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Sappho's Apples

Sappho summons Aphrodite to a shrine of apple-trees in fr. 2, and names an apple-tree in the simile of fr 105a. Denys Page (*Sappho and Alcaeus* [Oxford, 1955]: 40) argues that the detail of the description suggests that the place (of fr. 2) is real. However, apple trees are not in fact common on Lesbos.

melon is a general word for fruit, did Sappho actually refer to apples? Probably yes; the *glykymalon* of fr. 105, which reddens on the branch, should be an apple (*pyrus malus*) rather than a quince, sorb, or pomegranate. It is less clear if Sappho's apple trees were wild, or cultivated hybrids. Wild varieties, such as *malus sylvestris* and *orientalis*, which can grow as high as 12m, would, like Sappho's tree, be difficult to climb; but they are not usually red, or particularly sweet. Domesticated varieties (*malus mitis* or *domesticus*) can indeed be red (Pliny, *HN* 15.15), but they are now deliberately kept to dwarf sizes to increase yield and for ease of harvesting. I have not yet found evidence that this was the practice in antiquity.

There is usually little overlap between grape- and apple-growing regions, as grapes require a mild winter, apples a longer and colder one. In Mediterranean regions, it is unusual to grow apples at less than 150 m above sea level. Lesbos was famous for its wine in antiquity, but has many communities above 200m, where apples might prosper. Since the 18th century, olives have displaced other species on the island, including apples, even at these higher altitudes.

Can we identify a location for the Sappho's apple-grove? The shrine of Aphrodite on the slopes of the acropolis in Mytilene (*AD* 1987, B2: 475-489) is less than 50m above the sea, and does not have plentiful water, or level ground for horse-pasture. The *Amali* peninsula on which Mytilene is located, rises to 527 m, had plenty of water, and its name appears to derived from Aeolic *malon*; but the *imal-î* names in the region are associated with *Apollo Maloeis* (Thuc. 3.3.3), and Sappho probably did not call Aphrodite to a shrine of Apollo.

Locations on Lesbos still associated with apples include the villages of *Milies* (apple trees) near Plomari (above 300 m), and Ayiassos, (almost 400 m), which does produce small, sweet apples for a local market. The Ayiassos region also has the finest water sources on the island, including two famous springs.

We should therefore suppose that Sappho's apple grove was to be found in the central peninsula of Lesbos, between the Gulfs of Yera and Kalloni, on the slopes of the Lesbian Olympus. Paradoxically, this is an area from which we have as yet very little archaeological evidence of ancient settlement; Nigel Spencer, *A Gazetteer of Archaeological Sites in Lesbos* (Oxford. 1995), figure 8. Can we use Sappho to argue that that this singularly attractive mountain microenvironment was in fact inhabited in the archaic period?