

The desert of Egypt constantly reveals new treasures to us. Last year, two German scholars published a new papyrus in ZPE 147 (2004) 1-8, containing parts of a Sappho poem previously known only from the Oxyrynchus papyri (fr. 58). In this paper I will first discuss the reconstruction of this poem and subsequently show how the structure of this new poem can help us to elucidate the structure of older Sappho fragments, esp. frs. 16 and 31.

The new Cologne papyrus supplemented by the old Oxyrynchus fragment reveals a poem with a clear structure. At the beginning of the poem the first-person narrator, whom I take to be Sappho herself, describes the difficult situation she is in: she is old, too old to dance, and recites a list of symptoms that result from this: her heart is heavy, her hair has turned white, and her knees can no longer carry her (lines 3-6). The new papyrus is most important for the reconstruction of the rest of the poem, in which Sappho now seems to reconcile herself with her fate. She quotes a maxim stating that “it is impossible for a human being to remain young” (lines 7-8) and adduces the mythical example of Tithonus, who also had to grow old (lines 9-12). Here the Cologne papyrus ends the poem, but the Oxyrynchus papyrus continues with four more lines, in which Sappho provides an alternative for her situation: while no longer beautiful herself, she can at least enjoy the beauty of other things (lines 13-16). I will argue that these four lines constitute a fitting end to the poem.

Next I will show that the structure of this newly reconstructed poem can be used to clarify the structure of other, better known fragments. First of all I will compare the new poem to fragment 31, in which Sappho recites a similar list of symptoms affecting her, while she looks at a girl laughing and talking to a man. This poem also continues with a maxim and probably with the example of a “poor man,” who can obtain happiness despite his poverty.

While the continuation of fr. 31 in line 17 is commonly accepted, most scholars prefer to end fr. 16 with its fifth stanza, in which Sappho says she would rather see the lovely walk and beautiful face of Anactoria, who is not with her, than Lydian chariots or infantrymen (lines 17-20). The papyrus continues, however, with a gnomic statement worded similarly to the one now read in fr. 58.8: “it is impossible for a human being to [acquire all they wish for?], but to pray to partake in [shared memories?] is possible.” In this poem too, then, Sappho first describes a difficult situation (she misses Anactoria), but appears to resign herself to it in the second part of the poem.

Reinhold Merkelbach (1957) has dubbed fr. 16 “a consolation poem,” in which Sappho tries to console herself for the loss of her friend Anactoria. I will resist this autobiographical reading of Sappho’s poetry, but agree that the poem shows the structure of a self-consolation, a structure now also attested in at least two other poems of Sappho, frs. 31 and 58. I will end my paper by commenting on the possible context in which Sappho may have performed such consolation poetry.