

## Sappho the "Numinous"

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In the opening year of this century Friedrich Solmsen's father Felix accepted ψαφαρός as providing a valid etymon for "Sappho," and that reading of the name's significance has since then held the field.<sup>1</sup> After nine intervening decades of progress in philology and linguistics, it may be thought no want of *pietas* towards Solmsen *père* if this brief contribution to a memorial volume in honor of Solmsen *fils* introduces a radically new interpretation of a name immortalized by the Muses' grace.

In any search for the meaning of "Sappho," one likely to have appealed to a prominent family of archaic Lesbos, Oswald Szemerényi's account of the lexical cluster including σαφής seemed upon publication to hold a valuable clue.<sup>2</sup> As Jacobsohn and Leumann had shown, the development of this adjective started from the adverb σάφα, transformed first to σαφέως, and reaching the full status of σαφής by the fifth century.<sup>3</sup> But the existence of σάφα itself remained unaccounted for until Szemerényi proposed to add it to the ever growing number of Greek words traceable to an Anatolian origin, a number that had already reached half a hundred in Günter Neumann's researches on the *Weiterleben* of Hittite and Luwian in the Greek lexicon.<sup>4</sup> Szemerényi's proposed source is the Hittite adjective *šuppi-* whose meaning he gives as "pure," "clear" and whose adverbial form would therefore be *šuppa* from *šuppaya*. The name of the greatest Hittite ruler, Suppiluliuma, which may be rendered "Clearwell" ("Pure-spring"), includes *šuppi-* in fact as its initial element. That the Hittite word means specifically "ritually pure" follows not only from the ritual context of its

<sup>1</sup> The etymology, which would suggest that the poet had been remarkable—even in her infancy—for rough, dry hair or skin, was first advanced in *Rh. Mus.* 56 (1901) 502 and n. 1; finally maintained in his posthumously published *Indogermanische Eigennamen als Spiegel der Kulturgeschichte*, edited by Ernst Fraenkel (Heidelberg 1922) 131.

<sup>2</sup> O. Szemerényi, "The Origins of the Greek Lexicon: *Ex Oriente Lux*," *JHS* 94 (1974) 154.

<sup>3</sup> H. Jacobsohn, *Philologus* 67 (1908) 494; M. Leumann, *Homerische Wörter* (Basel 1950) 112 n. 77.

<sup>4</sup> G. Neumann, *Untersuchungen zum Weiterleben hethitischen und luwischen Sprachgutes in hellenistischer und römischer Zeit* (Wiesbaden 1961).

regular uses, but from the coexistence of Hittite *parku-* for "physically clean."

Whatever hesitations on the semantic side one may feel at passing from the sacred sphere of *šuppi-* in Hittite to the profane of *σάφα* in Greek—and they need not prove insuperable, especially where language-loans are involved—, at least the case for affiliating *Σάπφω* to *šuppi-* would be in no way weakened by the religious associations of the parent word. For, after all, the largest single class of Greek personal names is comprised of the theophoric names—Apollodorus, Hecataeus, Diogenes—, to which must be added all those from common nouns of sacral import—Hagnon, Hieronymus, Semne. In the specific context of Sappho's naming, one must not construe the evidence of her devotion to Aphrodite's cult as if she were demonstrably a priestess or born into a priestly family.<sup>5</sup>

At the same time, when Alcaeus addressed to Sappho that remarkable invocation (which is what his famous pentapody, *ἰόπλοκ' ἄγνα μελλιχόμεϊδε Σάπφοι*, amounts to), one might be tempted to wonder whether he was not perhaps including *ἄγνα*, "revered," as exegetical commentary on her name.<sup>6</sup> Such play with words, of course, presumes a control of the relevant linguistic items by the speaker, not necessarily by his audience. Here it is important to recognize that, as fellow poets on high archaic Lesbos, Sappho and Alcaeus were heirs of a culture which had survived the Bronze Age's end possibly intact, like that of another offshore island, Euboea, whose now revealed prosperity none would have guessed a generation ago.<sup>7</sup> Lazpas, whose identity with Lesbos has been given a renewed measure of backing by Mellink and Güterbock, could furnish the Hittite king a healing cult-image already in the late fourteenth century B.C.;<sup>8</sup> in any case, Homer's references to well-developed Lesbos (*ἔϋκτίμενος*) are borne out by the rich finds in Bronze-Age levels there.<sup>9</sup>

So much for possible Hittite connections of Lesbos and its certain pre-Classical foundations. But the island had early and long-continuing links with Iron-Age Lydia as well, so that we should at least note the possibility

<sup>5</sup> W. Burkert, *Greek Religion*, transl. by J. Raffan (Cambridge, MA 1985) 187: "It is Sappho who speaks most naturally of meeting with gods, as if from her own experience; Aphrodite . . .".

<sup>6</sup> It is satisfying to note that Bruno Gentili, in an article on "La veneranda Saffo," *QUCC* 2 (1966) 37–62, argued—quite independently of etymological considerations—for the archaic connotation of Alcaeus' *ἄγνα* applied to Sappho. At the same time, one may recall D. A. Campbell's observation that Alcaeus here "speaks of her in terms fit for a divinity." Not just any deity, I submit, but Aphrodite, as word-by-word analysis would bear out.

<sup>7</sup> *Lefkandi I* (London 1979).

<sup>8</sup> H. Güterbock and M. Mellink in *Troy and the Trojan War: A Symposium Held at Bryn Mawr College*, October 1984, ed. M. Mellink (Bryn Mawr, PA 1986) 41 and 98, respectively; cf. F. Comelius, *Geschichte der Hethiter* (Darmstadt 1973) 218: "Es besteht kein Grund, dies Land [sc. Lazpa] anderswo als auf der Insel Lesbos zu suchen."

<sup>9</sup> W. Lamb, *Excavations at Thermi in Lesbos* (Cambridge 1936).

that a name ultimately traceable in the Hittite lexicon could have reached Sappho through her family's commercial or other ties with Lydia,<sup>10</sup> an Iron-Age state whose language preserved a dialect of Anatolian Indo-European.<sup>11</sup> On this view we could compare the naming of Sappho with that of the Kroisos who was commemorated by a late archaic *kouros* found at Anavysos in Attica.

Yet, granted that a cultural and linguistic context in which Sappho could have received a name of eventually Hittite origin was present, will the derivation of Sappho from *šuppi-* really bear scrutiny, formally and in detail? Here the signals must be termed mixed. As for the initial phoneme of "Sappho" at least, the correspondence seems exact; the initial sound in *šuppi-* is regularly thought to be the sibilant *sh*, and Günther Zuntz<sup>12</sup> has cogently demonstrated that the initial Ψ wherever the MSS preserve instances of Sappho using her own name are due to later misunderstanding of a letter-form current in several Greek epichoric alphabets.<sup>13</sup> Sappho would have intended it to represent the double-sigma sound in θάλασσα, Παρνασσός and those other shibboleths of pre-Greek speech. Zuntz traces the letter-form to the character in the Linear A and B scripts which is transliterated *se*, and he may well be right. What cannot be mistaken is his point that the metrics of the Sapphic pentapody in which Alcaeus invokes Sappho by name tells absolutely against a psi-sound as the original initial in "Sappho." Curiously enough, the MSS of Hephæstion, where alone Alcaeus' verse is attested, all preserve before Σάπφοι a supposedly extra sigma, a small mark of her fellow poet's respect for Sappho's own incomparable aural sensibilities . . . or a sign that Alcaeus too pronounced it "Shappho."

But to turn to the apparent development from a *u-* to an *a-*sound between *šuppi-* and σάφα or "Sappho," Szemerényi indeed calls this change characteristic of Luwian, a sister tongue that increasingly affected Hittite itself. But Sapalulme, which he cited as a Late Luwian form of Suppiluliuma, is actually attested only in an Assyrian document, while Szemerényi's other example of the change (Greek Πανύασσις versus Luwian Puna/ṽwassis) seems to instance a *metathesis* of the vowels in Puna- to Πανυ-, instead. Moreover, Oettinger has made it highly probable that the Luwian verb *šappa-* is not related to our Hittite adjective *šuppi-* at

<sup>10</sup> A. J. Podlecki, *The Early Greek Poets and their Times* (Vancouver 1984) 82. Meanwhile, to P. Green, *The Shadow of the Parthenon* (Berkeley 1972) 170, the name of Sappho's father, Scamandronymus, points to his Asian origin from the Troad.

<sup>11</sup> According to my colleague Craig Melchert, due caution about affiliating Lydian more closely to Hittite than to Luwian is still in order. His good linguistic counsel must not go unacknowledged.

<sup>12</sup> "On the Etymology of the Name Sappho," *Mus. Helv.* 8 (1951) 12-35, esp. 21 n. 62.

<sup>13</sup> It was a similar misunderstanding of the Middle English thorn, whose shape approached a y-form, that led to the quaint error, "Ye Olde Tea Shoppe."

all.<sup>14</sup> In fact, the Luwian dialects, though closely akin to Hittite, seem never to use *šuppi-* for the concept “ritually pure,” but another word (*kummai-*) altogether different.

That raw datum may be fatal to my initial thesis, especially if Calvert Watkins is right that the language of the Late Bronze Age Trojans and Lesbians was Luwian.<sup>15</sup> Yet I hope that it will prove possible to build on the groundwork so far laid down. One may ask whether Zuntz’s own conclusion, reached at mid-century after wide-ranging, meticulous inquiry, that Sappho is an Asianic name may not rather point the way. He himself proposed as source the name *Šapōn* designating the holy mountain north of Ugarit together with its god. Though the Semites, borrowing from their Asianic predecessors in the land, called this mountain and its indwelling deity *Šapōn*, it was the same landmark that the Greeks knew as Mt. Kasios. Awkwardly for Zuntz’s thesis, however, the name *Šapōn* seems to have entered the roster of Greek myths as *Τυφῶν*.<sup>16</sup>

For my own derivation of the name Sappho, therefore, I proffer another Asianic personal name that appears repeatedly in the Hittite texts, most often in the form *Šapalli-*, though variants containing as initial syllables *Za-* and *Ta-* are assumed by Güterbock to be the same word. All of these may be confidently linked to the name *Ashapala* (once *Ashupala*) held by half a dozen priests, scribes, and others, and listed in Laroche’s great Hittite prosopography.<sup>17</sup> Even if the shorter forms should be kept distinct and are not simply variants more fully assimilated (by cluster-reduction) to Hittite, the *u/a* variation points to the foreign origin of the name. That origin should be specifically Hattian, the tongue of that people who exerted the profoundest influence on the early Hittites in the cultural and particularly in the religious domain. Now not even Kammenhuber or Schuster professes to know more than the rudiments of this ancient Anatolian language and culture, but its word for “god” is well established.<sup>18</sup> It is transliterated (*a*)*šhap*, *šhab*, or *šhav-* depending on its immediate phonetic environment. Thus *Šapalli-/Ashapala* with suffix of *appurtenance* in Hittite (*-(a)la-*) and “Luwian” (*-alli-*) form, respectively, should mean “devoted to the god,” “belonging to the god,” or the like.

If, then, as I am assuming, this name of centuries-long currency and cross-cultural spread in Asia Minor has issued in our “Sappho,” it has done so by dint of typical Greek shortening into a *Kurzname*. The spelling *-πφ-*,

<sup>14</sup> N. Oettinger, *Das Stammbildung des hethitischen Verbums* (Nuremberg 1979) 383.

<sup>15</sup> “The Language of the Trojans,” in *Troy and the Trojan War* (above, note 8) 45–62.

<sup>16</sup> See J. de Sauvignac, “Le sens du terme *Šapōn*,” *Ugarit-Forschungen* 16 (1984) 274

for relevant bibliography.

<sup>17</sup> E. Laroche, *Les noms des hittites* (Paris 1966) 44, no. 162.

<sup>18</sup> H.-S. Schuster, *Die hattisch-hethitischen Bilinguen* I (Leiden 1974) 79–81, 1. 1. 11–14, where, too, the presence of A- in the Hittite personal name *Ašhapala* is charged to scribes unable to write the consonant cluster *sh-* initially in cuneiform.

however, shows not only the usual expressive gemination, as in  $\Xi\epsilon\nu\omicron\kappa\kappa\acute{\omega}$  with double kappa from  $\Xi\epsilon\nu\acute{\omicron}\kappa\rho\iota\tau\omicron\varsigma$  or  $\Nu\kappa\omicron\tau\tau\acute{\omega}$  with double tau from  $\Nu\kappa\acute{\omicron}\tau\iota\mu\omicron\varsigma$ , but also the aspirated form of the final labial of the base on which "Sappho" was built. Thus, while misled by the poet's apparent spelling of her own name with initial  $\Psi$ , Felix Solmsen was entirely justified in deriving "Sappho" from a base in final phi ( $\psi\alpha\phi$ -). Schwyzer, indeed, cites this case along with others including "Pitthon" from  $\pi\acute{\iota}\theta\eta\kappa\omicron\varsigma$ .<sup>19</sup> It only remains to note that though the orthography of the Hittite scribes does not always enable us to be certain either of the voicedness or of the aspiration of their consonants, the alternation of the labial in (a)  $\check{s}h\acute{a}b/\check{s}h\acute{a}p$  with a  $\nu$ -sound in certain case forms led Kammenhuber to distinguish it from a straight unvoiced  $p$  and in fact to represent it phonetically as  $f$ : [ $\check{s}h\acute{a}f$ ].<sup>20</sup>

With that detail I hope to have accounted linguistically for the earlier history of the name in question—which is all, essentially, that an etymologist aims to accomplish. Of course, he may hope that in the process he has traced for the relevant name a plausible evolution in terms of cultural context. That has meant, in the present instance, interpreting "Sappho" approximately as "Numinous" and tracing it from an early Hattian-derived personal name for one placed under the aegis of the gods, through variants among Anatolian Indo-European dialects, down to the late seventh century. Then it was that the name Sappho, retaining still—I submit—something of its original religious aura, caught the fancy of Aeolian aristocrats wondering what to call a girl-child small, dark, and ever mysterious.

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<sup>19</sup> E. Schwyzer, *Griechische Grammatik I* (Munich 1939) 636–37.

<sup>20</sup> A. Kammenhuber, *Hethitisch, Palaisch, Luwisch, Hieroglyphenluwisch und Hattisch, Münchener Studien zur Sprachwissenschaft, Beiheft 4* (Munich 1969) 97, 99.

