

Heraclitus

The Fragments

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The Fragments of

HERACLITUS

(fl. c. 500 BC)



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The Delphi Classics Catalogue



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Version 1

The Fragments of
HERACLITUS OF EPHESUS



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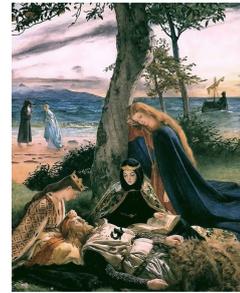
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The Translations



Ancient ruins at Ephesus, Asia Minor — Heraclitus' birthplace



The Theatre of Ephesus

Brief Introduction: Heraclitus of Ephesus



Flourishing in the sixth century BC, Heraclitus was a pre-Socratic philosopher from the city of Ephesus, then part of the Persian Empire. In spite of the fragmentary nature of his works, they have exerted a wide influence on Western philosophy, both ancient and modern, through the works of such authors as Plato, Aristotle, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger.

Little is known of Heraclitus' life. He was the son of Blyson from the Ionian city of Ephesus, a port on the Cayster River, on the western coast of Asia Minor (modern-day Turkey). The main source for his life is the doxographer Diogenes Laërtius. Most of the information provided by this source is unreliable and the ancient stories about Heraclitus are thought to be later fabrications based on interpretations of the preserved fragments. The anecdote that he relinquished the hereditary title of "king" to his younger brother may at least imply that he was from an aristocratic family in Ephesus. He appears to have had little sympathy for democracy or the masses, though it is unclear whether he was "an unconditional partisan of the rich" or, if like the sage Solon, he was "withdrawn from competing factions".

Heraclitus is traditionally believed to have flourished in the 69th Olympiad (504-501 BC), based on a fragment that references Pythagoras, Xenophanes and Hecataeus as older contemporaries, placing him near the end of the sixth century BC. According to Diogenes, Heraclitus died covered in dung after failing to cure himself from dropsy. This may be to parody his doctrine that, "for souls it is death to become water, and that a dry soul is best."

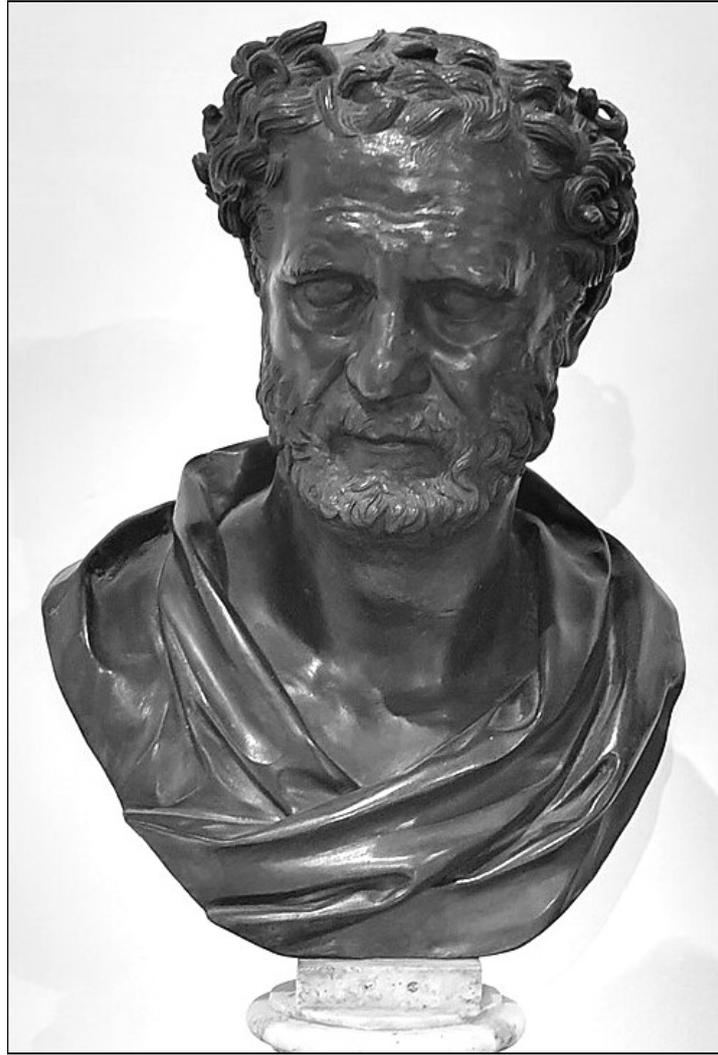
He wrote a single work, of which only fragments survive. Even in ancient times, his paradoxical philosophy, appreciation for wordplay, and cryptic, oracular epigrams earned him the epithets "the dark" and "the obscure". He was considered by his contemporaries as arrogant and a misanthrope, often subject to melancholia. Consequently, he became known as "the weeping philosopher" in contrast to the ancient atomist philosopher Democritus, who was known as "the laughing philosopher".

The central ideas of Heraclitus' philosophy are the unity of opposites and the concept of change. He viewed the world as a place of harmony and justice in strife; in other words, a world that was constantly in flux, always "becoming" but never "being". He expressed this concept with sayings like, "Everything flows" (πάντα ῥεῖ). Another famous example of his theory is that, "No man ever steps in the same river twice". This insistence upon change contrasts with that of the ancient philosopher Parmenides of Elea (fl. late sixth or early fifth century BC), who argued that reality was in essence a static "being".

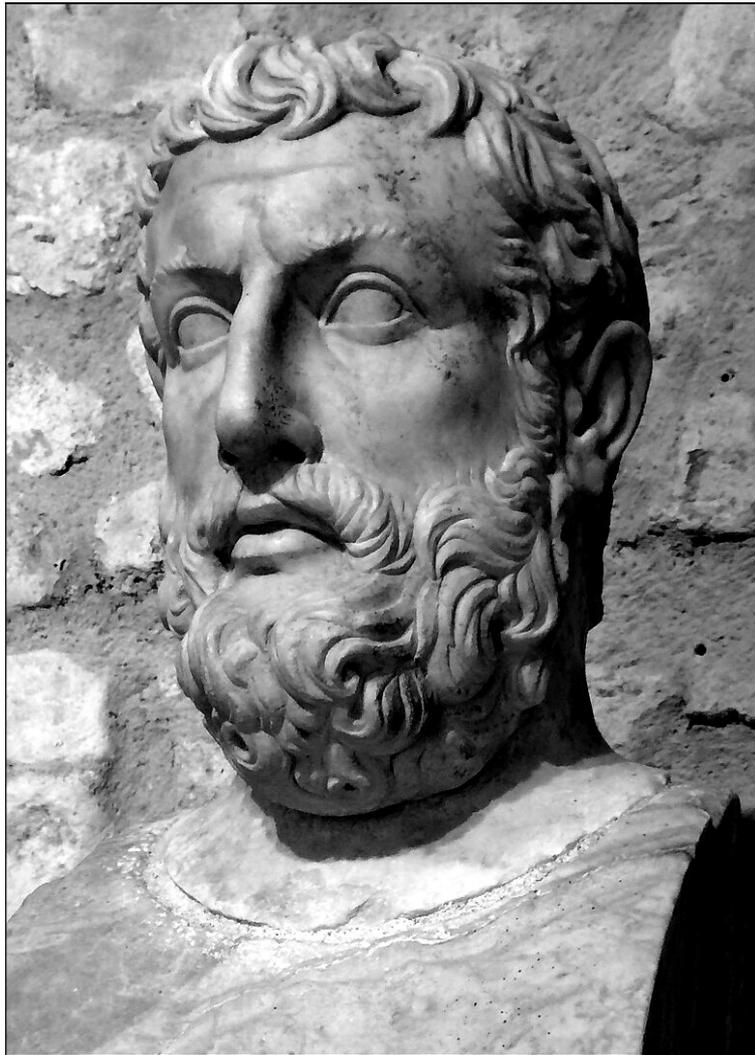
Over 100 fragments of Heraclitus' single papyrus work survive in quotations by other authors. The title of the book is unknown, leading later writers to refer to it as *On Nature*. According to Diogenes Laërtius, Heraclitus deposited the book in the Artemision in Ephesus as a dedication. It was available at least until the second century AD, when Plutarch and Clement quoted directly from it, if not later. Yet by the sixth-century, Simplicius of Cilicia, who mentions Heraclitus 32 times in his *Commentaries on Aristotle*, never quotes from him, implying that Heraclitus' work was so rare that it was apparently unavailable, even to the philosophers at the Platonic Academy in Athens.

The hallmarks of Heraclitus' philosophy are the unity of opposites and change, or flux. According to Aristotle, Heraclitus was a dialetheist, or one who denies the law of noncontradiction (a logical principle which states that something cannot be true and false at the same time). Also according to Aristotle, Heraclitus was a materialist. Attempting to follow Aristotle's hylomorphic interpretation (.i.e. every physical entity is a compound of matter), scholar W. K. C. Guthrie interprets the distinction between flux and stability as one between matter and form. In this view, Heraclitus is a flux theorist since he is a materialist that argues matter always changes. There are no unchanging forms, like with Plato or Aristotle.

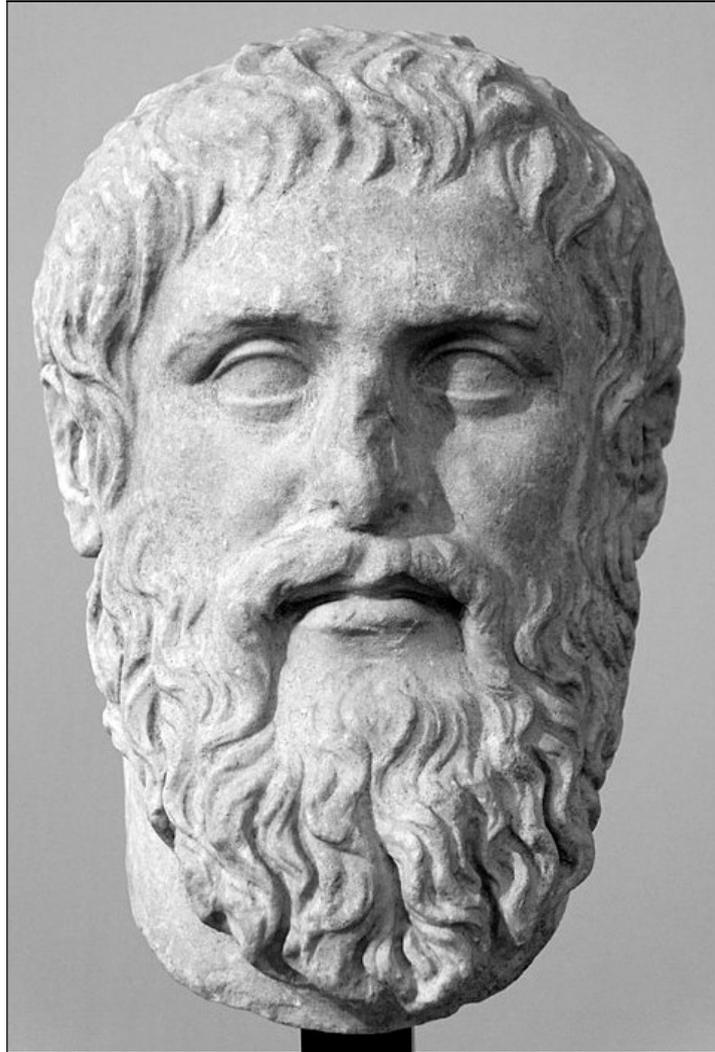
Heraclitus viewed fire as the essential material uniting all things, arguing that the world order is an "ever-living fire kindling in measures and being extinguished in measures." He extended the manifestations of fire to include not only fuel, flame and smoke but also the ether in the upper atmosphere. He suggests that part of that air, or pure fire, "turns to" ocean, presumably as rain, and part of the ocean turns to earth. Simultaneously, equal masses of earth and sea everywhere are returning to the respective aspects of sea and fire. The resulting dynamic equilibrium maintains an orderly balance in the world. That persistence of unity despite change is illustrated by his famous analogy of life to a river: "Upon those who step into the same rivers, different and ever different waters flow down." Plato later interpreted that doctrine to mean that all things are in constant flux, regardless of how they appear to the senses.



Bust of Heraclitus from the Villa of the Papyri (Herculaneum), Museo Archeologico, Napoli



Parmenides of Elea, a contemporary of Heraclitus, who espoused a doctrine of unchanging Being, has been contrasted with Heraclitus and his doctrine of constant change.



Plato, copy of the portrait made by Silanion c. 370 BC for the Academia in Athens — Plato's Theory of Forms was a result of reconciling Heraclitus and Parmenides.

John Burnet Translation, 1920

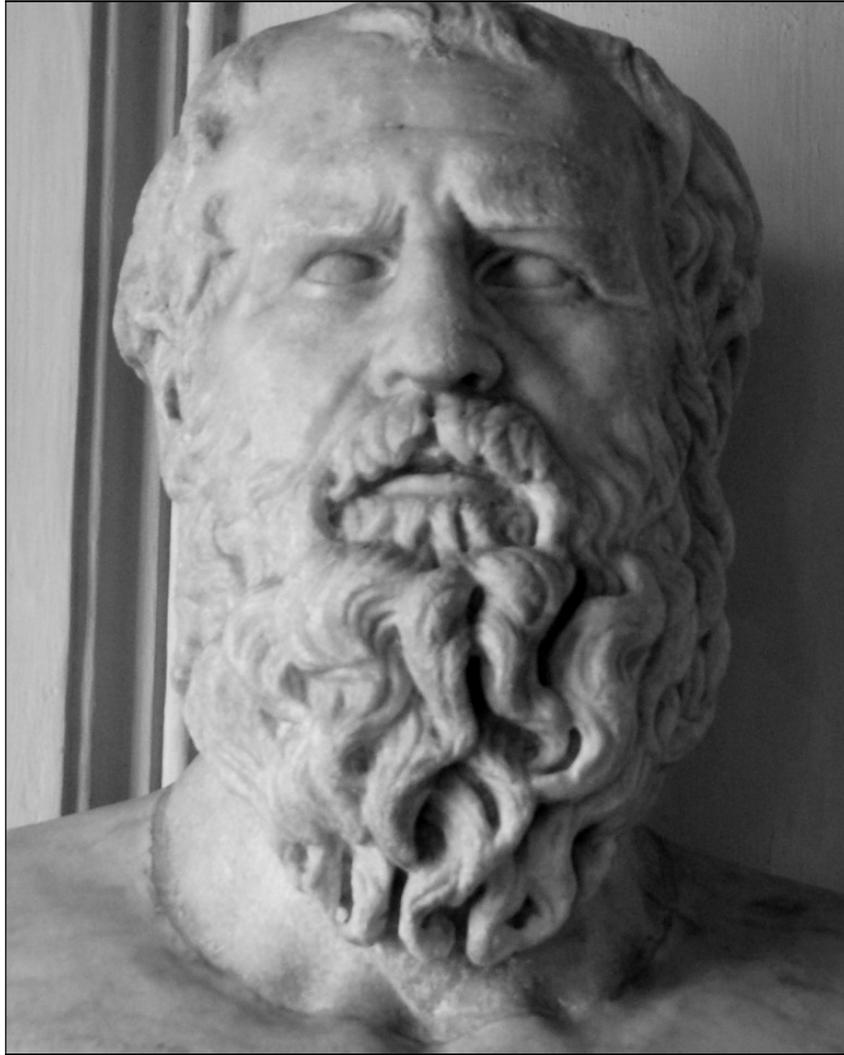


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Possible bust of Heraclitus in the Hall of Philosophers in the Capitoline Museum, Rome

Fragment 1



(2) THOUGH THIS Word¹ is true evermore, yet men are as unable to understand it when they hear it for the first time as before they have heard it at all. For, though all things come to pass in accordance with this Word, men seem as if they had no experience of them, when they make trial of words and deeds such as I set forth, dividing each thing according to its kind and showing how it truly is. But other men know not what they are doing when awake, even as they forget what they do in sleep. R. P. 32.

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