



Alcman
The Fragments

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The Fragments of

ALCMAN

(fl. 7th century BC)



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The Delphi Classics Catalogue



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Version 1

The Fragments of
ALCMAN OF SPARTA



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The Fragments of Alcman



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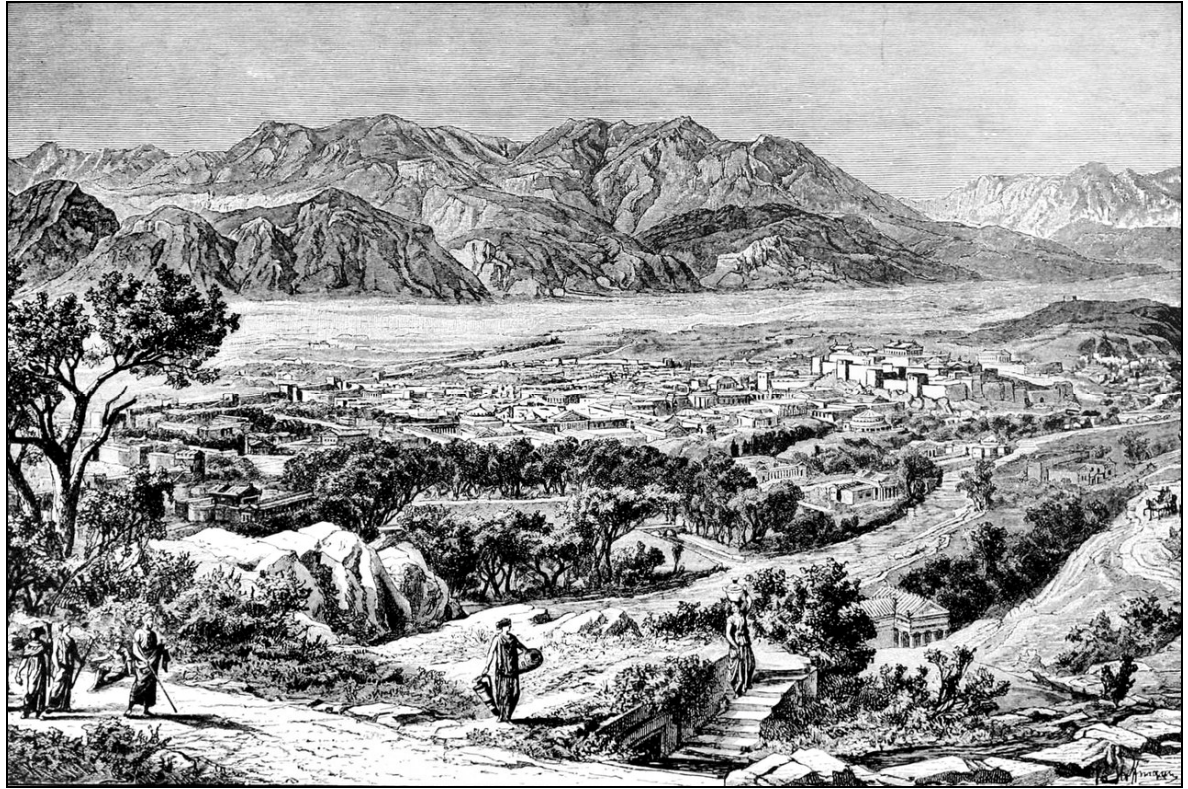
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The Translation



Ruins of ancient Sparta — Aleman's birthplace



Depiction of Ancient Sparta by John Steeple Davis, 1900

The Fragments of Alcman (1922)



Translated by J. M. Edmonds, Loeb Classical Library, 1922

Flourishing in the seventh century BC, Alcman was a choral lyric poet from Sparta. Little is known about his life. The earliest representative of the Alexandrian canon of the Nine Lyric Poets, he wrote six books of choral poetry, most of which is now lost; only quotations survive in the works of other ancient authors and fragmentary papyri discovered in Egypt. Alcman's poetry was composed in the local Doric dialect, with Homeric influences. The extant fragments reveal that his verses were mostly hymns composed in long stanzas, comprising lines in several different metres.

Alcman's nationality was disputed even in antiquity. The records of the ancient authors were often deduced from biographic readings of their poetry and the details are often untrustworthy. Antipater of Thessalonica wrote that both "the continents of Europe and Asia" claimed Alcman as their son. Others assumed he was born in Sardis, capital of ancient Lydia, though the Suda (a tenth century Byzantine lexicon) claimed that Alcman was actually a Laconian from Messoa. This settlement existed before the Dorian conquest and was united with three other such settlements (Pitane, Limnae and Cynosura) by a common sacrifice to Artemis. Messoa was eventually coalesced into ancient Sparta. It is probable that the settlement was in the southeast part of the city, although its site remains undiscovered.

The compound nature of Alcman's dialect only added to the uncertainty of his origins, but the many references to Lydian and Asian culture in the fragments hint at a Lydian origin. In one fragment, Alcman claims he learned his skills from the "strident partridges" — a bird native to Asia Minor and not naturally found in Greece. Several modern scholars defend his Lydian origin on the basis of the language and content of some of the fragments. Still, in the seventh century Sardis was a cosmopolitan city and so the implicit and explicit references to Lydian culture may be a means of describing the girls of the choruses as fashionable.

A tradition going back to Aristotle suggested that Alcman came to Sparta as a slave to the family of Agesidas and that he was eventually emancipated due to his great poetic skill. Aristotle reported that it was believed Alcman died from a pustulant infestation of lice, though he may have been confused with the philosopher Alcmaeon of Croton. According to Pausanias, Alcman is buried in Sparta next to the shrine of Helen of Troy.

Alcman's six books of choral poetry (containing 50-60 hymns) were lost at the beginning of the Middle Ages, resulting in the preservation of only a handful of quotations from other Greek authors. However, a significant discovery of a papyrus in 1855 by the French scholar Auguste Mariette in a tomb near the second pyramid at Saqqâra in Egypt greatly improved our understanding of this important early poet. Now held at the Louvre, the papyrus fragment contains approximately 100 verses of a so-called *partheneion* — a song performed by a chorus of young unmarried women. In the mid-twentieth century, many more fragments were identified and published in a collection of the Egyptian papyri found in a dig at an ancient garbage dump at Oxyrhynchus. Most of these fragments are also part of *partheneia*, but there are also examples other kinds of hymns, as well as some drinking songs.

Alcman's verses were composed in the Doric dialect of Sparta (the so-called Laconian dialect). Pausanias argues that even though Alcman used this dialect, which does not usually sound attractive, it "did not spoil the beauty of his songs". Apollonius Dyscolus describes Alcman as "constantly using the Aeolic dialect". However, the validity of this judgment is disputed. Also, many of the fragments reveal prosodic, morphological and phraseological features that are common to the Homeric language of epic poetry. This compound of features adds complexity to any analysis of the extant fragments.

Much uncertainty still exists as to how Alcman's choral works were first performed. Some scholars believe that the chorus was divided in two halves, each with its own leader; at the beginning and close of their performance, the two halves performed as a single group, but during most of the recital, each half would compete with the other, claiming that their leader or favorite was superior of all girls in Sparta. There is, however, little evidence that the chorus was in fact divided. Alcman may have composed songs for Spartan boys as well. Yet, the only statement in support of this comes from Sosibius, a Spartan historian from the second century BC, who reported that songs of Alcman were performed during the Gymnopaedia festival.

Alcman's poetry is noted for its clear, light and pleasant tone, which is referenced by several ancient commentators. Details from rituals and festivals are described with care, even though the context of some of those details can no longer be understood. His use of language is rich with visual description, conveying an interest in appealing imagery. Much attention is focused on nature: ravines, mountains, flowering forests at night, the quiet sound of water lapping over seaweed. Animals and other creatures are also often included: birds, horses, bees, lions, reptiles and even crawling insects.

The Suda describes Alcman as a man "of an extremely amorous disposition and the inventor of love poems." The longest extant fragment — the papyrus discovered in Egypt in 1855 — was probably written to celebrate a rite of passage and is characterised by sensuous imagery and erotic implications. Early research into the poet tended to overlook the erotic aspect of love presented in Alcman's poems. More recent scholars have commented on how his portrayal of homoerotic love is similar to that found in the lyrics of the contemporaneous Sappho. The homosexual relationship between the female choral singers could be likened to the pederasty of the Spartan males and was possibly an integrated part of the initiation rites. At a much later period, relying on older sources, Plutarch wrote that the Spartan women were engaged in same sex relationships. Still, it remains uncertain if these relationships tended to have a physical side and, if so, of what nature.

Alcman's light-hearted manner, which differs greatly from the later Spartan style, gave rise to the traditional notion that he was not a Spartan, but a native of Sardis. However, it is important to remember that recent research has indentified how Sparta in the seventh century BC enjoyed a brilliant cultural life, fitting perfectly with Alcman's style and vocabulary. Only in the ensuing centuries would the city become associated with a more severe and frugal form of culture.



Mosaic portrait of Alcman in Jerash, Jordan, late second century AD



View of the Saqqara necropolis, Egypt, including Djoser's step pyramid (centre), the Pyramid of Unas (left) and the Pyramid of Userkaf (right). The most important fragment of Alcman was discovered here in 1855.

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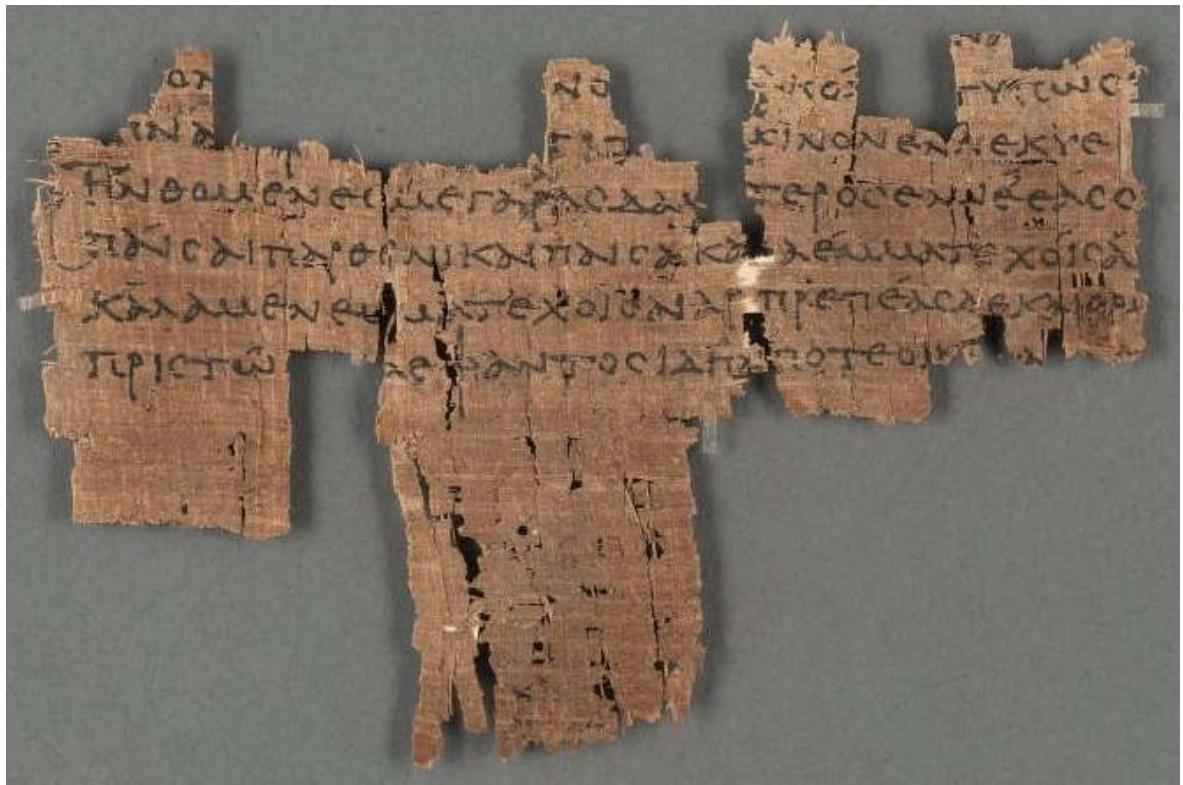
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The French scholar Auguste Mariette, photographed by Nadar, c. 1861



P. Oxy. 8 — a fragment of Alcman

Fragments Regarding Alcman's Life



Suidas *Lexicon*:

Alcman:— A Laconian of Messoa, wrongly called by Crates a Lydian of Sardis. A lyric poet, the son of Damas or, according to some authorities, of Titarus. He flourished in the 37th Olympiad (B.C. 631-625), when Ardys father of Alyattes was king of Lydia. He was of an extremely amorous disposition and the inventor of love-poems, but by birth a slave. He wrote six Books of lyric poems, and was the first to adopt the practice of not accompanying the hexameter with music.¹ Being a Spartan, he uses the Doric dialect.

Aelian *Historical Miscellanies* 12. 50:

The Spartans, who bent was for bodily exercises and feats of arms, had no skill in music. Yet if ever they required the aid o the Muses on occasion of general sickness of body or mind or any like public affliction, their custom was to send for foreigners, at the bidding of the Delphic oracle, to act as healers and purifiers. For instance they summoned Terpander, Thales, Tyrtaeus, Nymphaeus of Cydonia, and Alcman.

Velleius Paterculus *Roman History* 1. 18. 2:

The Spartan claim to Alcman is false.

Palatine Anthology 7. 709:

Alexander of Aetolia: Ancient Sardis, abode of my fathers, had I been reared in you I should have been a maund-bearer unto Cybele or beaten pretty tambours as one of her gilded eunuchs; but instead my name is Alcman and my home Sparta, town of prize-tripods, and the lore I know is of the Muses of Helicon, who have made me a greater king even than Gyges son of Dasyclus.

Ibid. 7. 18:

Antipater of Thessalonica on Alcman: Judge not the man by the gravestone. The tomb you see is small, but it holds the bones of a great man. You shall know this for Alcman, striker pre-eminent of the Laconian lyre, one possessed of the nine Muses.² And twin continents dispute whether he is of Lydia or Laconia; for the mothers of a minstrel are many.

Heracleides of Pontus *Constitutions* 2:

Alcman was the salve of Agesidas, but received his freedom because he was a man of parts.³

Eusebius *Chronicle* 403:

Olympiad 42. 2 (B.C. 611): Flourished Alcman, according to some authorities.

Athenaeus *Doctors at Dinner* 15. 678b:

[on garlands]: “Thyreatic”:- This, according to Sosibius in his tract on *Sacrifices*, is the name of a kind of garland at Sparta, made of palm-leaves, and known nowadays as *psilinos*. These garlands, he says, are worn in memory of the victory at Thyrea by the leaders of the choruses which dance on the festival of that victory, which coincides with the *Gymnopaediae* or Feast of Naked Youths. These choruses are three

in number, the youths in front, the old men on the right, and the men on the left; and they dance naked, singing songs by Thaletas and Alcman and the paeans of the Spartan Dionysodotus.

Aristotle *History of Animals* 557 a1:

[on the *morbus pedicularis*]: Mankind is liable to this disease when the body contains too much moisture, and several victims of it are recorded, notably the poet Alcman and Pherecydes the Syrian.

Pausanias *Description of Greece* 3. 15. 1:

[on Sparta]: Behind the colonnade which runs beside the Grove of Planes there are shrines of Alcimus and Enarsphorus and, close by, one of Dorceus, and adjoining this again one of Sebrus, all of whom are said to have been sons of Hippocoön. The spring near one of them is called Dorceian after Dorceus, and the plot near another, Sebrian after Sebrus. On the right of this plot is a monument to Alcman “whose poems were not made the less sweet because he used the tongue of Sparta,” a dialect not too euphonious. The temples of Helen and Heracles lie the one near the tomb of Alcman, the other close to the wall. In the latter there is a statue of Heracles armed, this form being due, it is said, to the fight he had with Hippocoön and his sons.

Athenaeus *Doctors at Dinner* 14. 638e:

The author of the comedy called *The Helots* says: “It is old-fashioned to sing Stesichorus, or Alcman, or Simonides. We can listen to Gnesippus...”

Suidas *Lexicon*:

Philochorus... wrote... a treatise on Alcman.

Athenaeus *Doctors at Dinner* 14. 646a:

Similarly Sosibius in the 3rd Book of his *Treatise on Alcman*.

Stephanus of Byzantium *Lexicon*:

... as Alexander Cornelius says in his tract *On the Topical Allusions of Alcman*.

Hephaestion 138 *On Graphical Signs*:

The outward-looking diplè is frequent in the works of the comic and tragic writers, but unusual in those of the lyrists. It occurs in Alcman, who in writing a poem of fourteen stanzas made the first seven alike of one metre, and the rest alike of another; in these the diplè is placed where the second part begins, to indicate that the poem is written in two different metres.

See also A.P. 7. 19, Plin. *N.H.* 11. 112, Plut. *Sulla* 36, Christod. *Ecphr.* 395.

Fragments of Alcman's Poetry



End of Sample