

In the Footsteps of the Traveling Artists, Souma, Sappho and Azra

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In Leptopoda, a village north of Chios (Greece), a festival dedicated to *souma*, a drink made by hand from figs, is held every year. With a glass of *souma* in one hand and the poems of Sappho translated into Turkish by Azra Erhat in the other, we can fantasize and dream about the Mediterranean from an armchair. Erhat, a writer, archaeologist, classical philologist and humanist, translated the Greek classics into Turkish and, for the first time, brought Turkish readers closer to the great masterpieces of Antiquity. In an article written by Cengiz Bektaş, Erhat's friend and colleague, he explains that he was never able to take her to Lesbos, Sappho's homeland, because at that time there was no way to cross the sea to the other shore and reach the Greek islands from Turkey. Thus, Erhat carried out all the research without being able to visit the island. Even so, in his translations it is clear that, beyond physical presence, literature is capable of bringing us closer together; it allows us to get to know and recognize each other in our shared aspects and in our mutual imaginary.

The north of Chios is mountainous compared to the south. The peak of Mount Pelinaios reaches 1,297 meters. Hidden within this mountainous, volcanic landscape are many villages. As everyone knows, you have to drive slowly on that thin, sometimes cliff-edge road. And, along the way, there are little chapels with candles inside reminding you, miniature models to commemorate people who died in an accident.

A summer's day. I drive my car to the village of Leptopoda, where today the *souma* festival is being held. I also take a couple of empty plastic 1.5 liter water bottles with me. My aim is to visit, see the village and the festival, and get some winter *souma*. The road climbs, winding like a snake. I read somewhere that the word *pelianabas* means great snake in Phoenician. There are certainly snakes in the mountain.

There is a feast in the village that day; people have flocked from the neighboring villages. Maybe two kilometers before I get there, I park my car at the side of the road like everyone else. The only way to reach it is on foot. Leptopoda is a place that we can call a castle village, with small stone houses leaning against each other and streets that are too narrow for cars to pass. Now, about 20-30 inhabitants live in the village. But today there are maybe 500 people or more, singing in unison, dancing in the streets and drinking *souma*.

Souma is a traditional drink made by hand from figs, which are collected in August and allowed to dry. Then they are put into large barrels with water and yeast and left to ferment. Next, the figs are boiled in a distiller to produce the *souma*. There are no *souma*

factories or companies producing it, only some private individuals. If they decide to sell some, they do so in unlabeled bottles.

Mixing my very poor Greek with my English, I point to my empty bottles and pronounce the magic word: “*souma*?” The man with a handkerchief around his head, and smiling eyes, immediately understands my wish and gestures me to follow him. He pushes open a door under the stairs, revealing blue barrels all over the place inside, and the smell of *souma* permeating the chamber. Is it only the chamber or does the man smell of *souma* too? He dips the ladle into a barrel and fills my bottles. My shopping bag is full enough for a whole winter. I do not intend to touch a drop of it, I will return home on that snake-curved road. The sun is above me. I am almost at the northernmost point of Chios; I squint and look at the horizon. The ghostly silhouette of the island of Lesbos appears in the haze. Lesbos is the island of Sappho (612-570 BC), the Ancient Greek lyric poetess, tenth muse, and priestess of the cult of Aphrodite. However, only one poem is accepted as complete today, “Ode to Aphrodite”, which has twenty-eight lines, arranged in seven Sapphic stanzas. Sappho’s poetry dates back to the 5th century BC but when lyric poetry is mentioned today she is the first poetess that comes to mind, the first to be read, interpreted, researched and explained. For me, it is poetry to dream and think about.

I arrive home and put one of my *souma* bottles in the fridge. A cold shower, the dust and sweat on my body flowing away. I put on a clean, light linen shirt and shorts and head to the library. A book, that book: *Conversations and Poetry on Sappho*, by Azra Erhat and Cengiz Bektaş.¹ This book is important to me. It has not been reprinted since 1978 and I found

this copy in a second hand bookstore. The pages are yellowed; I have to be gentle when I turn them as some are torn. The letters are small, the line spacing narrow, and the typography from another era. It dates from a time in 1978 in Turkey when paper for printing books was scarce. A constant crisis, always a crisis, surrounding the Mediterranean for ages.

Since that *mare medi terra* is explained as *mediterraneus* in Latin, meaning “in the middle of the earth” or “inside the pieces of land”, it started to indicate the sea, which until then had indicated the land. According to Louis-Jean Calvet, “The Mediterranean basin is the point of encounter and conflict between civilizations and empires, almost a generation of borrowing and imitation, an accumulator of language fragments whose energies are blown from one language to another, and I think a lexical meeting point.”²

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I pour a glass of my *souma* from the fridge and settle into my bamboo chair. I sip the cold fig water of life and begin to read the poem “Ode to Aphrodite”. As our subject is poetry, its translation, language, Sappho and her time, perhaps at this stage it would be useful to tell you a little bit about Azra Erhat and Cengiz Bektaş.

Azra Erhat talks about how patiently Cengiz Bektaş translated Sappho at the beginning of the book. Before Cengiz Bektaş sat down, he would learn the Greek alphabet and meter patterns, and then he and Azra Erhat would sit opposite each other and do a four-month study.

1. This fictional dialog is inspired by *Sappho Şiirler, Çeviri ve üzerine Konuşmalar*, translated by Azra Erhat and Cengiz Bektaş, Istanbul, Cem Yayınevi, 1978.

2. Louis-Jean Calvet, *La Méditerranée: Mer de nos langues*, Paris, CNRS Éditions, 2016.

For their translation, they read the Greek, German, French, English and Turkish translations of each poem and took into account the number of syllables and meter patterns when translating each Greek word into Turkish. As you can see, translation is a very fine art. Azra Erhat created the most faithful translations from Ancient Greek into Turkish of Homer's *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* and Hesiod's *Theogony* and *Works and Days*. Those translations are the first point of reference for reading and research in Turkey. She devoted a large part of her life to studies on humanism and ancient Greek literature. In an article written by Cengiz Bektaş on Lesbos, he mentions that she has never been to the island as he could not take her. At that time, there were no direct crossings to the islands between Turkey and Greece. Azra Erhat conducted her whole life's research from the opposite shore without visiting the island. Sappho's poems left something for the whole world, which would inspire future generations from that island. She was the main representative of lyric poetry that would be an inspiration for future generations, individual free thoughts, sexual preferences and living with love. Over the years, people on both sides have only looked at each other because of various political conflicts. However, for two years, due to Covid-19, people have not been able to cross the border from Greece or Turkey, either to the islands or to Anatolia. But even though we cannot physically go to a place, ideas, conversations and dreams pave the way for us.

I look up as I sip my *souma* and read Sappho's poetry from my bamboo chair.

*Here, you take a garland now also, Cypris:
gracefully in goblets of gold mix nectar
with the gladness of our festivities and
pour the libation*

[LP 2]⁵

I look at Azra next to me and ask:

"What did Sappho give us?"

"It seems to me that poets took as much from Sappho as they did from Homer. There are three major phases in Greek poetry: the first is Homer's "epic poem", the second the "lyric poetry" phase, at the apex of which we find Sappho, and the third phase is "tragedy". Western poetry has been heavily influenced by all three genres. Just as it is not possible to think of today's theater without the comedy and tragedy of that era, it is not possible to think of lyric poetry without Sappho."

"If you had to assess Sappho's era, what would you say?"

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"We are in the 7th and 6th centuries BC. In this period, humanity was going through changes in terms of how it saw life. These changes may seem normal or obvious to us today, but they were revolutionary for that era. This was the period when individual awareness was born, consciously creating a new life, a new way of thinking, suitable for itself and its new needs. For example, Homer's characters do not criticize tradition, they aim to be a shining example of the rules it determined. They do not place great value on human life and their own lives. However, the individualistic worldview attaches importance to human life. Seeing one's personality as separate, though linked to a whole, gives birth to individualism, personal consciousness, and Greek lyric poetry. Sappho is the first person who experiences the need to express her own feelings and, realizing this, she takes the first step towards revealing hu-

man sensations openly. By finding the human emotional universe and expressing its truth, she symbolizes the individualism of the period and the region; she reflects the period in the most effective manner. . . .”

“I think, now, we should say something about Sappho’s personality and the poet tradition of that period. Greek antiquity says things directly, not only in Sappho’s case, but also with Homer and later Hesiod. No one hesitates to reveal their sensual, sexual and political life as they are. What was this society?”

“Sappho is not an outsider. Sappho is part of a religion, a cult. . . . She is associated with the cult of Aphrodite and this cult gives her complete freedom.”

“How?”

“She is at the service of the goddess of love and this gives individuals freedom to express themselves. She expresses her feelings to girls and women, and does so with the individual’s full freedom of expression. We should regard Sappho with a certain appreciation. Sappho had a poetry school, or rather a circle of girls and women. These included Anactoria, Gyrinna and Atthis, coexisting and living together. This was a circle, a circle of poets. Just as there was a tradition of the Rhapsodoi in Homer,⁴ there was also a circle of poets here.”

“Throughout the ages, Sappho’s sexual preferences have been written about and drawn more than her poetry. What do you think about that?”

“To understand Sappho, it is necessary to look at early Greek society. In this first age, women’s circles and men’s circles were different. Marriage and having children was natural, but there was no connection of thought or spiritual exchange between men and women at that time. In later ages, a woman would be un-

thinkable in the circle of a Socrates or a Plato. Men were free; and their lives and exchanges of thought are not as we would understand them today. There is a woman in Plato’s *Feast*, but she is a wise person. Apart from that, women do not sit and talk to men in feasts. In Plato’s Athens, women were not present at men’s feasts. In order to understand the depth and quality of Sappho’s relationships with girls, one must consider this social reality. A complete exchange, a completely human exchange, was established between Sappho and the girls around her. But whether it has a sexual aspect or not is none of my business.”

“When I look at most of Sappho’s poems, I partially agree with this idea. There is no clear evidence of this sexual preference. Rather, a relationship of beauty and unlimited love emerges. It may have been misinterpreted over the ages and turned into a myth but let us put that aside. So why are those poems called lyric?”

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“At that time those poems were sung with a lyre. Accompanied by the lyre and sung by one person. When it comes to lyric, the content of the poem is not primordial. Sappho’s script is based on the principle of meter, without considering content. In Greek, when we say lyric we understand something different today. The concept has shifted from form to content, to substance. In this respect, Sappho is even more important. Indeed, it is the beginning of lyric poetry, lyricism in its cur-

4. Rhapsodoi: a circle of poets who believe they are the descendants of Homer and tell his poetry from generation to generation.

rent sense. Sappho is the transition from epic to lyricism. She does not write descriptive poetry. However, the epic is a story in a way; it describes a process, an event. Sappho was not telling a story but expressing a feeling. In that sense, she had to establish a language of her own. We see that this language comes from a language of epic and is a transition to the language of tragedy.”

“When describing nature, the details around her, clothes, games, ceremonies and

elements of daily life, Sappho seems to describe them through their reflections on her.”

“Sure,” says a woman’s voice from the next room. Holding two cold glasses of *souma*, Sappho glides through the room, gives us the icy treats, curls up on the sofa next to Azra, and sits down. She takes her lyre and...

*Now, I shall sing these songs
beautifully
for my companions.*