

# VARIA DIDACTICA

## TRANSLATIONS OF GREEK LYRIC POETRY

*W J Dominik (University of Natal, Durban)*

### *Sappho 1*

Deathless Aphrodite, child of god, wearing  
your wiles upon your ornate throne, I beg you:  
Don't hurt me, and don't overwhelm my heart with  
pain and grief, mistress.

But come here, if on another occasion,  
you heeded my cries when you heard me far off,  
and came to me, in yoked chariot, leaving  
your sire's golden house.

Swift, beautiful sparrows, with wings aflutter  
in tight formation, bore you over the black  
earth down from the thin air of heaven through the  
mid-air of the sky.

Fast they came! And you, blessed one, fashioning  
a smile on your immortal face, asked what was  
I suffering from this time, and why was I  
calling her again,

and what in my maddened heart did I wish most  
to happen to myself: "Whom this time am I  
to persuade to lead you back to her friendship?  
Who wrongs you, Sappho?"

For if she now runs away, soon she'll give chase.  
And if she refuses gifts, she'll then give them.  
And if she does not love you, soon she'll love you,  
though she wills it not."

Come to me now and free me from grievous cares.  
Bring to fulfilment whatever my heart longs  
to fulfill for myself, and you yourself be  
my comrade-in-arms.

*Sappho 31*

That man seems to me to be as fortunate  
 as the gods, who often sits opposite you,  
 and listens nearby as you speak sweetly and  
 laugh in such a way

as to excite love. This indeed sets my heart  
 trembling in my breast. For when I steal a glance  
 at you, then it is not possible any  
 more for me to speak,

but my tongue sticks to my dry mouth in silence,  
 and straightaway a subtle fire spreads beneath  
 my skin. I am able to see nothing with  
 my eyes, my ears hum,

a cold sweat covers my body, a trembling  
 seizes me all over, I am greener than  
 grass, and I seem to myself to be little  
 short of perishing.

But all must be borne, even this grief of love.

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**SHIFTING FRONTIERS IN LATE ANTIQUE STUDIES**

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Scholarly interest in late antique studies has for many years been inhibited by old prejudices and the dictates of the academic job market. Although these constraints have not fallen away, the vast amount of research presently being done on almost all aspects of the literature and history of late antiquity seems to suggest that their impact has somewhat diminished. Unfortunately, opportunities for live debate and the exchange of views are still very limited. In a courageous attempt to address this problem, Ralph Mathisen (University of South Carolina) and Hagith Sivan (University of Kansas) organized a conference on *Shifting Frontiers in Late Antiquity*. The conference, hosted by the University of Kansas, was held in the Spencer Museum of Art from the 23rd to the 26th of March 1995 and attracted more than sixty international scholars—mainly historians—from as far afield as Australia, France, Greece, the Netherlands, South Africa, and the UK. In proposing this

particular theme for the conference, the organizers clearly sought to stimulate discussion on the subject of late antiquity), as an important period of transition in the history of western civilization.

A necessary step in any attempt to re-establish the importance of the period generally referred to as late antiquity, would be the rejection of the much abused "decline and fall" paradigm. The suggestion that the transition from Roman-dominated to medieval Europe should be viewed as the evolution of a frontier certainly opens up new avenues for fruitful discussion on the topic of geographical borders in the later Roman Empire, as Hugh Elton (Trinity College, Connecticut), Linda Ellis (San Francisco State University) and John Drinkwater (University of Nottingham) have shown in their papers.

A dynamic conception of the term "frontier" added an exciting dimension to the conference, since it also allowed for papers on the shifting of intellectual, ideological, spiritual, and literary frontiers in late antiquity. Certainly one of the most profound transformations during this period involved the traditional boundaries which separated city from countryside. In his paper, Dennis Trout (Tufts University) indicated how Paulinus of Nola profited from the annual festival of St. Felix to Christianise the many *rustici* who had assembled at the saint's shrine and how, as a result, the divide between town and country, as well as the firm distinctions between paganism and Christianity momentarily dissolved on this occasion. Papers by Sebastian Heath (University of Michigan) and Susan Stevens (Randolph-Macon Women's College) highlighted the fact that in late antiquity man-made frontiers often came to demarcate zones of spiritual growth and intellectual progress. The challenges to established ideological frontiers in late antiquity were clearly illustrated in papers by Jacqueline Long (University of Texas) and David Olster (University of Kentucky).

For many years the literary creation of late antiquity has been considered to be at best epigonal, but, thanks to the very valuable studies by a number of scholars on both sides of the Atlantic, there has been a noticeable change in scholarly opinion. In my paper I attempted to indicate the breathtaking scope of Paulinus of Nola's transformation of the classical literary tradition in *carm.* 17 and 25. Late antique art manifests a similar creative approach to the classical tradition. This was the subject of a paper by Constantin Marinescu (Columbia University) who examined the Christianisation of pagan motifs on western sarcophagi.

Papers by Boudewijn Sirks (University of Amsterdam) and Hagith Sivan sought to shed some light on changes in the Roman legal system resulting from increasing contact between Romans and barbarians. In her paper Jill Harries (University of St. Andrews) focused on the various aspects of Sidonius Apollinaris' self-definition as a Roman and then went on to show how, at a time when the physical frontiers of the Empire were disintegrating, the otherwise divided Gallic aristocracy still felt themselves bound by a common heritage.

The current interest in the position of women in antiquity was also reflected in the number of papers which sought to investigate certain aspects relating to the frontiers of gender in late antiquity: gender equality in canon law (James Brundage,

University of Kansas); Jerome's twelve Biblical commentaries and late antique views on women (Fanie LeMoine, University of Wisconsin); gender ideology of the clerical elite in early medieval Ireland (Lisa Bitel, University of Kansas).

Over the past few years no one has argued with greater eloquence that late antiquity was an age of remarkable spirituality than Peter Brown. A number of papers confined the importance of the spiritual in the lives of late antique men and women. Taking as point of departure a chronicle written by the 5th century Portuguese bishop, Hydatius, Richard Burgess (University of Ottawa) demonstrated how the belief in the imminence of the end of the world and the second coming of Christ constituted a dominant feature of late antique *mentalité*. Beatrice Caseau (Université de Nanterre) outlined the popular conception in late antiquity of fragrances as a perfect means by which the impenetrable barrier between the divine world and the world of mortals could be breached. That soothsaying and magic provided avenues for social advancement to female members of the less privileged segments of late antique society was the subject of Ralph Mathisen's paper. By drawing on the example of 5th and 6th century Corinth, Richard Rothaus (Oklahoma State University) disputed the validity of a firm distinction between Christian and pagan in late antiquity. In one of the final papers of the session on frontiers in late antiquity, Thomas Smith (Loyala University, New Orleans) proposed a new approach to semi-Pelagianism.