuilding phases in later periods. A further Egyptian name of Naukratis, Pi-emroye or Per-Meryt, 'the Harbour/Port House', occurs in later documents, most famously on the two stelae erected in 380 B.C.E. by pharaoh Nektanebo I in Naukratis and Thonis/Herakleion.

Judging from written sources and from the archaeological evidence as it presents itself today, biased as it may be, it is clear that Naukratis was not just a Greek but also an Egyptian town, with the Egyptian presence at the site contemporary with the Greek – though not necessarily any earlier. The town had close connections with the then royal capital city of Sais, in the nome (administrative precinct) of which it lay and the main temple of which, that of Neith, received a tithe from tax income raised at Naukratis. The local temple of Amun-Re presumably functioned as the centre of Egyptian administration of Naukratis, which ultimately would have been under the jurisdiction of officials such as the 'Overseer of the gate of the Foreign Lands of the Great Green' (i.e. the Mediterranean), officials who since Saite times would have been in charge of securing the borders as well as administering trade taxes.

The population of Naukratis was thus undoubtedly ethnically diverse from the outset, accommodating at certain points in time, in addition to Greeks and Egyptians, also Cypriots, Persians, Macedonian Greeks and quite probably others. The site's Greek residents would have included traders, craftsmen, sailors, cult officials, hetairai (if we believe the literary sources) and perhaps retired mercenaries; visitors – some of them staying for extended periods – traders, architects and builders, mercenaries, philosophers and other travellers with an interest in Egypt. Among the Egyptian residents we must expect officials and administrators of various

kinds, interpreters (Herodotus 2.154), but also traders and craftsmen, some of them perhaps involved with the local faience scarab workshop. Egyptian women, too, lived in Naukratis. For instance, from an inscribed late 5th-century B.C.E. Attic cup we learn about a mixed-flavoured Greek-Egyptian love story between a certain Gorgias and Tamunis which declare their mutual love. Here Tamunis – judging from her Egyptian name (though this may of course be misleading) – appears to have been of Egyptian descent.

The idea that the population of Naukratis was characterized by cross-cultural integration at this time – if not already earlier – is supported by a further large and important body of evidence: the numerous, previously largely unstudied and unpublished terracotta and stone figurines of the Saite through to the Roman periods, which are now being investigated by Ross Thomas as part of the British Museum project.<sup>47</sup> Certainly from the 5th century B.C.E. these not only reveal certain hybrid elements of iconography and style and the transfer of technical features, but they also suggest that Egyptian domestic religion related to fertility was practised in the town, hinting perhaps at mixed marriages, undoubtedly helped by the important contribution of the imports of syncretic fertility cults from the Aegean basin, the Anatolian plateau and the Levantine region. For later periods, the huge Egyptian statue of the successful trader Horemheb, son of Krates and Shesemtet (therefore, a mixed-marriage) who self-identifies as a Greek, may stand as emblematic for a certainly fluidity.<sup>48</sup>

### **6. 3. Egyptian ideas in Greek thought**

When the first Greeks arrived in Egypt, and given the Egyptian love of writing, we can only speculate about the number of papyri that were carefully stored away in all the major and minor libraries of Egypt. We have extant lists of books found in the “House of Life” of major temples.

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They reveal categories and a system of classification.<sup>49</sup> The Egyptian thought was thus the main and decisive catalyst enabling Greek philosophy to emerge in Ionia ca. 600 B.C.E. and it played a crucial part in the Greek Renaissance giving way to Classical Greece and its philosophy.

One may unquestionably say that a direct influence of Ancient Egyptian thought and literary creation on the Archaic Greek thought has never been fully acknowledged. The Greek philosophy (of the Classical Period particularly) has been interpreted as an excellent standard sprung out of the genius of the Greek miracle. Hellenocentrism was and still is a powerful view, underlining the intellectual superiority of the Greeks and of the Graeco-Roman heritage. Due to the critical-historical approach however, scholars have reconsidered the Greek Antiquity by highlighting and valorizing the different and astonishing side of the Greek spirit, which includes the popular Dionysian and elitist Orphic mysteries, the mystical schools, the chorals, the lyric poetic, drama, and tragedies.<sup>50</sup>

*“Herodotus and other Greeks of the fifth century BC recognized that Egypt was different from other 'barbarian' countries. All people who did not speak Greek were considered barbarians, with features that the Greeks despised. They were either loathsome tyrants, devious magicians, or dull and effeminate pleasure-seeking individuals. But Egypt had more to offer; like India, it was full of old and venerable wisdom.”*<sup>51</sup>

Therefore, one can raise the issue of the Egyptian elements the Greeks embedded in their mentality and culture in the period when they visited Egypt. At the earliest, in ca. 570 B.C.E., when Naukratis became the channel through which all Greek trade was required to flow by law, they surely witnessed the extremely wealthy Egyptian state at work and may have participated, in particular in the areas they were allowed to travel, in the popular festivals and feasts that were held everywhere in Egypt.



Scholars like Bernal recently argued that the cultura of Ancient Greece is an outcome of repeated external influence, resulting in an “extravagat mixture that has produced this attractive and fruitful culture.”<sup>52</sup> However, one should not neglect the important contribution Greeks expressed because of their curious and open nature which eventually resulted in the originality of their culture and the Greek famous *genius*. They essentialized and syncretised the major cultures of their day, particularly the Egyptian one as the greatest and oldest civilization, originally adapting and interpreting them from their own point of view.

*“In addition to the tangible exchange of objects and good, from the time of Solon there appears to have been a certain kind of abstract intellectual contact. There survive a growing number of works written in Greek which demonstrate some measure of familiarity with Egypt and Egyptian thought or at least claim to have been influenced by them. The list of authors of such works is impressive : Solon, Hecataeus of Miletus, Herodotus, Euripides and Plato to name only the best known.”*<sup>53</sup>

When the Greeks’s abstracting, curious and younger minds (compared to those of the Egyptians) got in touch with the ancient wisdom and century-old cultural activity of the Egyptians, the encounter of these two different types of civilizations was very fertile, enabling the Greeks to develop their own intellectual and technological skills, outreaching the various examples of Egyptian ingenuity and applicability. They were able to make abstractization and connections beyond the borders of context and action, and to apply the general to the particular also. Moreover, not only the moral depth of Egypt’s sapiental discourses was readapted and incorporated into the Greek philosophy, but also the various literary genres, with their connotations and themes, were altered and adapted by the Greek authors to their taste.

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### 7. Sappho rediscovered

Although the 7th century B.C.E. Greek lyric poet Sappho of Lesbos was one of the most revered poets of antiquity and highly prolific, by the Middle Ages most of her works were lost.

From the Renaissance on, a whole new outlook rooted in the Classical past helped to the reassessment of the works of the ancient authors. Once books became a practicable form and comparatively cheap to make and acquire, scholars could begin to collect them and to write yet more books about books. In this respect the humanist scholars (re)valued the Greek lyric poets, and thus their status remained high right up to the nineteenth century, when the study of Greek and Latin 'Greats' was the core of the syllabus at Oxford and Cambridge universities.

Sappho's work in particular enjoyed a huge revival from the beginning of the eighteenth century and many new translations and then editions were published, which combed the works of ancient authors for any stray quotation that could be added to the meager collection of *Fragments*. However soon something happened that radically changed the state of Sappho scholarship.

Towards the end of the nineteenth century farmers in Egypt began to turn up pieces of papyrus as they ploughed new fields. In 1895 Bernard Grenfell and Arthur Hunt, two young men from Queen's College, Oxford, set out for Egypt with financial backing from the Egypt Exploration Fund. They settled on a site at a small town about 120 miles south of Cairo, Oxyrhynchus, now Behnasa. On the outskirts of the town was a group of low mounds. Almost as soon as they began to dig Grenfell and Hunt realized that it was the huge rubbish dump of a once-thriving town dating from the period of Hellenistic Egypt. The Egypt Exploration Society began slowly to edit and publish the finds, mostly tiny scraps of torn papyrs,

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which soon revealed to be fragments of bills and receipts, inventories, tickets, etc. Yet one page seemed to record some of the sayings of Jesus, while another tiny scrap, dating from the third century C.E., was a copy of a poem by Sappho – a new poem, previously unknown – “*To the Nereids*”.

As the work at Oxyrhynchus went on, other Sappho fragments were recovered, including some of the most substantial, such as Fragment 16 - “*Some say a host of cavalry...*”, Fragment 44 - “*Hector and Andromache...*”, and Fragment 58 - “[*fleeing?*]... [*was bitten...?*]... *love has got for me brightness and beauty of the sun.*” Altogether the body of Sappho’s known work increased considerably.<sup>54</sup>

Of the entire “corpus” of Sapphic fragments only one complete poem and parts of four others have survived, including three fragments among the Oxyrhynchus Papyri. However, two new poems have been recently found on a 3rd century C.E. papyrus in private hands.

The last discovery of a Sappho poem was in 2005, when new techniques of analysing marks on discarded papyrus dumped in Oxyrhynchus, in Egypt, revealed another poem, in which Sappho bemoaned her old age (again with attention to symptoms). Lachlan Mackinnon translated it in his collection *Small Hours*. In the poem Sappho chastises an audience for assuming Charaxos will return from a trading journey safely. It’s not clear whether this man ever existed. Herodotus mentioned him, and Ovid picked up on his story, too. The first marvel is the fragment’s completeness. What we have of Sappho has often survived due to the fact that the ancient critics and philologists quoted her, therefore we have a word here and a line there. But this time the lyrical fragment comes with nine lines of another one, showing Sappho using meaningful and typical words for her other poems, i.e., longing and desire, and addressing Aphrodite. On the one hand, one may notice the echo of a narrative - a

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formula of sorts - while the author's wish, that her brother sail back safely from his mission is a frequent trope in the verse of the stormy ancient Mediterranean. On the other hand, however, the fragment has an urgency that makes us sense the real Sappho. The word order emphasises the "me" to whom the brother must return and the vocabulary pleads that her heavy-heartedness should find release. This kind of poetry the ancients loved because although the feelings expressed were as old as the human was, however each time they were perceived in a new way.

Dr. Dirk Obbink, the renowned Oxford University classicist and papyrologist who received the papyrus fragment recognized its enormous significance. Another celebrity, the Harvard classics professor Albert Henrichs admitted its exceptional state of conservation, calling it the best preserved Sappho papyrus known to survive hitherto. The two poems are 20 and 9 lines each, with a total of 22 lines preserved in their entire length. The last seven lines are missing 3 to 6 letters from the beginning and end of verses and there are only traces of the last line remaining.

The subject matter is even more exciting than the condition. As Prof. Henrichs notes, one of the two recovered poems speaks of a "Charaxos" and a "Larichos," the names assigned by ancient sources to two of Sappho's brothers but never before found in Sappho's own writings. Accordingly, Prof. Obbink labeled the fragment the "Brothers" poem. "There will be endless discussion about Charaxos and Larichos, who may or may not be Sappho's brothers," Prof. Henrichs commented. One important point in that debate will be whether Charaxos in the "Brothers" poem was or wasn't a sea-going trader. Because about two centuries after Sappho, Herodotus also described Charaxos as a wayfarer, a man who traveled to Egypt, where he spent a fortune to buy the freedom of Rhodopis, a beautiful slave he had fallen in love with. Upon his return

home, Herodotus reports, Sappho brutally mocked her brother's lovestruck folly in one of her poems.

However, the "Brothers" poem contains no such mockery. It rather depicts an exchange between two people concerned about the success of Charaxos' latest sea voyage. The poem's final stanza speaks of Larichos, presumably Sappho's younger brother, "*becoming a man...and freeing us [Sappho's family?] from much heartache.*"

The second poem is an appeal to the goddess Aphrodite, possibly a prayer for aid in securing the affections of a new lover. The source of the papyrus is not known. It is most likely to have come from Egypt where the dry climate preserves papyrus like the Oxyrhynchus fragments.

Dr. Dirk Obbink has hitherto published three papers about the discovery which includes a transcription of the text.<sup>55</sup>

### **8. Sappho's lyric between West and East**

Since the discovery of the last Sapphic fragments, scholars have remarked myths, themes, or even historical facts and events which are present in these literary creations and connect at least the Greek Ionic world, starting with Lesbos island, and the ancient Near East and pharaonic civilizations. Thus, the poetry from the island of Lesbos on one hand had affinities with ancient India and the Vedic literature, and on the other hand it was entwined with the world of ancient Egypt and its survival.<sup>56</sup> Further, M.L. West, in *The East Face of Helicon* compared the antiphonal Fragment 137 with "*the so-called divine love lyrics of Sumer, which include erotic dialogue songs between Inanna and Dumuzi... Among the love songs and excerpts which make up the Song of Solomon, too, we find fragments of he-she dialogues. The form is also found in Egyptian love poetry of the New Kingdom*".<sup>57</sup> The author notes that there is an abundance of Near Eastern

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and Egyptian elements in Sappho's verse,<sup>58</sup> of which he mentions (among others): biblical parallel with Sappho's poetry between the finest sight of the object of one's heart desire (Sappho) and the sight of Yahweh's glorious name (the Hebrew poets)<sup>59</sup>; Semitic (Babylonian, Hebrew, etc.) poetic influences of the prayers<sup>60</sup> upon the depiction of the physical symptoms she feels when she looks at the beloved one<sup>61</sup>; erotic dialogue songs between two Mesopotamian gods adapted to the sphere of human love<sup>62</sup>, etc.

### 9. Egyptian influence upon Sappho's poetry

Besides the Semitic literary devices, in Sappho's love poems can also be detected Egyptian ideas and influences. However there is a difference between the Ancient Egyptians literary approaching of love and Sappho's perspective. In the Egyptian love poem, the depiction of love is a mixture of erotism, lust and passion, the reader seeing the love affair story from both the male and female's point of view. Whereas in Sappho's lyric, love is a mixture of romantism and passion, talking more about the deeper feelings of the characters. One may say that the idea behind the Egyptian love poems is more about every form of love, while for Sappho love is based purely more on an emotional view of love. There is a similar theme expressed by both the Egyptian love poems and Sappho's poetry but their methods and imagery are quite different. For instance, in the sixth stanza of the *Chester Beatty I Papyrus* which begins with the words "I passed before his house" contains the lines "*How mv heart exulted in gladness, My brother, at your sight! ... My heart leaps to go; To let me see my brother tonight,*" (lines 11-12, 22-23).<sup>63</sup> On one level of interpretation, this passage may be an explanation of the internal feelings of the speaker.<sup>64</sup> This, compared to Sappho's illustrates a stark difference on a similar topic: from

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the Fragment 31 (*“He seems to me equal to the gods that man,” “... no speaking is left in me no: tongue breaks and thin fire is racing under skin and in eyes no sight and drumming fills ears and cold sweat hold me and shaking grips me all, greener than grass I am and dead – or almost I seem to me”*).<sup>65</sup> This is quite an image of being struck forcefully by the emotion of love.

Another source of Egyptian inspirational love themes for the whole 7<sup>th</sup> century B.C.E, ancient Near Eastern Mediterranean and Aegean world and for Sappho’s lyrics particularly was recently identified by Amanda Alice Maravelia.<sup>66</sup> She analyzed several Demotic ostraca with fragmentary poems coming from the considerable amount of literary ostraca found during excavations at Deir el-Medina, the village known as the home of the royal necropolis workmen.<sup>67</sup> The whole corpus of the Egyptian love lyrics dates back from the early Nineteenth to the late Twentieth Dynasty (terminus post quem ca.1300 B.C.E.) The author points out that the love poems of ancient Egypt are a source of information concerning the relations between the sexes in antiquity, the customs appertaining to a highly-civilized society.<sup>68</sup> She exemplifies with the study of *O. DeM 1266*, explaining that this ostrakon, which is closely related to O. CG 25218 of the Cairo Museum, before it was broken, was inscribed with a large collection of poems. Three fragments of it have been known since 1897 (= O. CG 25218); 28 more fragments were found in the excavations at Deir al-Medina during 1949–1951. The 31 pieces have been published by Posener.<sup>69</sup> The ostrakon is still far from complete, hence most of the poems present us with lengthy lacunae. These poems, the author points out to her contribution in the translation of these fragments for the first time into Modern Greek from the original hieroglyphic transcription<sup>70</sup>. The poems are the following: 1. XX ( *O. DeM 1266*, ll. 7–11); 2. XXI (*O. DeM 1266*,

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ll. 11–13); 3. XXII (*O. DeM* 1266, ll. 13–14); 4. XXIII (*O. DeM* 1266, ll. 15–16); 5. XXIV (*O. DeM* 1266, ll. 16–18); 6. XXV (*O. DeM* 1266, ll. 18–19); 7. XXVI (*O. DeM* 1266, ll. 19–20); 8. XXVII (*O. DeM* 1266, l. 21); 9. XLVIII (*O. DeM* 1266, ll. 1–3); 10. XLIX (*O. DeM* 1266, ll. 3–6); 11. L (*O. DeM* 1266, ll. 21–22); 12. LI (*O. DeM* 1266, ll. 22–24); and 13. LII (*O. DeM* 1266, ll. 24–28).<sup>71</sup>

In her study Maravelia has suggested that the ninth fragment is the first Demotic *O. DeM* 1266. Here sensuality and lyrics are amalgamated in an alloy of expressive simplicity to exalt the love desire. The woman is thinking of the pleasures of love and of the sexual delights of her friend. She is lonely late at night and think of her beloved man in a way reminiscent of a certain Sapphic fragment.<sup>72</sup>

### 10. Conclusion

With all these said before, what could we finally add to conclude? Our intention has not been to suggest any association between Sappho and the Egyptian goddess Maat, but rather to present the historical and cultural context that marked the poetry of this famous ancient Greek author. Beyond the above-mentioned deas, one must understand the syncretic Mediterranean context of intercultural development and effervescence of the 7th and 6th centuries B.C.E. which resulted in the fertile interference between the Egyptian civilization and the neighbouring cultural centers, particularly between the Greeks and the Egyptians.



Notes:

- 1 Walter Burkert, 1992, *The Orientalizing Revolution. Near Eastern Influence on Greek Culture*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press.
- 2 “Some say the Muses are nine, but how carelessly! Look at the tenth, Sappho from Lesbos.” *The Greek Anthology*, with an English Translation by W. R. Paton, in five volumes, III, London, New York, William Heinemann, G.P. Putnam’s Sons, MCMXXV, Book IX, Epigram 506, 280-281.
- 3 Villing, Alexandra, “Greek–Egyptian relations in the 7th to 6th centuries BC”, in Villing, Alexandra, Bergeron, Marianne, et al., *Naukratis: Greeks in Egypt. An introduction to the development and historical context of Naukratis, its re-discovery and excavation and its modern history*, The British Museum, Trustees of the British Museum, [https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/online\\_research\\_catalogues/ng/naukratis\\_greeks\\_in\\_egypt/introduction/greek%E2%80%93egyptian\\_relations.aspx](https://www.britishmuseum.org/research/online_research_catalogues/ng/naukratis_greeks_in_egypt/introduction/greek%E2%80%93egyptian_relations.aspx)
- 4 See for example: Karetsou, A. (ed.) 2000, *Κρήτη-Αίγυπτος. Πολιτιστικοί δεσμοί τριών χιλιετιών, Μελέτες*, Herakleion; Panagiotopoulos, D. 2005, “Chronik einer Begegnung. Ägypten und die Ägäis in der Bronzezeit”, in Beck, H., Bol, P.C. and Bückling M. (eds.) 2005, *Ägypten Griechenland Rom: Abwehr und Berührung, Katalog zur Ausstellung im Städelschen Kunstinstitut Frankfurt, 26.11.2005–26.02.2006*, Tübingen., 34–49; Phillips, J. 2008, *Aegyptiaca on the Island of Crete in Their Chronological Context: A Critical Review*, Vienna.
- 5 Lloyd, A.B. 1983, “The Late Period, 664–323 BC,” in B.G. Trigger, B.J. Kemp, D.O’ Connor and A.B. Lloyd (eds), *Ancient Egypt: A Social History*, Cambridge, 279–348; Tanner, J. 2003, “Finding the Egyptian in early Greek art”, in R. Matthews and C. Roemer (eds), *Ancient Perspectives on Egypt*, London, 115–43; Villing, *ibid.*
- 6 For further details see: Coulton, J.J. 1977, *Ancient Greek Architects at Work. Problems of Structure and Design*, Oxford; Bianchi, R.S. 2005, “Der archaische griechische Kouros und der ägyptische kanonische Bildnistypus der schreitenden männlichen Figur”, in Beck, Bol and Bückling, w.c., 2005, 65–73.
- 7 Although Burkert argues that this process is a debatable one. Burkert, W. 2004, *Babylon, Memphis, Persepolis: Eastern Contexts of Greek Culture*. Cambridge, MA.
- 8 Gorton, A.F. 1996, *Egyptian and Egyptianising Scarabs. A Typology of Steatite, Faience, and Paste Scarabs from Punic and Other Mediterranean Sites*, Oxford.

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- 9 Martin, C.J. 2007, "The Saite 'demoticisation' of southern Egypt", in K. Lomas, R.D. Whitehouse and J.B. Wilkins (eds), 2007, *Literacy and the State in the Ancient Mediterranean*, London, 25–38.
- 10 Manning, J. G. 2010, *The Last Pharaohs. Egypt under the Ptolemies*, Princeton.
- 11 Assmann, J. 1996, "Zum Konzept der Fremdheit im alten Ägypten", in M. Schuster (ed.), 1996, *Die Begegnung mit dem Fremden: Wertungen und Wirkungen in Hochkulturen vom Altertum bis zur Gegenwart* (Colloquium Rauricum 4), Stuttgart, 77–99.
- 12 Higginson Wentworth, Thomas 1871, "Sappho", *Atlantic Monthly*, pp. 1-9, July, in *Early Women Masters*, pp. 1-9, [http://www.earlywomenmasters.net/essays/authors/higginson/twh\\_sappho.html](http://www.earlywomenmasters.net/essays/authors/higginson/twh_sappho.html)
- 13 The old Greek poet Archestratus, who wrote a work on the art of cookery, said that if the gods were to eat bread, they would send Hermes to Eresus to buy it (an excellent receipt still in vogue in the 19<sup>th</sup> century C.E.). For a modern, detailed and lyric story about Sappho, see Higginson 1871, July, 2.
- 14 *Culture – History*, [www.northaegean.gr/english/MS\\_70.html](http://www.northaegean.gr/english/MS_70.html), apud Cogotti Virginia and Georgiadou Ifigenia 2010, *History of Lesbos, The European Heritage Project*, <http://european-heritage.org/greece/lesvos/history-lesvos#1>
- 15 *Ibidem*.
- 16 Bodenstedt, F. 1981, *Die Elektronmünzen von Phokaia und Mytilene*, Tübingen; "Lesbos" in *Forum Ancient Coins Catalog*, 2015, <http://www.forumancientcoins.com/catalog/roman-and-greek-coins.asp?vpar=1183&pos=10>
- 17 Cogotti and Georgiadou 2010, *ibidem*.
- 18 Θεογλώσσους, see Brunck, Richard Francois Philippe 1772, *Analecta veterum poetarum Graecorum*, II, 114, 8 vols., Strassburg.
- 19 Higginson, Thomas Wentworth., 2013, *The Writings of Thomas Wentworth Higginson*, London, Forgotten Books, 172 -173 (Original work published 1900).
- 20 Soupios, M. A. 1949, *The Greeks Who Made Us Who We Are Eighteen Ancient Philosophers, Scientists, Poets and Others*, McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers Jefferson, North Carolina, and London, 32.
- 21 *Ibidem*.
- 22 "Sappho, the 'Numinous'", in Marcovich, Miroslav (editor), *Illinois Classical Studies XVI*, Department of Classics, University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, 1991, no. 1 & 2 1991: *Studies in Memory of Friedrich Solmsen*,

- 59-63. For a chronology of the studies on Sappho's etymology, see the useful footnotes in the paper.
- 23 Jacobsohn, Hermann, 1908, "Der Aoristtypus ἄλτο und die Aspiration bei Homer II", in *Philologus* 67, NF 21, Berlin, 481-530, particularly 494; Leumann, M., 1950, *Homerische Wörter*, Friedrich Reinhardt, Basel, 112, n. 77.
- 24 Szemerényi, O., 1974, "The Origins of the Greek Lexicon: Ex Oriente Lux", *The Journal of Hellenic Studies*, 94, 144-157, particularly 154.
- 25 Brown, 1991, 60.
- 26 Güterbock H. and Mellink M., 1986, in *Troy and the Trojan War: A Symposium Held at Bryn Mawr College*, October 1984, ed. M. Mellink, Bryn Mawr, PA, 41 and 98, respectively; cf. Cornelius, F., 1973, *Geschichte der Hethiter*, Darmstadt, 218: "Es besteht kein Grund, dies Land [sc. Lazpa] anderswo als auf der Insel Lesbos zu suchen."
- 27 Lamb, W., 1936, *Excavations at Thermi in Lesbos*, Cambridge.
- 28 Podlecki, A. J., 1984, *The Early Greek Poets and their Times*, Vancouver, 82. Moreover, to P. Green (*The Shadow of the Parthenon*, Berkeley, 1972, 170), the name of Sappho's father, Scamandronymus, points to his Asian origin from the Troad.
- 29 *Shadowlight: Sappho, the Tenth Muse*,  
<http://shadowlight.gydja.com/sappho.html>
- 30 This chronology is derived from the 10th-century literary encyclopedia known as the Suda, which claims Sappho was born at the time of the 42nd Olympiad (612–608 B.C.E.).
- 31 In the seventh century B.C.E., Lesbos was a prolific cultural center.
- 32 Soupios 1949, 32.
- 33 Which is currently known as Mitylene.
- 34 The name assigned Sappho's husband may reflect the ribaldry of Middle Comedy. "Cercylas from the island of Andros" translates as "prick from the island of man."
- 35 A marble slab found on the island of Paros with a chronological table dating events from the reign of the mythical Athenian king Cecrops to 263 B.C.
- 36 Sappho's exile in Sicily is the only event in her life for which there is documentary evidence. The inscription just mentioned, cut in a block of marble and found at Paros, now in the British Museum, gives a chronology of events from the sixteenth to the third century B.C. Among others, the chronology states that Sappho fled from Lesbos to Sicily when Aristocles ruled the Athenians. The reason was some sort of political upheaval in Lesbos.
- 37 Soupios 1949, 33.

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- 38 *Ibidem*, 45.
- 39 Powell 2007, 43-44.
- 40 Greene, Ellen (Editor) 1996, *Re-reading Sappho: Reception and Transmission, Classics and contemporary thought* V.3, University of California Press, Berkeley and Los Angeles, 36-37.
- 41 *Ibidem*, footnote 3.
- 42 Matthews & Roemer, 2003, 14.
- 43 Villing,  
[http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/online\\_research\\_catalogues/ng/naukratis\\_greeks\\_in\\_egypt/introduction/greek%E2%80%93egyptian\\_relations.aspx#FootnoteRef1](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/online_research_catalogues/ng/naukratis_greeks_in_egypt/introduction/greek%E2%80%93egyptian_relations.aspx#FootnoteRef1)
- 44 Assmann 1996, 90–2.
- 45 “With the enrollment of Greek mercenaries into his service, Egypt became more important from the Greeks' point of view than the ruined cities of Syria.” (Burkert, 1992, 14).
- 46 van den Dungen Wim 2013-2015, *Ancient Egypt: Hermes the Egyptian. The impact of Ancient Egypt on Greek Philosophy against Hellenocentrism, against Afrocentrism in defence of the Greek Miracle*, Antwerp, <http://www.maat.sofiatopia.org/hermes1.htm>
- 47 Thomas, Ross Iain, “Stone and terracotta figures – an introduction”, in Alexandra Villing et al., *Naukratis: Greeks in Egypt*, The British Museum, Trustees of the British Museum, <http://www.britishmuseum.org/naukratis>, [https://www.britishmuseum.org/pdf/Thomas\\_Figurines\\_SF\\_AV.pdf](https://www.britishmuseum.org/pdf/Thomas_Figurines_SF_AV.pdf)
- 48 Villing, “Naukratis: a city and trading port in Egypt”, in *Ibidem*, [http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/online\\_research\\_catalogues/ng/naukratis\\_greeks\\_in\\_egypt/introduction/naukratis\\_a\\_city\\_and\\_port.aspx](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/online_research_catalogues/ng/naukratis_greeks_in_egypt/introduction/naukratis_a_city_and_port.aspx) Horemheb is represented by an impressively – and exceptionally – huge statue of late 4th to early 3rd century B.C. E. date and entirely Egyptian type, even though its inscription designates its owner as a Greek
- 49 van den Dungen, *Ibidem*.
- 50 *Ibidem*
- 51 Matthews, R. and Roemer, C. 2003, *Ancient Perspectives on Egypt*, UCL Press, London, 11-12.
- 52 Bernal, Martin 2003, “Afrocentrism and Historical Models for the Foundation of Ancient Greece”, in O'Connor, D. and Reid, A., *Ancient Egypt in Africa*, UCL Press, London, pp. 23-30, 29.
- 53 La'da, Csaba A. 2003, “Encounters with Ancient Egypt. The Hellenistic Greek Experience”, in Matthews, R. & Roemer, C., *Ancient Perspectives on*

*Egypt*, UCL Press, London, pp. 157-170, 158

- 54 Reynolds 2000, 20.
- 55 Obbink, Dirk 2014, "Preliminary Version: to appear in ZPE 189 (2014); Two New Poems by Sappho", pp. 1-11, [http://www.aristofane.it/pdf/Obbink\\_Saffo\\_ZPE.pdf](http://www.aristofane.it/pdf/Obbink_Saffo_ZPE.pdf). Obbink, Dirk 2014, "Two New Poems by Sappho", *Zeitschrift für Papyrologie und Epigraphik* 189 (2014), pp. 32-49. Obbink, Dirk 2015, "Provenance, Authenticity, and Text of the New Sappho Papyri". Paper read at the 'Society for Classical Studies' panel: 'New Fragments of Sappho', New Orleans, 9 January 2015, pp. 1-37, [www.papyrology.ox.ac.uk/Fragments/SCS.Sappho.2015.Obbink.paper.pdf](http://www.papyrology.ox.ac.uk/Fragments/SCS.Sappho.2015.Obbink.paper.pdf)
- 56 DuBois, Page 2010, *Out of Athens: The New Ancient Greeks*, The President and Fellows of Harvard College, 40-56.
- 57 West, M.L. 1997, *The East Face of Helicon. West Asiatic Elements in Greek Poetry and Myth*, Oxford Clarendon Press, 531.
- 58 West 1997, *ibidem*, 526-531.
- 59 "Some say a troop of horse, some infantry, / and some declare a fleet the finest sight / upon the earth; but I say, what one loves." (Sappho) compared to "These of chariotry, and these of horses, / but we of the name of Yahweh will make remembrance." (the Hebrew psalmist). See Sappho 16. 1-4; Ps. 20. 8(7) in A. P. Burnett 1983, *Three Archaic Poets*, London, 282 apud West 1997, 526.
- 60 For deliverance from sufferings presumed to be due to divine hostility or an evil demon).
- 61 *Ibidem*, 527 and footnote 86. West suggestively characterized that kind of narrative techniques as "litanies of affliction transferred to the erotic sphere" (*Ibidem*, 628).
- 62 *Ibidem* 531.
- 63 Lichtheim, Miriam 1976, *Ancient Egyptian Literature: Volume II: The New Kingdom*, Berkeley, University of California Press, 184-185.
- 64 On another level, as Lichtheim notes, there is a couple of words which may give different suggestions, i.e., "house" (having the meaning of "stanza" or "chapter"), "brother" (a homophone of "two"), etc. *Ibidem*, footnote 1, 185.
- 65 Greene, Ellen (Editor) 1996, *Re-reading Sappho: Reception and Transmission*, Berkeley, California, University of California Press, 40 and footnote 9.
- 66 Maravelia, A. -A. "Some Aspects of Ancient Egyptian Social Life from the Study of the Principal Love Poem's Ostraca from Deir al-Medina", in Zahi Hawass (Editor), *Egyptology at the Dawn of the Twenty-first Century: Proceedings of the Eighth International Congress of Egyptologists 2000*,

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Cairo, The American University in Cairo Press vol.3, 2003, pp. 281-288, mainly 283 and footnote 14. A. –A Maravelia, “Sappho’s Poetry and Ancient Egyptian Love Poems: A Field of Comparative Interpretation, 1,” in D. Kalamakis, K. Manafis, and P. Vlachos (Eds.), *Proceedings of the 11th International Conference of the F.I.E.C. I*, Athens, 2001, pp. 527–538 (mainly § II.2). See also the completion of this study, A.–A Maravelia, “Sappho’s Poetry and Ancient Egyptian Love Poems: A Field of Comparative Interpretation, 2,” in B. I. Werbart (Ed.), *Cultural Interactions in Europe and the Eastern Mediterranean during the Bronze Age (3000–500 BCE)*, Papers from a Session held at the European Association of Archæologists 6 th Annual Meeting in Lisbon 2000, Oxford, 2001, pp. 67–84 (mainly p. 77).

67 Maravelia, *Ibidem*, 281, apud E. Schiaparelli, *Relazione sui lavori della missione archeologica italiana in Egitto*, II, (Torino, 1927); see also B. Bruyère, *Rapport sur les fouilles de Deir el-Médineh I–XVII*, (Le Caire, 1924–53).

68 Maravelia, *Ibidem*.

69 Maravelia, *Ibidem*, apud G. Posener, *Catalogue des ostraca hiéroglyphiques, littéraires de Deir el-Médineh*, nn. 1227–1266, II 3 , (IFAO; Le Caire, 1972), 43–4, pls. 74–9.

70 Maravelia, 2003, 78–89, 140–146.

71 *Ibidem*, 282.

72 Maravelia 2001, 537-538; Maravelia 2001, 67-84, mainly 77.

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