

This paper addresses the evolving history of erotic attachments that ancient Greeks and their cultural heirs invested in the island of Lesbos. In the modern world, Lesbos has a strong association with female homosexuality, but it wasn't until the second century CE that any Greek writer (Lucian) made an explicit link between female homosexuality and the island (Brooten). It seems that female homosexuality was a taboo subject in classical Greek literature (Dover). Indeed, there are only three extant texts in classical literature that acknowledge female homosexuality. The comic poets, who are in other ways quite crass and explicit, are silent on the topic. For them, *Lesbiai*, designated women possessing a certain sexual industriousness, and if the verb *lesbiazein* described any particular sexual act it was fellatio. This erotic reputation encodes, I think, acknowledgment of Lesbos' distinctive song culture. It is widely acknowledged that the contemporary erotic connotation of Lesbos arises from the reception of Sappho's lyric poetry, and the erotic world it describes. I will seek to illuminate the factors that were at play in transforming the imagined Lesbos from an island of erotic (perhaps oral) adventure to one of sexual orientation.

Beginning with an analysis of the erotics of place in the poetry of Sappho, I will suggest that the topography Sappho depicts is bound up with both gender (as Winkler has argued) and social positioning. Recently, scholars have argued that in the archaic period, Lesbos and the culture that Sappho inhabited and wrote about was associated with Lydian luxury and an elite lifestyle devoted to pleasure. With the rise of democracy and the need for seeming economic parity among citizens, this aesthetic lost standing in Athens and was denigrated as effeminate. I will continue this line of research, examining the changing discourses around Lesbos, its poetic culture, and representations of Sappho found in Hellenistic comic fragments and later sources (Greene et al.) that eventually paved the way for the strong association of Lesbos with a radically feminine and radically alternative sexual culture.

It was because of the Roman representation of female homosexuality as a Greek practice (Hallett) that later writers in the Athenian tradition came to articulate the association between Lesbos with female homosexuality. The evolution of the meaning of Lesbos reveals a history of sexual morality and provides a case for examining the slow shift of possibilities for talking about sexuality. Beginning in the Hellenistic period, but coming to fruition under the Roman Empire, female homosexuality became legible as a new, illegitimate position. It is the distance afforded by the association between sexuality and geographical space that allows for the articulation of this once taboo identity.