

The “New Sappho”

In 2004, researchers identified a papyrus in the University of Cologne as part of a roll containing poems of Sappho. This text, recovered from Egyptian mummy cartonnage, is the earliest manuscript of her work so far known. It was copied early in the third century BCE, not much more than 300 years after she wrote. Parts of three of her poems are represented. As usual, all are in a fragmentary state. But the second one, it turned out, had been partially known since 1922 from an Oxyrhynchus papyrus of the third century CE, and combining the two texts revealed an almost complete poem, only the fourth [or second depending on how you are counting] complete poem of Sappho’s to survive.*

ὑμμες πεδὰ Μοίσαν ἰ]οκ[ό]λων κάλα δῶρα, παῖδες,
σπουδάσδετε καὶ τὰ]ν φιλαάοιδον λιγύραν χελύνην·

ἔμοι δ’ ἄπαλον πρίν] ποτ’ [ἔ]οντα χροῖα γήρας ἤδη
ἐπέλλαβε, λεῦκαι δ’ ἐγ]έροντο τρίχες ἐκ μελαίαν·

βάρυς δέ μ’ ὁ [θ]ῦμος πεπόηται, γόνα δ’ [ο]ὔ φέροισι,
τὰ δὴ ποτα λαΐψηρ’ ἔον ὄρχησθ’ ἴσα νεβρίοισι.

τὰ <μὲν> στεναχίσδω θαμέως· ἀλλὰ τί κεν ποείην;
ἀγήραον ἄνθρωπον ἔοντ’ οὐ δύνατον γένεσθαι

καὶ γὰρ π[ο]τα Τίθωνον ἔφαντο βροδόπαχυν Αὔων
ἔρωι φ...αθεισαν βάμεν’ εἰς ἔσχατα γὰς φέροισα]ν,

ἔοντα [κ]άλον καὶ νέον, ἀλλ’ αὐτον ὕμως ἔμαρψε
χρόνῳ πόλιον γήρας, ἔχ[ο]ντ’ ἀθανάταν ἀκοιτιν.

* From Martin West, “A new Sappho poem” *TLS* 21 June 2005; http://www.the-tls.co.uk/this_week/story.aspx?story_id=2111206