

## SAPPHO AND THE ὄλισβος

In Sappho's compound ὄλισβοδόκος, the component ὄλισβο- denotes the *penis coriaceus*.

The publication of the papyrus text now constituting Sappho's fragment 99 Lobel-Page imparted a conclusive blow to the view held by those scholars who had thought that Sappho could not be accused «of any impropriety in the conduct of herself or her companions» (so D. Page, *Sappho and Alcaeus*, Oxford 1955, p. 144 ff.). Here is the part of the papyrus fragment containing the «crucial» evidence (so Page, *op. cit.*, p. 145) offered by lines 4-5:

<p>         .], γα . . εδαβαίῳ[                    ], α          . [ . ] διπλωσανακτ[ . ] α . [ . ]          ... αισσαμιασι . ιε . [ . ] τρισ . . . . [ . ] [ ]          χόρδαισιδιακρεκην          5 ὄλισβ.δοκοῖσ περκαθ . . . . ενοσ          ..ον . [ . ] σιφιλοφ[ . ] νωσ       </p>	<p>         ουκ . ν          κορωνισ       </p>	<p>         ..στροσ[          F . πα[          = ὠνηρ[          } καιφαι . [ . ]          ταισπα . [ . ]          ( ) ακρωδ[       </p>
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Page (*loc. cit.*) had to admit that «it is practically certain that ὄλισβ- is what was written», and the supplementation ὄλισβοδόκοις is regarded as inescapable. Since we cannot get rid of the ὄλισβος in the fragment under discussion, the only way open to the critics in order to preserve a puritanical vision of Sappho was to dream up a new meaning for ὄλισβος, and so West (*Maia* 22, 1970, p. 324) has suggested that «*prima facie*, the word [ὄλισβοδόκοισ(ι)] agrees with χόρδαισι, which would mean that ὄλισβος was once a synonym of πλῆκτρον». Now, ὄλισβος in Greek means nothing but αἰδοῖον δερμάτινον (material in J. Rosenbaum, *Geschichte der Lustseuche im Alterthume*, seventh edition, Berlin 1904, p. 144; G. Vorberg, *Glossarium eroticum*, reprint Rome 1965, p. 407). Ὀλισβοδόκος, as correctly seen by Dover, cannot but mean «receiver of the ὄλισβος», i.e. is a word formed like φλεβοδόκος (K. Dover, *Greek Homosex.*, London 1978, p. 176, n. 9). If, as seems probable, or at least *prima facie* possible; ὄλισβοδόκοισ(ι) agrees with χόρδαισι, this does

not mean that we must invent for ὄλισβος the new sense πλῆκτρον, i.e. the new sense created by West: it simply means that we are faced with a common or garden case of adjectival enallage: the χορδαί of the instrument used by the player (for χορδαῖσι διακρέκην cf. e. g. κρέκειν δόννακι A. P. XIV 231, 2) are called ὄλισβοδόκοι because the player herself was ὄλισβοδόκος (on this type of enallage cf. lastly my observations in *L'Antiq. Class.* 1977, p. 514 and *Graz. Beitr.* 1978, p. 72).

Dover (*loc. cit.*) is reluctant to regard the passage under discussion as «relevant to Sappho's homosexuality», because, according to him, the ὄλισβος «is associated essentially with solitary female masturbation». In reality, the ὄλισβος was a «Notbehelf», i. e. was used whenever the replacement of a real *mentula* was needed, that is to say, it was used not only for purposes of «Selbstbefriedigung», but also for purposes of «gleichgeschlechtliche Liebe» (Vorberg, *op. cit.*, pp. 407, 68, 181; for instance, the third person from the left in the scene reproduced from a vase in Vorberg, *op. cit.*, p. 408, is using the «Notbehelf» in question not for solitary purposes). Cf. Sud., s.u. ὄλισβος (as quoted in Rosenbaum, *loc. cit.*): the ὄλισβος was used not only by αἱ χῆραι γυναῖκες (evidently for solitary purposes), but also by female and male homosexuals, whom Sud. calls respectively τριβάδες and αἰσχρουργοί, for purposes of homosexual love; on such «Unzucht» indulged in by τριβάδες cf. Vorberg, *op. cit.*, p. 181.

It seems, therefore, that the word ὄλισβοδόκοισ(ι) leaves us in no doubt as to what Sappho and her companions were up to, and confirms the ancient view that Sappho was a τριβάς in the sense that this word has in Vorberg, *op. cit.*, p. 654.

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