Song 44 of Sappho revisited: what is 'oral' about the text of this song?

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Classical Inquiries

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For example:
Song 44 of Sappho revisited: what is ‘oral’ about the text of this song?

August 31, 2016 By Gregory Nagy

This song, attributed to Sappho, shows the same kind of formulaic structure that we see at work in the Homeric Iliad and Odyssey. Such a structure, in the case of Homeric poetry, indicates that this poetry originated from oral traditions. So also in the case of the songmaking exemplified by Song 44 of Sappho, the formulaic structure of this song indicates a parallel origin from oral traditions.

In a posting that is listed in the Bibliography as Nagy 2015.02.27, I focused on evidence for arguing that Song 44 of Sappho shows the existence of ancient Greek traditions of women’s songmaking about the epic past. In terms of that argument, such traditions of women’s songmaking were distinct from but related to traditions of epic—which was a form of poetry produced by men, not by women. Here I take the argument further: Song 44 of Sappho, which has a form conventionally described as lyric, is not only related to the form of epic as exemplified by the Homeric Iliad and Odyssey: more than that, this form of lyric, like the form of epic, originates from an oral tradition.

I have made such an argument in two write-ups basically, as listed in the Bibliography: Nagy 1974 Chapter 5 and Nagy 1990a Appendix. Both of these two write-ups, and the two books that contain them, are now available online (thanks to the efforts of my colleagues Noel Spencer and Daniel Cline), and the URN-s are indicated in the Bibliography. The first of these two write-ups is foundational for a major part of my research over the last forty-two years. And the second provides an essential qualification. I summarize here the argument by dividing it up into ten parts, where each part depends on the preceding part.

A ten-part argument about Song 44 of Sappho and about Homeric poetry
Part 1. I link the term "oral" with the idea of "formula" as defined in Parry 1928a and Parry 1928b, and as redefined in Nagy 1996b:29.


Part 3. The formulaic structure of the meter that we find in Song 44 of Sappho, glyc2da, which can be described superficially as a "dactylic pentameter", is cognate with the formulaic structure of the epic meter of Homeric poetry, which is commonly described as the dactylic hexameter. So, if the two formulaic structures are cognate, it follows that both originate from oral traditions. That is one of the main points I made in Nagy 1974 Chapter 5.

Part 4. The meters that contain the formulaic structures of Song 44 and of Homeric poetry, dactylic hexameter and dactylic pentameter, are likewise cognate. That is another one of the main points I made in Nagy 1974 Chapter 5.

Part 5. On the basis of comparable meters that are found in Indo-European languages other than Greek, especially in Indic (Vedic Sanskrit), it can be argued that the meters of both Song 44 and Homeric poetry are Indo-European in origin. That is yet another one of the main points I made in Nagy 1974 Chapter 5.

Part 6. Others too have argued that the meters found in the songs or "lyric" of Sappho—as also of Alcaeus, and in other Greek lyric poetry—are cognate with the meter of Homeric poetry. Examples include the works of West 1973ab, Berg 1978, Tichy 1981, Haug and Welo 2001. What all these works have in common, despite many incompatibilities in methodology, is a general agreement that the multiple meters of Greek "lyric" and the single meter of "epic" are Indo-European in origin. But none of these works addresses this question: does "lyric", like "epic", have a formulaic structure?

Part 7. The work of Gentili and Giannini 1977 likewise argues that the meters of "lyric" and "epic" are cognate—but without positing an Indo-European origin. This work also challenges the positing of any "monogenetic" origin of "lyric" meter from any single "lyric" meter. Such a challenge applies to all the works mentioned in Part 6.

Part 8. The same challenge also applies to Nagy 1974 Chapter 5. But the arguments presented there were then supplemented by the arguments in Nagy 1990a Appendix, where the dactylic hexameter of "epic" is explained as a convergence of two different formulaic systems contained in two different metrical systems found in "lyric". Those two metrical systems can be described in terms of the nomenclature applied to studies of the meters found in the lyric "poetry" of Pindar: "aeolic" and "dactylo-epitrite". The "aeolic" meters of Pindar are cognate with the meters found in the songs of Sappho and Alcaeus, while the "dactylo-epitrite" meters of Pindar are cognate with the meters found especially in the songs of Stesichorus. For more on Pindar’s meters, see Barnes 2013; on lyric and epic meters in general, see Barnes 2011.

Part 9. The dual "etymology", as outlined in Part 8, of dactylic hexameter as the singular meter of "epic" accounts for every major word-break pattern in this meter, as argued in Nagy 1996a Appendix. By contrast, the other etymologies as attempted in the works listed in Part 6 cannot account for all these breaks.

Part 10. There are similar problems with the "colon-theory" of Fränkel 1960, where the operation of "cola" is not correlated with the operation of "formulae" as described in Parry 1928b and in Nagy 1974 Chapter 3. Fränkel’s theory cannot account for the full range of formulaic variation in the making of Homeric verse (Nagy 1990b:29–35; see also Clark 1994, 1997).

Three comments on formula and meter, with reference to Song 44 of Sappho and to Homeric poetry

Comment 1, via Nagy 1990a:49 (§560). The metrical structure of Song 44 is stichic and not strophic. The term "stichic" refers to a structure that goes from verse to verse, vs. the term "strophic", which refers to a structure that goes from stanza to stanza. The strophic rather than strophic meters of "lyric" are actually attested as usable for extended narratives of a type parallel to "epic", composed in the dactylic hexameter, which is the stichic meter of "non-lyric" par excellence. A prime example of a "stichic" structure in "lyric" is Song 44 of Sappho, featuring a narrative that has a heroic setting: this song is composed in a stichic meter, glyc2da, on which see Nagy 1996a Appendix. All of Book II of the canonical Sapphic corpus was composed in this meter: Hephaestion 7.7, p. 23.14–17 ed. Conbrusch. This meter, glyc2da, even though it is stichic here, is clearly cognate with various strophic meters of Lesbian "lyric". An example is glyc1da in Song 94 of Sappho, on which see Nagy 1996a Appendix. Stichic meters of narrative "lyric" such as the glyc2da of Song 44, conventionally sung to the accompaniment of the lyre, are doubtless more closely related than is the spoken meter of hexameter to the format of the South Slavic gušlar who sings to the accompaniment of the gusle. In this connection, I quote West 1973a:188: “If there was epic or heroic balladry in (say) 1600 [BCE], its characteristic verse was most likely the glyconic [= glyc], whose cognates are used in Sanskrit and Slavic epic.”
Comment 2, via Nagy 1974 Chapter 5 and Nagy 1990a Appendix. The formulas of Song 44 are cognate with the formulas of Homeric poetry. If we map these formulas within the respective metrical frames of glyc2dα in the case of Song 44 and pher3dα in the case of one of the two metrical prototypes of dactylic hexameter, we find a general pattern of matching formulas shaped ...uu – uu | x#... in Song 44 and ...uu – uu | x#... in Homeric poetry. (The symbols here are <u> = short syllable, <u> <u> = long syllable, <u> = short or long syllable, <x> = word-break at the end/beginning of two consecutive verses, <x> = word-break inside a verse.) A prime example is ...κλέος ἄφθιτον # (xx)... in Song 44.4 and
κλέος ἄφθιτον || ἔχεισ. What is most remarkable in such matching patterns is that the wordings fit independently their respective metrical and formulaic frames. To show this independence, I cite the case of ...ἐπ' ἄλμυρον # πόντον... in Song 44.7–8, where the matching phrase ...ἄλμυρον || ὤδωρ... in Odyssey 9.470 etc. has an underlying variant ...ἄλμυρον ... πόντον, as we can see from expressions like ...ἄλμυρος ἔτρεφε Πόντος# and ...ἄλμυρός ἐνδοθι πόντος# in Hesiod Theogony 107 and 964, respectively. In other words it seems that ὤδωρ displaces πόντος in certain environments, not the other way around.

Comment 3 via Nagy 1974:145. In the case of the correspondence between ...κλέος ἄφθιτον # (xx)... in Song 44.4 and ...κλέος ἄφθιτον || ἔχεισ in Iliad 9.413–414, the further correspondence of these phrases with Sanskrit śrávaḥ(s) ... ākṣitam in Rig-Veda 1.9.7 points to an Indo-European heritage for the formulas and meters of ancient Greek verbal art. On the syntax of κλέος ἄφθιτον || ἔχεισ in Iliad 9.413–414 and of śrávaḥ(s) ... ākṣitam in Rig-Veda 1.9.7, I offer both comparative and internal analysis in Nagy 1990a.244–245 π126 and Nagy 1990b.122–127.

A formulation about formula and meter

Viewed from the broader perspective of Indo-European poetics, the terms <formula> and <meter> can be readjusted to accommodate such broader terms as <phrase> and <rhythm>. I have devised a formulation with such a readjustment in mind:

At first, the reasoning goes, traditional phraseology simply contains built-in rhythms. Later, the factor of tradition leads to the preference of phrases with some rhythms over phrases with other rhythms. Still later, the preferred rhythms have their own dynamics and become regulators of any incoming non-traditional phraseology. By becoming a viable structure in its own right, meter may evolve independently of traditional phraseology. Recent metrical developments may even obliterate aspects of the selfsame traditional phraseology that had engendered them, if these aspects no longer match the meter. (Nagy 1974:145; see also Allen 1973:13–14, 258; further analysis in Nagy 1990b:39–42.)

A postscript to the cover picture for this posting

The cover picture for this posting is taken from one of the many versions of “Hector and Andromache” as painted by Giorgio de Chirico. This 1926 version is my personal favorite. There is something singularly arresting about the bare back of Andromache, revealed at the tenderly vulnerable moment when she sadly embraces Hector for the very last time. I add here as a coda, with the generous permission of the artist, Fyodor S. Wheeler, a picture that takes a second look at the picture made by De Chirico.

"Porcia and the Painting." Original work by Fyodor S. Wheeler. Image via.
We see again the vulnerable bareness of the sad woman's back, but now this woman in the foreground is not Andromache but another sad woman who is looking at a picture of Andromache. This sad woman is Porcia, wife of Brutus. The story is told in Plutarch's Life of Brutus. For quotation and translation, see Nagy 2015.08.12, as listed in the Bibliography. Brutus will soon die just as Hector will soon die in the Iliad, and Porcia is having herself a really good cry, just thinking about the sadness of it all while she views an ancient picture of that final embrace of Andromache and Hector. Accompanying Wheeler's picture is his own story about the inspiration of the picture as visualized by De Chirico—and as visualized again and again in the story about Porcia and her viewing of that ancient picture of Andromache:

There's a story from Plutarch that tells of Porcia, Brutus's wife, crying every time she saw a certain painting of the parting of Hector and Andromache, as told in the Iliad Book VI. Hector didn't come back. Brutus didn't either.

My class finished reading the Iliad and ugh so many parts where I saw Hector and Andromache as Brutus and Porcia. Why must I be a classics fan.

Bibliography


Page, D. 1955. Sappho and Alcaeus: An Introduction to the Study of Ancient Lesbian Poetry. Oxford. See p. 67. A detail mentioned here by Page, which calls for further research, is the distribution of dative plural οἱκ with or without word-final -ι, so, -οικ vs. -οικ. Two cases merit special attention: line-final φίλοικ in Sappho F 44 line 12 and line-final θέοικ at line 21. In line-medial position, such forms generally show -οικ. By contrast, the definite article in the dative plural is τοικ and ταικ even in line-medial position. See also Page p. 208 on Alcaeus “G2” (now F 130) line 15, κυνόδοικί μ’ αὔταικ, and on Sappho F 160 lines 1–2, τόδε σῶν ζηνοίκες κῆλεν δίαλω. Page notes a similar pattern of distribution in the phraseology of Archilochus and Anacreon: line-medial -οισι vs. line-final -οικ.


Notes

[1] Corrigenda. On p. 203 between "same line") and "specified," insert "of the marital bed; similarly, she 'recognizes' (ἀναγνόσθη xix 250) as σῆματα (same line) the clothes …" (in the present printed version, the reference to the marital bed as σῆματα at Odyssey xxiii 206 is distorted by a mistaken omission of the wording that needs to be restored here: by haplography, the mention of the marital bed is omitted, and this omission distorts the point being made about the clothes and brooch of Odysseus as σῆματα in their own right at xix 250). On p. 214n42, "Pausianias 9.44.44" should be 8.44.4.

Tags: Albert Lord, Epic, Lyric, meter, Milman Parry, Sappho

One Response to Song 44 of Sappho revisited: what is ‘oral’ about the text of this song?

Yang Sciscent  September 2, 2016 at 2:28 pm (Edit)

Hi Greg,

I found your arguments on the cognateness of Sappho 44 to the epic tradition is convincing, with proofs of parallels in story contents, rhythms and formulaic structures which could allude to their shared Indo-European origin.