

**Philip Freeman, *Searching for Sappho. The Lost Songs and World of the First Woman Poet*.** New York and London: W. W. Norton, 2016. Pp. xxvii, 306. ISBN 978-0-393-35382-2l. \$15.95 (pb). Map, 9 illustrations.

Freeman has published a number of volumes for non-specialists on Classical and Celtic topics, including studies of Julius Caesar, Alexander the Great, and St. Patrick. *Searching for Sappho* is similarly directed. “Many admirable books have been written on Sappho by scholars for scholars,” the author explains, “but this is a book for everyone else. I assume no special knowledge of classical history, and certainly no training in ancient Greek, only a desire to learn more about one of the greatest writers who ever lived and her world” (p. xxiv). To that end, Freeman provides general background information relevant to Sappho’s songs, discusses (what he accepts as) the facts about her life, and offers a very readable close translation of the fragments—while conveying throughout a sense of warm appreciation for her work.

The Introduction begins with the Suda’s prosaic entry on Sappho, followed by a lively narrative describing the start of B.P. Grenfell and A.S. Hunt’s long-term excavations at Oxyrhynchus (1896). Their first season culminated propitiously in the discovery of a papyrus fragment with several lines of a previously unknown work by Sappho (P.Oxy. 7, now Sappho fr. 5V), an unexpected find that was followed by many more fragments of Sappho’s oeuvre in later seasons. Photographs of the excavation and of a papyrus fragment (albeit not the one under discussion) enhance the account.

Seven easily-read chapters follow, providing historical context for aspects of Greek culture reflected in Sappho’s work. Topics include childhood, marriage and weddings, family relationships (especially maternal and sibling ones), erotic relationships, the role of gods (primarily Aphrodite in Sappho’s songs and Demeter in Greek culture generally), and the speaker’s perspective on growing old. Acknowledging that we have little external information about specifics of Lesbian society ca. 600 BCE, Freeman draws on information from later Greek sources, especially from classical Athens, on the assumption that women’s circumstances there were largely similar to those in Sappho’s world.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to the topics covered, a focus on (especially choral) song and dance would have been welcome, as these are frequent themes in Sappho’s extant work (e.g. fr. 27, 30, 44, 55, 58, 71, 94, 96, 106, 153, 160) and have generated considerable interest in how her songs were made public—itself a not insignificant aspect of the historical background.

These discussions are rich in ancient evidence and examples. Freeman frequently cites not only Sappho but other Greek sources, especially Homeric epic;

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<sup>1</sup> For a critique of this approach, see André Lardinois in the introduction to Diane J. Rayor and André Lardinois, *Sappho: A New Translation of the Complete Works* (Cambridge UP 2014), pp. 12-14

visual images, most of them from fifth-century vase paintings, round out the text. Although the essays contain little that is original, standard information is presented knowledgably and engagingly, without obfuscation or condescension. Especially noteworthy is the author's balanced discussion of same-sex female relationships—a continuing source of interest in modern scholarship on Sappho. While emphasizing the gap between ancient and modern concepts of sexual orientation, he straightforwardly concludes that a number of passages clearly refer to female homoeroticism (e.g. fr. 94, pp. 124–7).

It is a more problematic undertaking to write about Sappho's life. The commonly-accepted outline is presented in brief compass (p. xvii): born into an aristocratic trading family on Lesbos, she was temporarily exiled to Sicily, married, bore a daughter, and died an old woman. Freeman acknowledges that each of these "facts" has been vigorously debated—they are based on the dubious ancient biographical tradition, a matter that should receive more attention—but *faute de mieux* he accepts them as the basis of his reconstruction, and uses them to inform his interpretation of a number of fragments.

A short Epilogue deals with Sappho's influence and reception among ancient writers. Freeman notes in particular her significance for subsequent Greek female poets and for Roman Sulpicia, and her reputation among and influence on male Latin poets such as Catullus, Horace, and Ovid. He notes Sappho's varied reception in antiquity, not only as Plato's "tenth Muse" but as a target for Athenian comedy, concludes with a brief nod to her rediscovery by classical scholars in early modern Europe—and ends by coming full circle to the discoveries at Oxyrhynchus.

The author's translation of the extant fragments will be not only a convenience for his readers, but a pleasure as well. While not attaining the high poetic level of some other recent renderings—especially Anne Carson's *If Not, Winter* (New York, 2002) and Diane J. Rayor's 2014 translation (with André Lardinois; mentioned above, n. 1)—Freeman's version reads smoothly while staying close to the original. A number of the longer fragments are discussed at appropriate points elsewhere in the book; in addition, the endnotes include a short note on every fragment, sometimes only to give its provenance (information that may be puzzling to a general reader). Freeman's comments fall somewhere between Carson's elegant but sparse and allusive remarks, and the more scholarly yet accessible notes on a number of fragments in Rayor and Lardinois.

A six-page bibliography ("Further Reading") lists books and articles that range from general works on Greek history and religion to translations of Sappho to collections of scholarship on her work. Many of the works listed here are mentioned in the endnotes, but subdividing the bibliography by topics would have made it more helpful to readers who wish to pursue a specific topic.

A number of classicists (myself included) will wish that this engaging book dealt in greater depth with some of the questions that so animate modern Sappho scholarship. For example, how and in what context(s) did she present her songs? What does the first-person voice in her work represent, and what is the speaker's relationship to her addressees? While some scholars tend to see Sappho's "I" as a persona expressing sentiments—even passionate sentiments—deemed appropriate to a social or ritual role that lies behind a song, Freeman is convinced that the deep emotions expressed sound so genuine and impassioned that they must be giving voice to Sappho's own individual experience and feelings. This conclusion, asserted rather than argued, is closely related to a less debatable point that he makes several times: Sappho's songs are widely accessible even to a modern audience. (Cf. a comment on fr. 31: "Anyone who has ever been madly overcome by passion will recognize the symptoms expressed so poignantly by Sappho" [p. 123].)

On the whole Freeman's book can be deemed highly successful in fulfilling its stated purpose: it provides non-specialist readers with historical background for many aspects of Sappho's work, right down to the discovery of the "Brother's Poem" in 2014, along with appreciative comments to guide (and surely to encourage) their reading of it.

DEBORAH BOEDEKER  
BROWN UNIVERSITY