



# Thinking of Further Desiderata While Tracing the Reception of Sappho in the Ancient World

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# Thinking of further desiderata while tracing the reception of Sappho in the ancient world

 Gregory Nagy

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§0. Following up on my previous essay in *Classical Inquiries* ([Nagy 2020.11.20](#)), I offer here some further thoughts about desiderata that occur to me as I proceed in making plans to write up, as a self-standing monograph to be published by *Classical Inquiries* both online and as a printed “pamphlet,” the results—to date—of my attempts at tracing the reception of Sappho in the ancient world. For my starting point here, I show once again the introductory illustration for my previous essay. We saw there, in the form of a line-drawing, a detail from a vase painting dated to the Classical era of Athens, that is, to the fifth century BCE. As I argued in my previous essay, what we saw in that detail was a picturing of a female beauty who could be viewed as a depersonalized vision of Sappho. To introduce my present essay, I show that picture again, but now I place right next to it, side-by-side, a line-drawing of a detail taken from another vase painting dated to the fifth century BCE. In this other painting, what we see being pictured is a personalized vision of Sappho herself. As I will argue, this particular picture of Sappho fills a big gap as we seek to achieve a fuller understanding of her reception in the ancient world. Among the many desiderata for any study of Sappho’s reception, as I will also argue, a closer look at the evidence from Classical Athenian visual arts is in any case most desirable.



On the left: red-figure lekythos attributed to the Painter of the Frankfurt Acorn; Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Antikensammlung, F2705. Close-up of Eukleia. For the overall painting, I cite the Beazley Archive, [here](#). Line-drawing by Jill Robbins.

On the right: red-figure calyx krater by the Tithonos Painter; Bochum, Ruhr Universitat, Kunstsammlungen, S508. For the overall painting, I cite the Beazley Archive, [here](#). Line-drawing by Jill Robbins.

§1. I begin by analyzing the context of the picture painted on the Bochum vase, identified in the caption that accompanies the line-drawing as shown above. In what follows, §§2-5, I include some wording epitomized from an earlier analysis (Nagy 2007:238-239).

§2. Pictured in this painting on the Bochum vase is a female beauty in a dancing pose. She is wearing a cloak or *himation* over her tunic or *khitōn*, and a snood (net-cap) or *sakkos* is holding up her hair. As she “walks,” she is fingering with her left hand the strings of a *barbiton*, a special kind of lyre that is propped snugly against her left hip, while her gracefully extended right hand is dangling a ‘twanger’ or *plēktron* for strumming on her instrument. The inscribed

lettering that we see positioned not far from her lips, ΣΑΦΦΟ, indicates that this female beauty is *Sappho*.

§3. The morphology of the *barbiton*, the musical instrument of choice for this figure labeled Sappho, made it ideal for a combination of song, instrumental accompaniment, and dance. With its elongated neck, it produced a low range of tone that best matched the register of the human voice, and its shape was “ideally suited to walking musicians, since it could be held against the left hip and strummed without interfering with a normal walking stride” (Price 1990:143n30). The “normal walking stride,” as described here, is what modulates into a dancing pose (for more on Sappho’s pose, I cite Yatromanolakis 2005).

§4. Of special interest in this picture is a carrying bag that we see hanging from the lower arm of Sappho’s *barbiton*. Such a bag was evidently used for carrying inside it a wind instrument known as the *aulos*, ‘reed-pipe’. As we look more closely at the picture, we see that the carrying bag, attached to the *barbiton*, is flowing in the air, and the contour of this flow is synchronized with the graceful motion of the dance step. This flowing effect is evidently caused by the absence of an *aulos* inside the bag (for further background on the Bochum vase, I cite Yatromanolakis 2007 chapter 2).

§5. What we see represented here in this painting on the Bochum vase is a visual fusion of song and dance as accompanied by either lyre or reed, and such fusion is indicative of a stylized performance that can be imagined as taking place either at a public concert or at a private symposium, as I argued at length in an essay I cited at §1 (Nagy 2007).

§6. I see a comparable visual fusion in the picture painted on the Berlin vase, identified in the caption that accompanies the line-drawing that I have placed to the left of the line-drawing for the picture painted on the Bochum vase. In this other picture, we see a female beauty who is named as Eukleia, and her name, as we saw in the preceding essay that I posted, means ‘she who has genuine *kleos*’—where *kleos* means ‘glory of song’. Like the figure of Sappho as painted on the Bochum vase, the figure of Eukleia is holding a lyre in her left hand, and she is fingering the strings of her lyre. I would argue that the painter of this Berlin vase, just like the painter of the Bochum vase, is imagining a stylized performance that could take place either at a public concert or at a private symposium.

§7. But the stylized performance of Eukleia, unlike the performance of Sappho, is more difficult to imagine here. The little bird that we see perched on the index finger of the performer's right hand is more difficult to fit into any visualized choreography of any real-life performance. Such difficulties can be explained, I think, in terms of distinctions in artistically imagining, on the one hand, an idealized performance by Eukleia, who is a divine personification, and, on the other hand, a more realistic performance by an updated Sappho whose persona as a performer is anachronistically reconfigured to follow the model of real-life lyre-singings and reed-singings in the Classical era of Athens. The occasions for such real-life performances, in terms of my argument, would be not only private, as at symposia, but also public, as at grand public concerts, especially at the Great Panathenaia. In the case of public events like the Great Panathenaia, the performances would be an all-male affair, restricted to professional male lyre-singers and reed-singers who would compete with each other in pursuit of sumptuous prizes. In the case of symposia, on the other hand, there would have existed a wide variety of such private occasions—not only all-male affairs where the only female participants would have been *hetairai* or 'courtesans'. There is ample reason to think that there were also all sorts of all-female sympotic events going on, and I leave room here for traditional venues where the participants were socially respectable, as I guess in cases of all-night wedding parties arranged for daughters by their mothers.

§8. So, what about the little bird that we see perched on the index finger of the diva Eukleia? I think that this little pet is emblematic of the content, not the form, of songs performed at public concerts—and at private symposia. Thus the choreography of performance by Eukleia as she sings to the accompaniment of the lyre that she holds in her left hand is not necessarily impeded by the little bird that is perched on the index finger of her right hand. I think there is no contradiction in imagining the presence of the bird while our diva is performing—if our little bird happens to be the subject of our diva's song instead of some real-life intrusion on the performance of this song..

§9. In essays still to come, I will have more to say about the bird of Eukleia and about her lyre—even about the shape of her lyre. For now, however, I concentrate on the actual personification conveyed by the name of Eukleia, whom I am describing anachronistically as a diva of sorts. I will now argue that even the personification of this diva can become the subject of song—and that we actually see an attestation of such a subject in a song once composed by the lyric master Bacchylides. Further, I will argue that the painter who painted the picture of Eukleia may well have heard such a song being sung at symposia or even at the grand concerts

of the Great Panathenaia. My reason for positing the Panathenaia as a possible venue is that there is evidence, as I showed in a related project ([Nagy 2018.12.06](#), 2019), that the Lyric Canon as represented by poetic personae like Sappho and Bacchylides was the basic repertoire for performances of lyre-songs and reed-songs at the Panathenaia.

§10. Before I can present my argument about the figuring of Eukleia as the personified subject of a song sung at the Panathenaia, I need to show, side-by-side with her picture, a picture of another such diva, named Eunomia:



Eunomia on the left, Eukleia on the right: from a red-figure lekythos attributed to the Painter of the Frankfurt Acorn; Berlin, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Antikensammlung, F2705. For the overall painting, I cite the Beazley Archive, [here](#). Line-drawings by Jill Robbins.

§11. The Berlin painter has positioned the two personified goddesses as a symmetrical pair, and there is a comparable pairing to be found in Victory Ode 13 of the poet Bacchylides. As Natasha Bershadsky reminds me, I once made a comment about these two goddesses Eukleia and Eunomia as they are pictured in the poetry of Bacchylides, and I epitomize here the relevant parts of that comment (Nagy 2011:198–199):

In *Ode* 13 of Bacchylides, the flash of light emanating from the achievement or *aretē* (117) of the victorious athlete is personified as a goddess *Aretē* who makes that achievement visible to all, as expressed by the verb *phainein* (177). This goddess of achievement is ‘steering straight’ (*kubernân* 185) the island state of Aegina, which is thus envisioned as a ship of state. And this same goddess is linked by sacral metonymy with the fame or *doxa* (179) of the song that celebrates the victory—and with the true glory or *kleos* (185) that the song brings to the victor. Such a song of ‘true glory’ is personified as a second goddess, *Eukleia* (183–184), who is fused in song with the first goddess, *Aretē* or ‘achievement’ personified. This second goddess, who is *Eukleia* or ‘true *kleos*’ personified, is linked by sacral metonymy with *stephanoi* ‘garlands’ (184) plaited with blossoms. And the sacral metonymy extends further: these two goddesses, one of whom is linked with a fair voyage for the ship of state while the other is linked with garlands of blossoms for victorious athletes, are in turn fused in song with a third goddess, who is the personification of *eunomia*, meaning ‘true rule’. She is *Eunomia* (186). This third goddess *Eunomia* as ‘true rule’ personified has a special link of her own to the first goddess, whose steering of the ship of state is a metaphor for true rule. And, with her attribute of festivities or *thaliai* (187), this third goddess also has a special link to the second goddess, whose blossoms are a metaphor for the festivities that mark the third goddess. In the fusion of these three singing and dancing goddesses, I highlight the linking of the garlands or *stephanoi* (184) of blossoms with the glory or *kleos* (183–184) of singing and dancing in the festivities of a victory ode. In terms of my argument, such linking is not just a poetic gesture: rather, the garlanding of the victor, as expressed at the climax of this passage by the verb *stephanoûn* (197), is also a ritual act, which is part of the overall ritual act of performing the victory ode.

§12. In the classical era of Athens, such an old-fashioned pairing of Eukleia and Eunomia in special contexts where athletic victories were celebrated by way of song and dance in choral performance could now be renewed in more general or more varied contexts of monodic reperformances at public concerts and at private symposia. And, when I say “symposia” here, I leave room for imagining a wide variety of all-female merriment.



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reception, Sappho