



Sappho and mythmaking in the context of an Aeolian-Ionian poetic Sprachbund

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Sappho and mythmaking in the context of an Aeolian-Ionian poetic Sprachbund

October 8, 2016 By Gregory Nagy listed under Sappho

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2016.10.08 | By Gregory Nagy

The starting point here is Song 44 of Sappho, "The Wedding of Hector and Andromache." My focus, this time, is on Aeolian myths about Thēbē, an old walled city in northwest Asia Minor, to be located southeast of Mount Ida and northeast of the Gulf of Adramytteion.

[[Essay continues here...](#)]



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Introduction

The starting point here (as also in [Nagy 2015.02.27](#): see the Bibliography below) is Song 44 of Sappho, "The Wedding of Hector and Andromache." My focus, this time, is on Aeolian myths about Thēbē, an old walled city in northwest Asia Minor, to be located southeast of Mount Ida and northeast of the Gulf of Adramytteion. I argue for the existence of Aeolian myths about this city, which is actually mentioned in Song 44. And I argue that these myths can be linked to Aeolian mythologizing about another walled city, ancient Troy, located northwest of Mount Ida. I also argue that the proud old city of Troy, better known as Ilion in the historical period of the ancient world, was appropriated and re-mythologized by Aeolians whose cultural identity can be reconstructed by studying the poetic world of Sappho and Alcaeus (on this topic, see also Aloni 1986, 1989, 2006).

Before I proceed with my argumentation, however, I must offer some background on Ilion and the Aeolians, and then I must explain what I mean by the term "Aeolian-Ionian Sprachbund" as I use it in the title of this essay.

Ilion and the Aeolians

After a major destruction of the citadel at old Troy sometime around the beginning of the 12th century BCE, which marks the end of a phase that archaeologists recognize as Troy VIIa, the importance of the site was

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radically diminished, and things stayed that way through the phase known as Troy VIIb, lasting into the 10th century BCE. After Troy VIIb comes Troy VIII, which marks a “Greek era” extending all the way to the so-called “Roman era” that is Troy IX. In the earliest phase of Troy VIII, from the 10th to the mid-7th century BCE, a small population was occupying the area of the citadel, and, on the western side of the citadel wall, they left behind some archaeological remains of a “place of memory” that must have commemorated in some way the epic traditions of the Trojan War (Aslan and Rose 2013:11). At a later phase of Troy VIII, in the mid-7th century BCE, there was a destruction, to be followed in the late 7th century by a reoccupation. From this time onward, in the latest phase of Troy VIII, we see the beginnings of the historical period. By now the old Troy is on its way to becoming the new Troy, that is, New Iliion (on the historical and archaeological reality of the New Iliion, see the overview of Rose 2006). As I show in Nagy 2010|2009:131 (see the Bibliography), the city of old Troy—in its reinvented phase as New Iliion—was Aeolian. That is, the city was occupied by a population that spoke a Greek dialect known as Aeolic—and that were rivals of another Greek-speaking population whose dialect was known as Ionic.

Here I use the words Aeolic and Ionic as linguistic terms referring to Greek-speakers who differentiated themselves culturally as Aeolians and Ionians. I give details in Nagy 2011a (see the Bibliography), where I argue for the historical existence of a Sprachbund linking the Aeolic and the Ionic dialects of Asia Minor, despite the intense political and cultural rivalries that preoccupied the Aeolian and the Ionian speakers of these dialects.

The concept of Sprachbund

The relevant comments I present here on the concept of Sprachbund are excerpted from Nagy 2016.05.19 §10b, following Jakobson 1931. In terms of this concept, whatever changes take place in a language that makes contact with another language need to be seen in terms of the overall structures of both languages (Jakobson 1949). This concept of Sprachbund can be applied to any situation where the structure of one culture is affected by a corresponding structure in another culture, whether by borrowing or by any other kind of influence. Any such contact needs to be viewed as a historical contingency, which requires historical analysis. Diachronic analysis is in this case insufficient, since it cannot predict history (Nagy 2011c §16). That is why I describe as historical the comparative method required for the study of parallels resulting from intercultural contact. The historical method depends on synchronic analysis of the parallel structures being compared. But it cannot depend—or at least it cannot fully depend—on diachronic analysis, which cannot independently account for historical contingencies (again, Nagy 2011c §16).

The argument

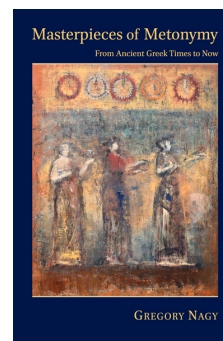
In my ongoing commentary on the Homeric Iliad, available along with the present essay in the online publication Classical Inquiries (<http://classical-inquiries.chs.harvard.edu>), I argue that the Aeolian identity of Thēbē and of other such cities in the region of Mount Ida and beyond can be reconstructed on the basis of Homeric references to these places. For this argument to work, I have to show that Homeric poetry, as a system, evolved by way of contacts between Aeolian and Ionian poetic traditions—contacts that can best be explained in terms of an already pre-existing Aeolian-Ionian poetic Sprachbund.

In terms of my argument, the references made in Homeric poetry to the Aeolic identity of cities like Thēbē are only latent. That is because the formulaic system of Homeric poetry—what Milman Parry once described as Homeric diction (Parry 1932)—is primarily Ionic, though it is also secondarily Aeolic. As I show in an article on the Aeolic component of Homeric poetry (see Nagy 2011a in the Bibliography), the diction of this poetry is dominantly Ionic and it is only recessively Aeolic. By contrast, we see an inverted relationship in the formulaic system underlying the songs of Sappho and Alcaeus, to which I will hereafter refer short-hand as Sapphic diction. Here is my working formula: Sapphic diction is dominantly Aeolic and recessively Ionic. [[For an example of recessive “Ionicisms” in Sappho 44, I cite the verse-final dative plurals in -oic, as noted in the Bibliography under the entry for Page 1955.]]

My earliest publication on what I now call Sapphic diction dates back to a book that appeared over forty years ago (Nagy 1974; now available online, as indicated in the Bibliography). In Chapter 5 of that book, I concentrated on the metrical and phraseological parallelisms between what we find in Song 44 of Sappho and what we find in all of Homeric poetry. In analyzing these parallelisms, I explained them as cognate structures—in other words, as structures that can be reconstructed backward in time to a common linguistic origin. So, just as the Aeolic dialect and the Ionic dialect can be reconstructed backward in time to a common language that is conventionally known as “Common Greek,” so also Sapphic diction and Homeric diction can be reconstructed backward in time to a common poetic language. But now I extend the argument. The parallel forms that we find in Sapphic diction and in Homeric diction are not only cognate, resulting from a common linguistic origin. They result also from mutual contact between the two cognate poetic traditions, and such mutuality can best be explained as a kind of poetic Aeolian-Ionian Sprachbund. Such a Sprachbund, moreover, operated not only on the level of form in language but also on the level of content in myth as a special language. [[I posit here a “contractual” sharing of myth. In Nagy 2011b, I studied a comparable pattern of “sharing,” with reference to myths about the Aiakidai in the 6th and the 5th centuries BCE. In this case, the “contractual sharing” involved Aegina and other states, some of which were political rivals or even enemies of Aegina.]]

Some details about Thēbē

The Aeolic form Thēbā of the place-name of the city of Thēbē is actually attested in Sappho 44.6, Θῆβακ ἐξ ἰέρακ Πλακιάκ τ' ἄ[n' ἄ]ν<v>ᾶω 'from sacred [ierā] Thēbā and from the region of Plakos, with its ever-



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flowing springs'. The epithet *ierā* 'sacred' here corresponds to the epithet *hierē* 'sacred' as applied to the same city in Homeric poetry at *Iliad* 1.366, ἐς Θήβην ἱερὴν πόλιν Ἡετίωνος 'to Thēbē, the sacred [hierē] city of [the king] Ēētiōn. The name for this city is attested also in the elliptical plural at *Iliad* 22.479, Θήβριν ὑπὸ Πλάκῳ ὑληέσσῃ 'at Thēbai [= Thēbē together with its territories], under the heights of Plakos, with all its forests'. Foregrounded in the *Iliad* is the heroic feat of Achilles in destroying the walls of this city when he conquered it as well as another city, Aeolian Lyrnessos, which was likewise located to the south of Mount Ida: Λυρνησοῶν διαπορθήσας καὶ τείχεα Θήβης '[Achilles], having destroyed Lyrnessos and the walls of Thēbē', *Iliad* 2.691. Elsewhere in the *Iliad*, 6.416, the spectacular view of the the city wall is highlighted: Θήβην ὑψηπυλον Ἱηβῆ, with its lofty towers'. Also highlighted, at 6.396–397, is the view of the overlooking high country named Plakos: ὑπὸ Πλάκῳ ὑληέσσῃ | Θήβῃ Ὑποπλακίῃ 'under the heights of Plakos, with all its forests, at Thēbē, [the city that is] Hypo-Plakiē'. This view, as we saw a moment ago, is also highlighted in Sappho 44.6, Θήβακ ἐξ ἑέρακ Πλακίας τ' ἀ[ν' ἀ]ἰ[ν]ῶ 'from sacred [ierā] Thēbā and from the region of Plakos, with its ever-flowing springs'.

Such details in Song 44 of Sappho, I argue, are cognate with details that we see in Homeric poetry. But the cultural/linguistic identity of any one of these details can be distinctly Aeolian/Aeolic and thus "home-grown" as it were, in the case of Sapphic diction, while at the same time the Ionian/Ionic references to these same details in the case if the *Iliad* may seem "transplanted"—even if they may be familiar by way of regional proximity.

Further details about Thēbē and other Aeolian places, from my online commentary on the *Iliad*, Nagy 2016.08.26

anchor comment at **I.09.128–131 / 270–272**

The story that is being told here at I.09.128–131 and retold at I.09.270–272 centers on one single stunning event: Achilles captured the entire island of Lesbos. By implication, this island became Aeolian precisely because it was captured by the principal hero of the Aeolians. The vastness of this story is even broader in scope, since we can see in the *Iliad* occasional references to other such conquests accomplished by Achilles. Most prominent are the *Iliadic* references to his capturing of two cities located on the Aeolian mainland of Asia Minor: they are Lyrnessos and Thēbē. In the *Iliad*, the conquest of Lyrnessos by Achilles and his capturing of Briseis are mentioned for the first time at I.02.690–691. What then follows at I.02.691 is a mention of his conquering the walled city of Thēbē as well. Thēbē is mentioned already at I.01.366: it was there that Achilles captured another woman, Chryseis, when he conquered that city, I.01.366–369. (For background on Briseis and on Chryseis, I strongly recommend the work of Dué 2002 and 2006, listed in the Bibliography.) Another native of Thēbē was Andromache, who had been married off to Hector at Troy before the beginning of the Trojan War: she was taken captive only later, after Troy was captured, and she was then allotted as a war-prize to the son of Achilles, Neoptolemos, as we read in the *Iliou Persis*, attributed to Arctinus of Miletus, plot summary by Proclus p. 108 line 9 (ed. Allen 1912). The conquests of these territories by Achilles, especially his capture of Lesbos, can be interpreted as a charter myth that aetiologizes a prehistoric or even non-historical "colonization" of east Aeolis, as it were, by west Aeolian migrants from Thessaly, situated in the European mainland, which was the reputed birthplace of Achilles. (See Nagy 2011a:171–173.) In using the term "east Aeolis" here, I am referring to the islands of Lesbos and Tenedos, together with the facing mainland of North Asia Minor. The "colonization" of this area has conventionally been described as the "Aeolian Migration," and the term 'migration' here matches neatly the appropriate Greek word, *apoikiā* as used in Strabo 9.2.3 C401 and elsewhere (see Nagy 2011a:161). The reference at I.09.129 to the captive women from Lesbos can be correlated with the poetic traditions of Lesbos as later attested in the songs of Sappho and Alcaeus, both dated around 600 BCE. These poetic traditions, which are decidedly Aeolian, derive not only from the island of Lesbos but also from the island of Tenedos and from the mainland of Asia Minor facing these two islands. (See Nagy 2010|2009:184–185.) Traces of these Aeolian poetic traditions can be seen in the *Iliadic* references to such figures as Briseis, Chryseis, Andromache, and the seven unnamed captive women from Lesbos. All these figures derive from Aeolian poetic traditions, and the same can be said about the figure of Achilles himself: in terms of his poetic heritage, he is Achilles the Aeolian. (See Nagy 2011a:171–172.) But there is an important difference to be highlighted here: Achilles is an Aeolian from European Thessaly, while the captive women are Aeolians from Asia Minor and from the offshore islands of Lesbos and Tenedos. In the Ionian poetic traditions of epic as exemplified by Homeric poetry, we can track the early influence of corresponding Aeolian poetic traditions as exemplified at a later period, around 600 BCE, by the songmaking of Sappho and Alcaeus. [[GN 2016.08.25 via Nagy 2010|2009:149, 241; see also Nagy 1979:140–141.]]

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