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## A Prayer for Charaxus

These, perhaps hazardous, speculations upon an invaluable papyrus are offered in homage to our most eminent papyrologist. Rash indeed is the man who would pluck the roses of the Tenth Muse. Fortunate he upon whom some petals may chance to fall.

By a perverse fortune Oxyrhynchus papyrus no. 1231, our chief authority for Book I of Sappho, exhibits for long stretches stanza after stanza of headless lines. This involves, among other drawbacks, the disappearance in such case of the coronis, which would have proclaimed beyond peradventure the passage from one poem to the next. In default of this external mark we must then fall back largely upon subjective and imponderable evidence, abhorrent to the *esprit de géométrie*. Even so, we are not entirely deprived of objective sign-posts. One of these is the length of the poems. Five stanzas seems to be the norm for the first Book, so that if we can establish the beginning of a poem we have at least some idea where to look for the end. Another guide-post is pattern. These odes present in many cases a rondeau-like form, returning as it were upon their traces and ending upon the opening theme. This schema is evident in the odes beginning Ποικιλόθρονε, Πλάσιον δὴ μ[(οι) εὐχομένα φανείη], Κύπρι καὶ Νηρήϊδες, Οἱ μὲν ἱππήων, and signs of it are present in Φαίνεται μοι. It enables us to restore with certainty [πεσδομ]άχεντας in the Anactoria ode, which is now seen to end at that point with the recapitulation of the opening line. Similarly the final stanza of the Nereid ode can now be tackled with some chance of success, e. g. :

[Νήρεος γ]όναι κ[οί]λαισι ναῦ]σι  
[πέμ]πετ' ἄψ]ερ[ο]ν · σὺ δὲ Κύπ[ρ]ι: σ[έμ]να  
[λώ]πε' αἰψα περ]θεμ[έν]α κάκων [ἔ-]  
[ριν διά]λυσ[α]ι ·

« Putting on thy robes of justice ».



The beginning of a new ode after *πεσοδομάχεντας* is at the same time assured, and here a new principle comes into play — the alphabetic order of these poems. This simply calls aloud for the restoration:

[Ὀλβιὸν] μὲν οὐ δύνατον γένεσθαι  
[πάμπ]αν ἄνθρωπ[ον · π]εδέχην δ' ἄρασθαι.

So much by way of prelude. The aim of the present disquisition is to identify, and mark the limits of, a complete ode in P. Oxy. 1231, fr. 9, ll. 4–23, p. 7 in Lobel. In line 2 of the fragment there is something about the words γάνος δὲ καὶ, preceded as they are by a stop, which gives us pause. They have a « dying fall », and unmistakably warn us that a poem is hastening to its close. Equally unmistakable is the note of τύχα σὺν ἔσλα in the new stanza. Our thoughts at once fly to a traveller and his journey's end. The word τύχη is regular in this connection, e. g. in the *Choephoroi*: ἐλθεῖν δ' Ὀρέστην δεῦρο σὺν τύχη τινί. Some word meaning « arrive » would therefore be natural in the next line, and, as the language of the poem is nautical, we may restore λίμενος κρέτησαι = « win to port » (and so escape being storm-driven hither and thither *περὶ γ]ᾶς μελαίνας*, if such be the trend of thought in the succeeding line). There is another ode in this papyrus, the *Doricha* poem (p. 3 in Lobel), where the imagery is nautical, although there the language is figurative and applies exclusively to the *embarquement pour Cythère*. In that ode too we find τύχα and λίμενος in conjunction. Incidentally, should we not read λίμενος κρη[τήσαι (l. κρητήσαι)? The closing words, εἰς ἕρον ἦλθε, also keep up the metaphor, and connote « arrive in harbour ». We have therefore an inferential support for λίμενος κρέτησαι, although the collocation is new. Sappho's mind runs in grooves. She is no recondite Alexandrian, casting about for diversity. Her works give the impression rather of a veritable mosaic of stock phrases transmuted by the alchemy of genius into poetry.

The general situation, then, is by this time clear. The poem is most naturally to be interpreted as a prayer for safe arrival. But a prayer for whom? The mention of cargo (φόρτια) farther on inevitably calls to mind the poet's brother, Charaxus, trader in wine. An ordinary traveller would not worry much about such things. No doubt but the poem has a particular reference, for Sappho's verse is strictly personal and occasional. We shall not

therefore be far wrong in reconstituting these lines as a petition addressed on behalf of Charaxus to some sea-divinity, e. g. :

[Αίσομαι Νήρευ σε τ]ύχα σὺν ἔσλα  
[τὸν κασίγνητον λίμεν]ος κρέτησαι.

This for the opening lines. Farther on, the recurrence of χέρσω in the fifth stanza, if restating the χέρσω of the second, suggests that the rondeau pattern is in operation, and that the poem should close with that verse. With regard to the puzzling ἴμοθεν, unless it represents a proper name, the reading γᾶς ὕ]μοθεν πλείοις[ν offers at least a meaning, « hugging the shore ».

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