



Ibycus

The Fragments

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The Fragments of

IBYCUS

(fl. 6th century BC)



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The Delphi Classics Catalogue



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Version 1

The Fragments of
IBYCUS OF RHEGIUM



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The Fragments of Ibycus



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The Translation



*Reggio Calabria, the largest city in Calabria, southern Italy, site of ancient Rhegium, Magna Graecia
— Ibycus' birthplace*



Ancient Roman ruins at Rhegium

The Fragments of Ibycus



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

Regarded by Hellenistic scholars as one of the canonical nine lyric poets, Ibycus flourished in the second half of the sixth century BC. He was born in Rhegium in Magna Graecia, and was probably active as a poet at Samos during the reign of the tyrant Polycrates. He was mainly remembered in antiquity for his pederastic verses, but he also composed lyrical narratives on mythological themes in the manner of Stesichorus. His work survives today only in quotations by ancient scholars or recorded on fragments of papyrus recovered from archaeological sites in Egypt. Still, his extant verses number some of the finest examples of Greek poetry of the period.

As is the case with many other major poets of ancient Greece, Ibycus became famous not just for his poetry but also for the dramatic events of his life, which later became the stuff of legend — none more so than the amazing tale of his murder and posthumous vengeance. The Byzantine encyclopaedia *Suda* explains how Ibycus was captured by bandits in a deserted place. The poet loudly declared that a flock of cranes, which happened to be flying overhead, would be his avengers. After Ibycus was murdered, the bandits returned to Corinth, where in their subsequent carousing they saw a flock of cranes overhead. One of the bandits exclaimed, “Look, the avengers of Ibycus!” When a bystander overheard this and followed it up, the crime was confessed and the bandits put to death for the murder of the celebrated poet. Hence, the proverbial expression, “the cranes of Ibycus”.

The *Suda*’s chronology has been dismissed as “muddled” by some, since it makes Ibycus a generation older than Anacreon, another poet known to have flourished at the court of Polycrates. Also, the account is inconsistent with what we know of the Samian tyrant from Herodotus. Eusebius recorded the poet’s first experience of fame somewhere between 542 and 537 BC and this better fits the period of Polycrates’ reign. The *Suda*’s account is corroborated by a papyrus fragment, usually ascribed to Ibycus, glorifying a youthful Polycrates, but this was unlikely to have been the Polycrates of Samos and might instead have been his son, mentioned in a different context by Himerius as Polycrates, governor of Rhodes.

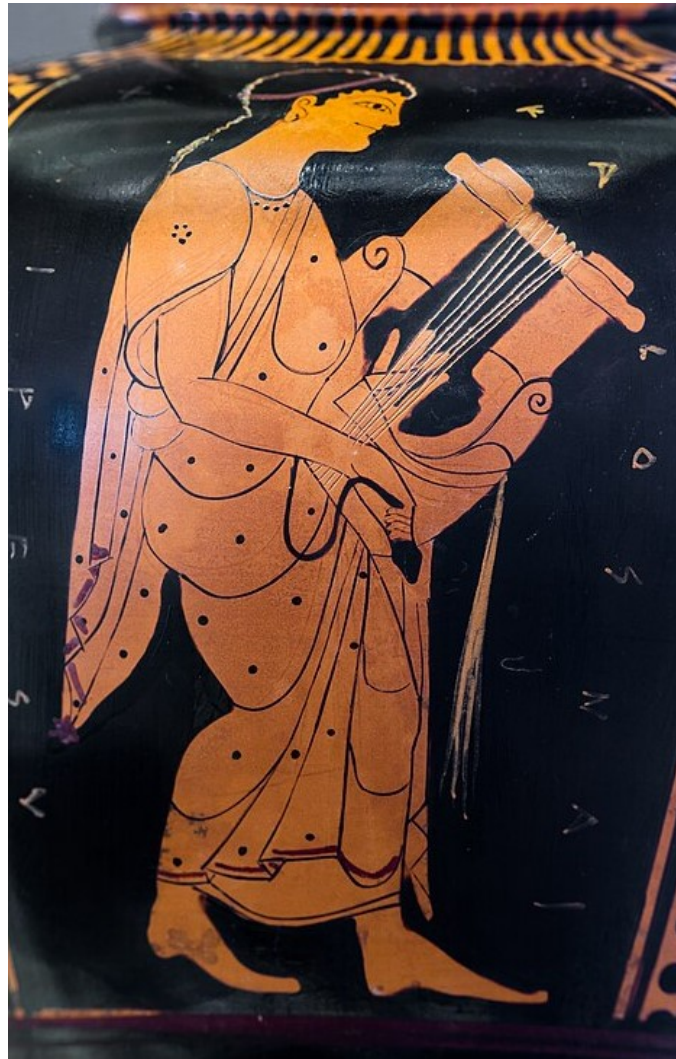
The *Suda*’s extraordinary account of the murder is found in other sources, such as Plutarch and Antipater of Sidon. Much later, the story would inspire Friedrich Schiller’s ballad *The Cranes of Ibycus*. However, some believe that the legend was merely derived from a play upon the poet’s name and the Greek word for the bird ἰβυξ or ibyx. Another proverb associated with Ibycus was recorded by Diogenianus: “more antiquated than Ibycus”. This expression was apparently based on an anecdote about Ibycus foolishly turning down an opportunity to become tyrant of Rhegium in order to pursue a poetic career instead. Yet, modern scholars have inferred from his poetry that Ibycus was in fact wise enough to avoid the lure of supreme power, citing as an example Plato’s quotation from one of his lyrics: “I am afraid it may be in exchange for some sin before the gods that I get honour from men”.

There is no other information about Ibycus’ life, save for an account by the fourth century sophist and rhetorician Himerius, explaining how the poet fell from his chariot while travelling between Catana and Himera and injured his hand badly enough to give up playing the lyre for a considerable time.

Some modern scholars have detected in the fragments evidence that Ibycus might have spent time at Sicyon before journeying to Samos — mythological references indicate a local knowledge of Sicyon and could even point to the town's alliance with Sparta against Argos and Athens. The poet's depiction of the women of Sparta as "high-showing" (quoted by Plutarch as proof of lax morals among Spartan women) might indicate that he also composed poetry in Sparta. It is possible that he left Samos at the same time as Anacreon, on the death of Polycrates, and there is an anonymous poem in the *Palatine Anthology* celebrating Rhegium as his final resting place, describing a tomb located under an elm, covered in ivy and white reeds.

Greek scholars have likened Ibycus' role in the development of Greek lyric poetry as a mediator between eastern and western styles, marking a new stage in Greek poetry. Inspired by the narrative and choral verse of Stesichorus, Ibycus employed verse as a vehicle for his own private or public emotions. Although ancient scholars collected the work of Stesichorus into twenty-six books, each probably a self-contained narrative that gave its title to the whole book, they compiled only seven books for Ibycus, which were numbered rather than titled. Recent papyrus finds suggest that Ibycus might have been the first to compose 'choral' victory odes, an innovation previously credited to Simonides.

Until the 1920's, all that survived of Ibycus' work were two fairly large fragments and about fifty other lines scraped together from a variety of ancient commentaries. Since then, papyrus finds have added many more verses to his oeuvre. He composed in a similar vein to Stesichorus, adopting a literary language largely epic in tone, with some Doric flavouring and with a few Aeolisms borrowed from the love poetry of Sappho and Alcaeus. It is possible that the Doric dialect was added by editors in Hellenistic and Roman times, when the poet's home town, Rhegium, had become more Doric than it had been in Ibycus' own time. In addition to this superficial element of Doric dialect, Ibycus' verse employs chiefly dactylic rhythms, as with Stesichorus' work, a love theme and accumulated epithets. His use of imagery is notable with an artistic effect. His rich and varied use of language has been described by recent scholars as both "graceful" and "passionate." The ancients sometimes considered his work with distaste as a lecherous and corrupting influence. However, his famous quotation of pathos, in his account of Menelaus' failure to kill Helen of Troy under the spell of her beauty, was highly valued by some.



A young kithara player, in costume, by the Goluchow painter, Athens, c. 520 BC. The kithara, latinised as cithara, was an ancient Greek musical instrument in the yoke lutes family. According to the Suda, Ibycus was the inventor of the 'sambyke', a triangular cithara.



'The Cranes of Ibycus' by Heinrich Schwemming, illustrating Schiller's poem, Kunsthistorisches Museum, c. 1880

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An 1890 depiction of Polycrates with Pharaoh Amasis II. Polycrates, son of Aeaces, was the tyrant of Samos from the 540 BC to 522. He had a reputation as both a fierce warrior and an enlightened tyrant. Ibycus is believed to have been active at Samos during the time of Polycrates.

FRAGMENTS CONCERNING THE LIFE OF IBYCUS



Eusebius *Chronicle*: Olympiad 61 (B.C. 536-533): — Flourished the poem-writer Ibycus.

Himerius *Declamations*: After the plague [or his illness] Anacreon tuned his lyre and greeted the dear Loves once more with song; after the mishap Stesichorus tuned his harp; and report hath it that Ibycus, when he fell from a chariot on the way from Catana to Himera and broke his wrist, played indeed for some time out of tune but did not dedicate his lyre to Apollo. [i. e. did not abandon his profession]

Suidas *Lexicon*: Ibycus: — Son of Phytius, or, according to another account, of Polyzelus of Messene the historian; or as some writers say, of Cerdas; by birth of Rhegium. Thence he went to Samos when it was ruled by Polycrates father of the despot of that name, [or Aiaces father of the despot P.?] whose date falls in the reign of Croesus, the 54th Olympiad (B.C. 564-561). He was of an extremely amorous disposition, and was the inventor of the instrument called *sambuca*, which is a kind of three-cornered lyre. His works are in seven Books written in the Doric dialect. Falling one day among robbers in a deserted spot he was killed exclaiming that the very cranes which flew over at the moment would prove his avengers. Some time afterwards one of the robbers saw some cranes in the city and cried, 'Look! the avengers of Ibycus.' Whereupon one of the bystanders enquired into the matter of this speech of his, the crime was admitted, and the robbers brought to justice. Hence the proverb, 'The cranes of Ibycus.'

Statius *Silvae*:

... and Ibycus who prayed to the birds

Plutarch *Garrulity*: Were not the murderers of Ibycus taken as they sat in the theatre whispering with smiles together, at the sight of some cranes, that yonder were the avengers of Ibycus? For the spectators near by heard what they said, and though Ibycus had long disappeared and been mourned for dead, took up the matter of this speech and reported it to the ruling authority. Whereupon they were convicted and forthwith executed, not indeed that they were punished by the cranes, but rather compelled by their own garrulity as by some Fury or Doom-Goddess to confess to the murder they had committed. [cf. Iamb. Vit. Pythcig. 126, Suid. επιτηδευμα (above, p. 21)]

Palatine Anthology: On the murder of the lyrist Ibycus by robbers; by Antipater of Sidon:

Robbers slew thee, Ibycus, the day thou earnest to land on a desert shore untrod, but not till thou hadst called to aid thee a cloud of cranes who had come witnesses to thy woeful death. Nor was thy call in vain; for by reason of their clang an avenging Fury requited thy murder in the land of Sisyphus. [Corinth] Alas, ye greedy robbers! why fear ye not the wrath of the Gods? Even Aegisthus who slew the bard [Cassandra] in

olden days escaped not the eye of the sable-robed Eumenides. [cf. Ibid. 9. 184 (vol. i. p. 2)]

Athenaeus *Doctors at Dinner*: The invention of this instrument (the sambuca) is ascribed by Neanthes of Cyzicus, in the 1st Book of his Annals, to Ibycus the poet of Rhegium, and that of the barbiton to Anacreon. [cf. Suid. Ἰβυκανητόν, E.M. ἰβίς]

Diogenian *Proverbs*: As ancient as Ibycus: — A proverb used of foolish persons. For Ibycus, when he might have reigned as a despot over his fellow-citizens, went away to live in Ionia. [the explanation seems to belong to the other proverb below]

The Same: As foolish as Ibycus.

Palatine Anthology: On the lyric poet Ibycus; anonymous:

I sing of the end of shoaly Italia, of Rhegium which taste th ever of the water of Sicily, because Ibycus that lover of the lyre, that lover of lads, was buried by her, his many pleasures over, beneath a leafy elm-tree, where much ivy and a bed of white reed make a covering for his grave. [cf. 9. 571]

Aristophanes *Thesmophoriazusae*: It is particularly unrefined of a poet to be boorish and unkempt. Just think how master-cooks of music like the great Ibycus and old Anacreon of Teos wore the cap of luxury and danced like this [i. e. in the Ionian way].

Cicero *Tusculan Disputations*: What extravagant things Alcaeus writes on the love of youths! and as for Anacreon, his poetry is erotic from beginning to end. Yet to judge from his works they all were surpassed in this matter by Ibycus of Rhegium. And the love of all these poets was the sensual love.

Plutarch *On High-Birth*: How often in Simonides, in Pindar, in Alcaeus, in Ibycus, in Stesichorus, is high-birth a matter of praise and honour?

THE POEMS OF IBYCUS



[arranged in antiquity in 7 Books (see Suid. p. 79), to which refs, are given in only 3 passages, cf. 21, 22, 34]



End of Sample