



Sappho's 'fire under the skin' and the erotic syntax of an epigram by Posidippus

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Sappho's 'fire under the skin' and the erotic syntax of an epigram by Posidippus

July 8, 2015 By Gregory Nagy listed under By Gregory Nagy, H24H, Sappho

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Sappho and her errant brother Kharaxos

§1. In a book soon to be published, Anton Bierl and André Lardinois have collected a set of essays commenting on newly-discovered texts of Sappho's songs, preserved in papyrus fragments originating from ancient Egypt in the Hellenized phase of its long history.[1] In the essay that I contributed to that book—an essay that will be made available online as soon as the printed version of the book appears—I study expressions of what I call “sisterly affect” in the songs of Sappho, especially as evidenced in the new texts. [2] In particular, I concentrate on songs where Sappho, in the role of an affectionate sister, tells about a passionate love affair of a brother of hers named Kharaxos. One of these songs has been preserved almost in its entirety in a papyrus text that has come to be known simply as “The Brothers Poem” or “The Brothers Song.”[3]

§2. As I noted in [my previous post, 2015.07.01](#), Herodotus in his History says that Sappho makes pointed references in her songs to the passionate love affair of Kharaxos, and the historian adds that she sings disapprovingly of this affair.[4] The cause of her disapproval becomes clear as we read the whole tale as retold by Herodotus.[5] It is a tale of a self-destructive passion that led Kharaxos, a wealthy aristocrat from the Greek city of Mytilene on the island of Lesbos, to squander his wealth on a beautiful and most seductive courtesan named Rhodōpis, who lived in the Greek enclave of Naucratis in Egypt.

§3. So, of course, the aristocratic sister would disapprove of such self-destructive passion. And yet, as I argue in the essay I mentioned at the beginning, the sister would also understand such an experience, and this understanding is most sensually expressed in the songs of Sappho about the affair. The sensuality of this understanding, I argue further, is what made the songs of Sappho about Kharaxos and the courtesan so famous in the era of Herodotus. The historian pointedly refers to the fame of this courtesan throughout the Greek-speaking world—a fame that was due, he implies, to such songs as once sung by Sappho herself about the love-affair of her errant brother with this sexually irresistible woman.

§4. Sappho understands, I argue still further, because she too has experienced—and will experience—both the torment and the delight of passionate love. In the posting here, 2015.07.08, I extend the argument by analyzing an epigram of Posidippus that actually visualizes Sappho's vicarious understanding.

The mark of a courtesan's rosy complexion in an epigram by Posidippus

§5. The poet Posidippus of Pella, who lived in the third century BCE, composed an epigram that memorializes the life and times of the courtesan from Naucratis who was passionately loved by Kharaxos, brother of Sappho. In this epigram, however, the name of the courtesan is not Rhodōpis, as she is called by Herodotus, but Dōrikha. The epigram is quoted by Athenaeus (13.596c), who lived in the third century CE—and whose native city was in fact Naucratis. In the context of this quotation, Herodotus is accused of being unaware that Rhodōpis and Dōrikha are different women. But I will argue that Rhodōpis is in fact an alternative name for the same woman who is called Dōrikha in the epigram of Posidippus.

§6. After all, we cannot even be sure that Dōrikha was the only name for this courtesan in Sappho's songs. [6] Granted, Dōrikha is understood to be the only name in the text of Athenaeus. But, aside from this one source, we find in no other source any indication that the names Dōrikha and Rhodōpis were mutually exclusive. Even in Oxyrhynchus Papyrus 1800, where we read only the name Dōrikha, we cannot be sure that this naming is meant to exclude Rhodōpis as an alternative. By contrast, in the reportage of Strabo (17.1.33 C808), it is clear that the names Dōrikha and Rhodōpis are used interchangeably with reference to the same woman.

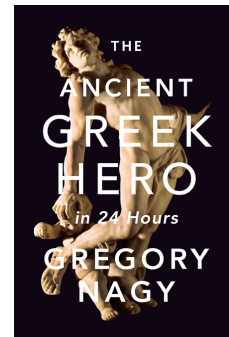
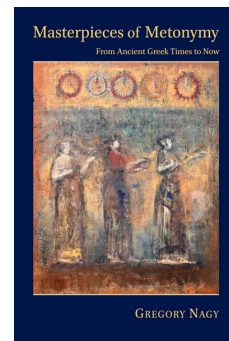
§7. As for the text of the epigram by Posidippus as quoted by Athenaeus, I will now argue that its wording actually recognizes the name Rhodōpis as an alternative to Dōrikha. We are about to see a reference to the rosy complexion of Dōrikha, and this reference is I think a subtle allusion to the name Rhodōpis. Here is the wording of the epigram:

||₁ Δωρίχα, ὅστέα μὲν σὰ πάλαι κόνις οἷ τ' ἀπόδεσμοι ||₂ χαίτης ἥ τε μύρων ἔκπνοος
ἀμπεχόνῃ, ||₃ ἢ ποτε τὸν χαρίεντα περιστέλλουσα Χάραξον ||₄ σύγχρους ὀρθρινῶν ἡψαο
κισσυβίων. ||₅ Σαπφῶι δὲ μένουσι φίλης ἔτι καὶ μενέουσιν ||₆ ψῆδης αἱ λευκαὶ φθειγγόμεναι
σελίδες. ||₇ οὖνομα σὸν μακαριστόν, ὃ Ναύκρατις ὧδε φυλάξει, ||₈ ἔσθ' ἂν ἤ Νείλου ναὺς ἐφ'
ἀλὸς πελάγη.

||₁ Dōrikha, your bones have turned into dust a long time ago—and so too the ribbons ||₂ of
your hair, and so too the shawl, exhaling that perfumed scent of yours, ||₃ in which you
enveloped once upon a time the charming Kharaxos, ||₄ skin next to skin, complexion
making contact with complexion, as you reached for cups of wine at the coming of the
dawn. ||₅ But from Sappho there still do remain and will forever remain her loving ||₆
song's columns of verses that shine forth as they sound out her voice. ||₇ That name of
yours has been declared most fortunate, and Naucratis will guard it safely, just as it is, ||₈
so long as there are ships sailing the waters of the Nile, heading out toward the open sea.

Posidippus 122 ed. Austin and Bastianini, quoted in Athenaeus 13.596c

At verse 4 of this epigram, the adjective sun-khrous can be interpreted as ‘having one's complexion make contact with someone else's complexion’. In describing Dōrikha, this adjective captures the moment when the beautiful courtesan embraces with one arm her lover Kharaxos under the cover of her perfumed shawl while she reaches out with the other arm for yet another sip of wine after having spent a whole night of



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lovmaking that now extends, like some unending aubade, into the light of dawn. The element -khrous in this compound formation sun-khrous comes from the noun khrōs- / khrōt- meaning 'complexion', while the prefix sun- expresses the experience of mutual contact: that is why I translate sun-khrous here as 'skin to skin, complexion making contact with complexion'.

§8. This reference to the complexion of the courtesan who is pictured in the act of making contact with her lover's skin evokes the name by which she will be known forever in the city of Naucratis. The city, as the final wording of the epigram promises, will forever guard safely the name of this woman, keeping it 'just as it is'. And what name is this name? Is it the name that was spoken at the beginning, Dōrikha, or is it a name left unspoken at the ending, which would be Rhodōpis? Such an unspoken name would be signaled by the complexion of this woman, ignited by the skin-to-skin contact of lovemaking with her lover. The unsaid name here, I suggest, would be Rhodōpis, which as I showed in [the post for 2015.07.01](#) means 'she with the rosy looks'.

Sappho's 'fire under the skin'

§9. The question remains, how do 'rosy looks' that radiate from a beautiful woman's face connect with the erotic syntax of body language that pictures skin touching skin in the suggestive wording of the epigram by Posidippus? The answer, I argue, has to do with the fact that the eroticism of the khrōs- / khrōt- 'complexion' is a distinctive feature of Sappho's own poetics. I now show Sappho's words describing sexual arousal as a sudden 'fire under the skin':

λέπτον | δ' αὔτικα χρώι πῦρ ὑπαδεδρόμηκεν

And a delicate |—all of a sudden—fire rushes under my skin [khrōs-].

Sappho Song 31.9–10

It is sex, then, that ignites the complexion, creating its rosy blush. And the erotic syntax of the epigram by Posidippus evokes, I think, the original words of Sappho herself in describing the torrid bodily contact between her 'charming' brother and his beautiful lady love. Thus the words of the epigram, in capturing the embrace of brother and courtesan, will be telling forever the tale of the lady with the rosy complexion—a tale also told by the name of Rhodōpis.



Flaming June, by Frederic Lord Leighton (1830-1896) [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

A tale of a name and the name of the tale

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§10. Such a tale as told in the epigram of Posidippus would have a special meaning in the Greek-speaking city of Naucratis in Egypt. I think that the people of this city, and of all Egypt as well, were meant to understand in the final words of this epigram a veiled reference to the beauty of a woman who channels, as it were, the irresistible sexuality of a most exotic Egyptian queen.

§11. Here I return to my analysis in [the post for 2015.07.01](#) concerning Egyptian variations on a theme embodied in the Greek name Rhodōpis. This theme, as we saw, goes all the way back to a queen named Nitōkris who ruled toward the end of the 6th Dynasty, in the late third millennium BCE. The dating and the naming, as we also saw, originate from the Egyptian historian Manetho, who lived in the third century BCE. In a surviving paraphrase from the work of Manetho, who composed in Greek, we read these further details about Nitōkris the queen:

Νίτωκρις, γεννικωτάτη καὶ εὐμορφωτάτη τῶν κατ' αὐτὴν γενομένη, ξανθὴ τὴν χροιάν, ἣ τὴν τρίτην ἤγειρε πυραμίδα, ἐβασίλευσεν ἔτη ιβ'.

Nitōkris was the most noble and beautiful of all the women of her generation. She was fair [xanthē] in complexion [khroia]. It was she who erected the third pyramid. She ruled for twelve years.

Manetho FGrH 609 F 2 (p. 26) lines 18–21[7]

Once again I translate xanthē here as 'fair', as in the English expression 'fair-skinned', and once again I allow for the alternative translation 'blonde': according to the relevant paraphrase of Manetho by Eusebius in this context, the description of Nitōkris in the surviving Armenian translation of Eusebius' original Greek wording is rendered in Latin as *flava rubris genis* 'blonde with blushing cheeks'. These descriptions of Nitōkris correspond closely to the meaning of the Greek name Rhodōpis, 'the one with the rosy face'—or 'the one with the rosy looks'. A striking point of comparison is the portrayal of the sensuous Beroe, daughter of Aphrodite and Adonis, in the *Dionysiaca* of Nonnus (42.75–78): the cheeks of this nymph are described as 'having rosy looks [rhodoeidea]' (77: ῥοδοειδέα) and showing a natural blush that needs no cosmetics simulating 'the complexion [khrōs-] of a blonde [xanthē]' (76: ξανθόχροϊ κόσμῳ).

§12. In an Egyptian context, to repeat from [the post of 2015.07.01](#), it is unjustifiable to infer that Manetho describes Nitōkris as a blonde with blushing cheeks simply because he thinks that this woman from the 6th Dynasty, dating back to the third millennium BCE, must be identified with a woman named Rhodōpis who dates back only as far as the sixth century. Instead, the appearance of Nitōkris as described by Manetho is a traditional Egyptian theme that becomes a model for describing, many centuries later, the good looks of a courtesan by way of renaming her as Rhodōpis, that is, as the lady with the rosy face.

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Notes

[1] Bierl and Lardinois 2015, *The Newest Sappho*.

[2] Nagy 2015, "A poetics of sisterly affect in the *Brothers Song* and in other songs of *Sappho*."

[3] The editio princeps of this text has been published by Obbink 2014.

[4] Herodotus 2.135.6.

[5] Herodotus 2.134–135.

[6] On the reading [Δ]ωρίχα at line 11 of *Sappho* F 15V, see Yatromanolakis 2007:330–331.

[7] The chronology here is further supported, it seems, by Eratosthenes, who lived in the third/second centuries BCE: see FGrH 610 F1 κβ. See also Dio Cassius 62.6.

Tags: [Herodotus](#), [Posidippus](#), [Rhodopis](#), [Sappho](#)