



Research project

The Aeolic lyric as ritual performance: a study of ritual practices and society structures in the *corpus* of Sappho and Alcaeus

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to analyze all the poems of Sappho and Alcaeus from a historical-anthropological perspective, which allows for a comparison of textual elements with anthropological themes related to the notion of identity within a social group and ritual practice.

Within the poems of the Aeolian poets, the phases of ritual actions will be examined, which are essential elements for understanding the dynamics of social life among the *γένη* of Mytilene between the 7th and 6th centuries BCE. In fact, the compositions contain references to various communities reconstructible for Lesbos in constant dialogue with each other. Starting from the study of the ritual component, the relationships between these social groups can be defined in two ways: as conflicting relationships, involving different *γένη* (or even members of the same *γένος*); alternatively, as relationships of peaceful coexistence within pan-Lesbian occasions, particularly those related to the sanctuary of Messon.

The relationships constructed among different social groups and within the same *γένος* are based on the adherence of their members to the worship of one or more deities and, consequently, on common ritual practice: in the sanctuary of Messon, all Lesbians meet and celebrate the cult dedicated to the triad composed of Hera, Zeus and Dionysus; in the local context of Mytilene, the women in Sappho's circle perform ritual actions in honor of Aphrodite, and even the entire *γένος* of the poet recognizes the goddess as its protector. Therefore, the awareness of belonging to a social group and of opposing other *γένη* necessarily reflects in the dimension of the ritual, particularly in the shared participation in festive occasions and in the performance of ritual actions. In this analytical perspective, the performative aspect of archaic lyric poetry is emphasized.

OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGIES

The research aims to study Aeolian poetry as a form of expression of collective ritual performances, executed by a specific social group, in order to define the various contexts in which the poems were sung: through performance, belonging to a group, crisis between *γένη*, rupture and repair of conflicts, even within the same social group, could be expressed.

The lyrical production of Sappho and Alcaeus gathers a repertoire of Lesbian myths and rituals that were reproduced through poetic performance¹, which must be placed in the socio-cultural context in which it was produced and represented. Therefore, it is necessary to adopt a method that involves studying the text within its own context, corresponding to a specific place and time. The methodology I intend to follow

¹See Nagy 2007a, p. 24.



during the research is the historical-anthropological one²; the contribution of the category of social drama as a driver of a ritual performance will also be very useful³, and importance will be attributed to body techniques and gestures emerging from the texts⁴, in order to investigate the relationship of the Aeolian poets with ritual and the social context in which they were inserted.

STATE OF THE ART

Within such a field of investigation, it is essential to value the centrality of the text and the philological skills necessary for its reconstruction, understanding and interpretation. The poems of the Aeolian poets are undoubtedly among the most problematic texts in Greek literature, due to the limited number of fragments that have come down to us and the reconstruction difficulties faced by philologists and commentators.

The critical edition of reference for the *corpus* of both poets has been for several decades – and partly still is – that of Eva-Maria Voigt from 1971.

As for the Sapphic *corpus*, a critical-textual, exegetical and historical-literary fine-tuning has been provided in recent times by Camillo Neri⁵. Neri's edition gathers all the texts with critical apparatus, testimonies about the life and poetic activity of Sappho, translation and a very detailed commentary on the poems. The *editio maior* takes into account recent papyrus acquisitions, which I intend to valorize during the research: I refer to the "new" fragments from Cologne⁶ and the "very new" ones from London and Oklahoma City⁷, in particular the so-called "Brothers' Poem" and the "Kypris Poem," which have enriched the knowledge of the poet's figure and her family, as well as her poetic production.

Since the second half of the twentieth century, especially from the 1980s and 1990s, there has been a need to read and study lyric poetry within the historical and socio-cultural contexts that produced it. Even with reference to Aeolian poetry, the context emerges as an essential element for understanding and interpreting the texts, therefore philological analysis is accompanied by studies on the history and archaeology of archaic Lesbos⁸, on the aristocratic social environments in which the poets and their γένη were inserted⁹, on Greek religion and on ritual practices traceable in the poems of Sappho and Alcaeus¹⁰.

In the field of research related to Greek lyrical production and its relationship with performance, a very significant contribution is provided by Bruno Gentili in 1984, in *Poesia e pubblico nella Grecia antica. Da Omero al V secolo*. In this work, the interest in lyric poetry as "performance" emerges, destined for an audience and represented through a performance inserted in a specific historical, political and social context.

I believe that in the studies' background on Aeolian poetry, there is a lack of in-depth research that allows investigating the relationship between the production of Sappho and Alcaeus and ritual. Various aspects of this poetry have been examined in separate contributions, but it is necessary for the philological and

²See Gernet 1968, Di Donato 1990, Di Donato 2013.

³See Turner 1993, Schechner 2013.

⁴See Mauss 1991, pp. 385-409, Jousse 2022 (It. tr.).

⁵See Neri 2021.

⁶See *P. Köln* 429 in Gronewald-Daniel 2004a-b.

⁷See *P. Sapph. Obbink* in Obbink 2014a and *P.G.C.* inv. 105 in Burris-Fish-Obbink 2014.

⁸See Labarre 1994 and 1996, Spencer 1995 and 2000.

⁹See Aloni 1983, Caciagli 2011.

¹⁰See Schlesier 1991, Pirenne-Delforge 1994, Scullion 1994, Polignac 1997 and 2009, Pirenne-Delforge – Prescendi 2011, Brulé 2012, Pirenne-Delforge – Pironi 2014 and 2016, Parker 2017, Bremmer 2019.



historical-anthropological components to interact together to achieve original results. The research I intend to carry out, in fact, foresees the synergy between a rigorous philological analysis and the application of the historical-anthropological method: the connection between expression forms, represented by the texts, and society structures, which are reflected in ritual practice, will provide new tools for the interpretation of the poems and for the reconstruction of the social context in which the members of the aristocratic γένη of Mytilene acted in archaic times.

PROJECT DEVELOPMENT

During the research, the work will be divided into four phases. Firstly, attention will be focused on the philologically rigorous analysis and cataloging of the fragments of the poets' *corpus*, from which the elements of worship and ritual actions performed within the compositions will be considered. For each fragment, a thorough systematic bibliographic review is planned to lay the necessary groundwork for the subsequent analysis of the same poems from a historical-anthropological perspective.

In the second and third phases, the sections of the compositions of Sappho and Alcaeus in which ritual actions performed in the context of Mytilene – or, more generally, the island of Lesbos – between the 7th and 6th centuries BCE are mentioned or described will be the subject of in-depth study. In these phases, useful material will be progressively collected and organized for writing the thesis, to which the last period of work will be dedicated: the results of the research will be examined and discussed in the paper. Regarding the Sapphic *corpus*, in most of the poems ritual practices are identified as collective rites performed by the group of women to which Sappho belongs or by the wider γένος of the poet; in the case of Alcaeus, ritual actions are often embedded in the symposium context, involving members of the Alcaean drinking group or opposing factions.

In such circumstances, the social significance of the rites will be considered from a historical-anthropological perspective, understood as a particularly dramatic attempt to subject a certain part of life to orderly control, in a prescribed place and time¹¹. This perspective allows for the study and reception of the lyric poetry of Alcaeus and Sappho as ritual performance, expressing the various phases that constitute a social drama. According to Turner's model, this category involves a moment of rupture, a period of crisis among the parties involved, followed by a reparative action and finally the reintegration of the group into the social context, or alternatively, a schism. Turner formulated his theory by analyzing cultural and ritual phenomena typical of civilizations contemporary to him, a theory later developed by other scholars. However, I believe that the category of social drama can be effectively applied to an ancient context, such as that of archaic Lesbos, in order to establish a productive comparison between historical-social, political and religious structures of a distant past and realities closer to contemporaneity.

The phase of repairing a social drama, in particular, can be accomplished through the representation of a public rite as a performance, expressed by the poets' compositions. This ritual practice may aim to strengthen the identity of the social group and its internal cohesion, to pit one's own group against others or to gather multiple social groups, even from different locations in Lesbos, in common ritual occasions.

I would like to refer here to some case studies that I will delve into during the research. In the "Brothers' Hymn," Sappho asks to be sent to invoke Queen Hera so that the goddess may grant that Carasso, the poet's brother, returns to Mytilene with a laden ship. The context in which this hymn is placed is ritualistic: a group is involved, referenced by the plural personal pronoun ἄμμες in line 13 and line 21, and Sappho

¹¹See Turner 1993, p. 175.



addresses an interlocutor whose identity could be subject to various hypotheses. The prayer expresses the will of Sappho's γένοϛ members and could find its realization in fragment 17 V. within the pan-Lesbian context of the sanctuary of Messon, where the poet's social group interacts with other communities of Lesbos. Additionally, two other Sapphic hymns, fragment 5 V. and fragment 15 V., are likely connected to Carasso's affairs. The cited fragments could represent different phases - hence different performances - inserted within the same ritual framework: particularly, the reparative action could be represented by the rites practiced at Messon, where the members of the γένοϛ strengthened their bonds and interacted with other Lesbian social groups.

Alcaeus refers to a collective female ritual in fragment 130b V.: lines 17-20 describe the performance of an annual sacred cry by Lesbian women, presumably still within the context of the sanctuary of Messon, the location where the poet is in exile. It is a female ritual in which perhaps the participation, at least passively, of men was not excluded. Messon sanctuary was indeed a place of worship where many island communities gathered; therefore, the historical-anthropological analysis of the ritual practice mentioned by Alcaeus could contribute to building plausible hypotheses regarding the social formations involved in the sanctuary and the interactions among their members.

RESEARCH TIMETABLE

The four phases of the research will be structured throughout the years of activity.

The first nine months will be dedicated to the philological analysis and cataloging of the poets' fragments: as with subsequent phases, a comparison with additional texts from ancient and modern literature in which ritual elements emerge significantly is also planned.

During the subsequent nine months of the PhD program, I intend to consider Sappho's hymns in which the ritual component emerges, which will be examined using the historical-anthropological method and the category of social drama.

Using the same methodological criteria, over the following six months, I will analyze the ritual practices present in Alcaeus' compositions. The third year of research, finally, will be dedicated to the final organization of the collected material and the writing of the thesis.

EXPECTED RESULTS

In conclusion, I believe that research work involving cooperation between philological analysis of the fragments of Aeolian poets and an interpretative perspective based on the historical-anthropological method can be very innovative. In the panorama of studies on Greek lyric poetry, such an approach is useful in tackling the study of Aeolian poetry in a dual direction: allowing for the enhancement of alternative textual reconstructions, where appropriate, and defining society structures which were on the island of Lesbos between the 7th and 6th centuries BCE.

This method could then be effectively adapted to the poetic production of other Greek lyric poets, without losing sight, each time, of the historical-social context of reference.



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