

Stesichorus  
The Fragments

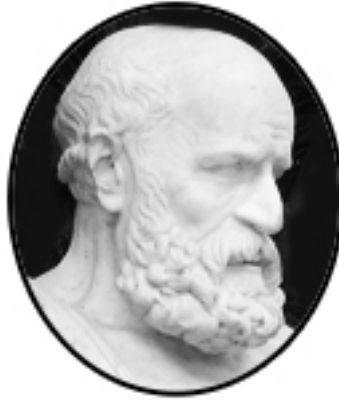
DELPHI  CLASSICS

Ancient Classics Series

*The Fragments of*

**STESICHORUS**

(c. 630-555 BC)



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Stesichorus (1873) by William Smith

Stesichorus (1911)

*The Delphi Classics Catalogue*



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Version 1

*The Fragments of*  
**STESICHORUS OF METAUROS**



*By Delphi Classics, 2024*

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## *The Fragments of Stesichorus*



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## The Translations



*Gioia Tauro, a comune in Calabria, Southern Italy, on the Tyrrhenian coast – Stesichorus was born in Metauros (modern Gioia Tauro) in c. 630 BC.*

## The Fragments



*Translated by J. M. Edmonds, Loeb Classical Library, 1924*

Regarded by the scholars of the Hellenistic age as one of the canonical nine lyric poets, Stesichorus flourished in the sixth century BC. He is best known for composing epic stories in lyric metres and for the colourful ancient traditions concerning his life, such as his opposition to the tyrant Phalaris and the blindness he is said to have incurred and cured by composing verses first insulting and then flattering Helen of Troy. Although his work attracted relatively little interest among ancient commentators, resulting in a low number of extant fragments, Stesichorus exerted an important influence on the representation of myth in sixth century art and on the development of Athenian dramatic poetry.

He was born in Metauros (modern-day Gioia Tauro, southern Italy) in c. 630 BC. Some commentators claimed that he came from Himera in Sicily, but this is now believed to be false. When exiled from Pallantium in Arcadia he came to Katane (Catania) in Sicily, where he is believed to have died in 555 BC. There is still much confusion regarding the dates and events of his life. We do know that he was later than the lyric poet Alcman, since he was born in the 37<sup>th</sup> Olympiad (632/28 BC). He died in the 56<sup>th</sup> Olympiad (556/2 BC). He had a brother, Mamertinus, who was an expert in geometry and a second brother, Helianax, who served as a law-giver. More importantly, he was called 'Stesichorus' as he was believed to be the first poet to establish a chorus of singers to the cithara; his name was originally Teisias.

The Suda (a large tenth-century Byzantine encyclopedia of the ancient world) claims that Stesichorus was the son of Hesiod, though this has been largely dismissed as fantasy. Still, the legend is also mentioned by Tzetzes and the Hesiodic scholiast Proclus. According to another tradition known to Cicero, Stesichorus was the grandson of Hesiod, yet even this verges on anachronism since Hesiod was composing verses in c. 700 BC, long before Stesichorus' birth. Certainly, he can be regarded as Hesiod's literary "heir", as his treatment of Helen in the *Palinode*, for example, may have owed much to Hesiod's *Catalogue of Women*, which may explain the original source of confusion about their relationship. According to Stephanus of Byzantium and the philosopher Plato, Stesichorus' father was named Euphemus, but an inscription on a herm from Tivoli lists him as Euclides.

Stesichorus' lyrical treatment of epic themes was well-suited to a western Greek audience, owing to the popularity of hero-cults in southern Italy and Magna Graecia at the time; for example, the cults of Philoctetes at Sybaris, Diomedes at Thurii and the Atreidae at Tarentum. It was also a sympathetic environment for his most famous poem, the *Palinode*, composed in praise of Helen, an important cult figure in the Doric diaspora. However, the life and works of the western Greeks were similar to their eastern counterparts and his poetry cannot be regarded exclusively as a product of the Greek west. His fragments reveal both Doric and Ionian influences, which is consistent with the Suda's claim that his birthplace was either Metauria or Himera, both of which were founded by colonists of mixed Ionian and Doric descent. On the other hand, such a flavour was fashionable among later poets, as shown in the lyrics of the Ionian poets Simonides and Bacchylides. Stesichorus' poetry included a

description of the river Himera, as well as praise for the town named after it. His poem *Geryoneis* included a famous description of Pallantium in Arcadia.

His possible exile from Arcadia is attributed by some to a rivalry between Tegea and Sparta. Traditional accounts indicate that he was politically active in Magna Graecia. Aristotle mentions two public speeches by Stesichorus: one to the people of Himera, warning them against Phalaris, and another to the people of Locri, warning them against presumption (likely in reference to their war against Rhegium). Philodemus tells of a time when Stesichorus stood between two unnamed armies and reconciled them with the power of his song, though there is a similar story about Terpander. According to the ninth century scholar Photius, the term *eight all* (used by gamblers at dice) derives from the expensive burial the poet received outside Catania, including a monument with eight pillars, eight steps and eight corners. Yet, the third century grammarian Julius Pollux attributed the term to an ‘eight all ways’ tomb given to the poet outside Himera.

According to the Suda, Stesichorus’ works were collected into 26 books, but each of these was probably a long, narrative poem. The titles of more than half of them are recorded by ancient sources, with notable examples being *Helen*, *Sack of Troy*, *Nostoi* (‘The Returns’ — dealing with the return of the Greek warriors from Troy), *Geryoneis* (relating the theft by Heracles of Geryon’s cattle), *Thebaid* (‘A Seven against Thebes’ tale), *Oresteia* and *The Funeral Games of Pelias*.

The Suda also refers to the fact, now verified by papyrus fragments, that Stesichorus composed verses in units of three stanzas (strophe, antistrophe and epode), a format later adopted by Bacchylides and Pindar. This three-stanza format was popularly referred to as the ‘three of Stesichorus’ in a proverbial saying rebuking cultural buffoons (e.g. “You don’t even know the three of Stesichorus!”). According to others, however, this saying could instead refer to the three lines of the *Palinode*, addressed to Helen of Troy:

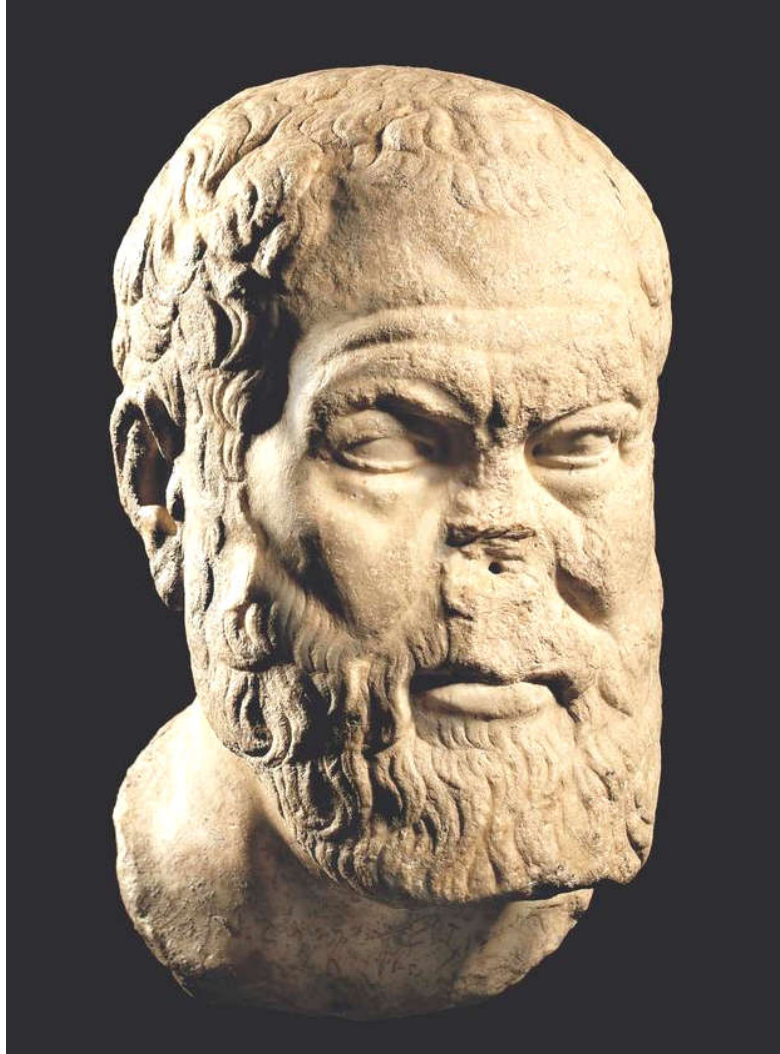
There is no truth in that story,  
You didn’t ride in the well-rowed galleys,  
You didn’t reach the walls of Troy.

These famous lines (as reported by Plato in *Phaedrus* 243a) were reportedly written by Stesichorus as a recantation, or rejection, of the Myth of Helen going to Troy. The story goes that Stesichorus had written slanderous verses about the mythical Queen of Sparta, blaming her for the cause of the Trojan War. In response, Helen suddenly blinded the poet and he quickly redressed his insult by the writing of the *Palinode*.

The ancients associated the lyrical qualities of Stesichorus with the voice of the nightingale, as in this quote from the *Palatine Anthology*:

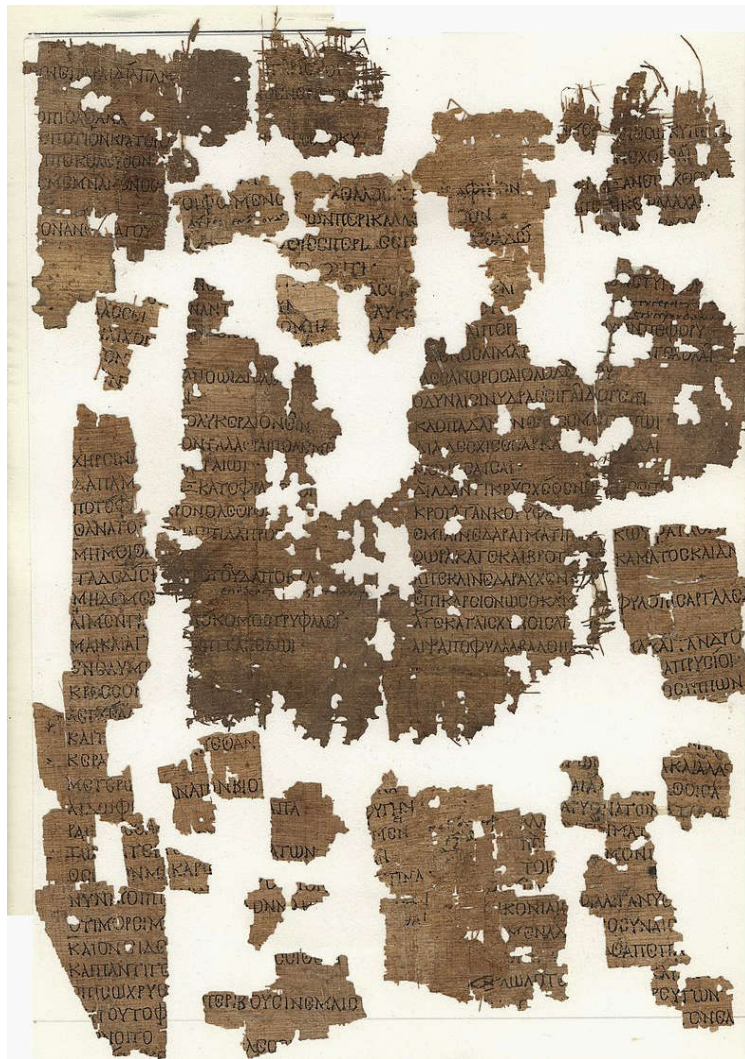
“...at his birth, when he had just reached the light of day, a nightingale, travelling through the air from somewhere or other, perched unnoticed on his lips and struck up her clear song.”

The account is repeated by Pliny the Elder. Nevertheless, it was the epic quality of Stesichorus’ work that most impressed ancient commentators. Dionysius of Halicarnassus commends Stesichorus for “...the magnificence of the settings of his subject matter; in them he has preserved the traits and reputations of his characters” and Longinus ranks him among Herodotus, Archilochus and Plato as the ‘most Homeric’ of authors.



*Possible bust of Stesichorus, private collection, France*





*The P. Oxy XXXII 2617 fragment, which contains remains of Stesichorus' 'Geryoneis'*

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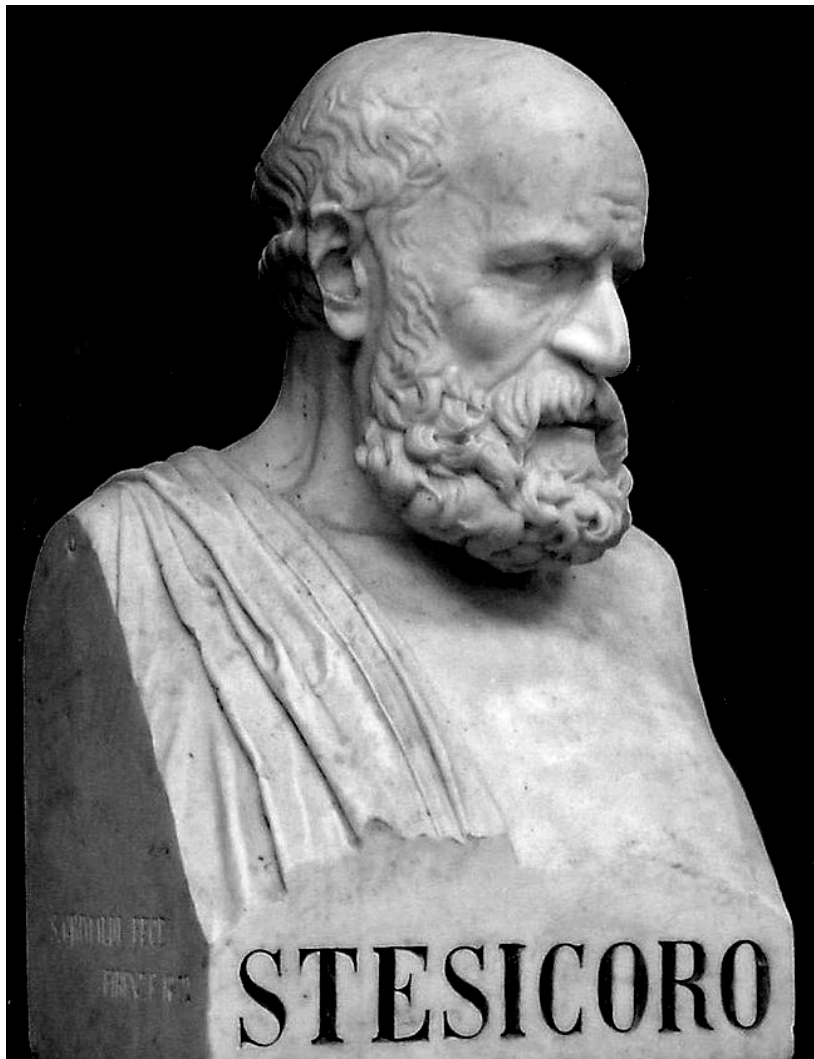
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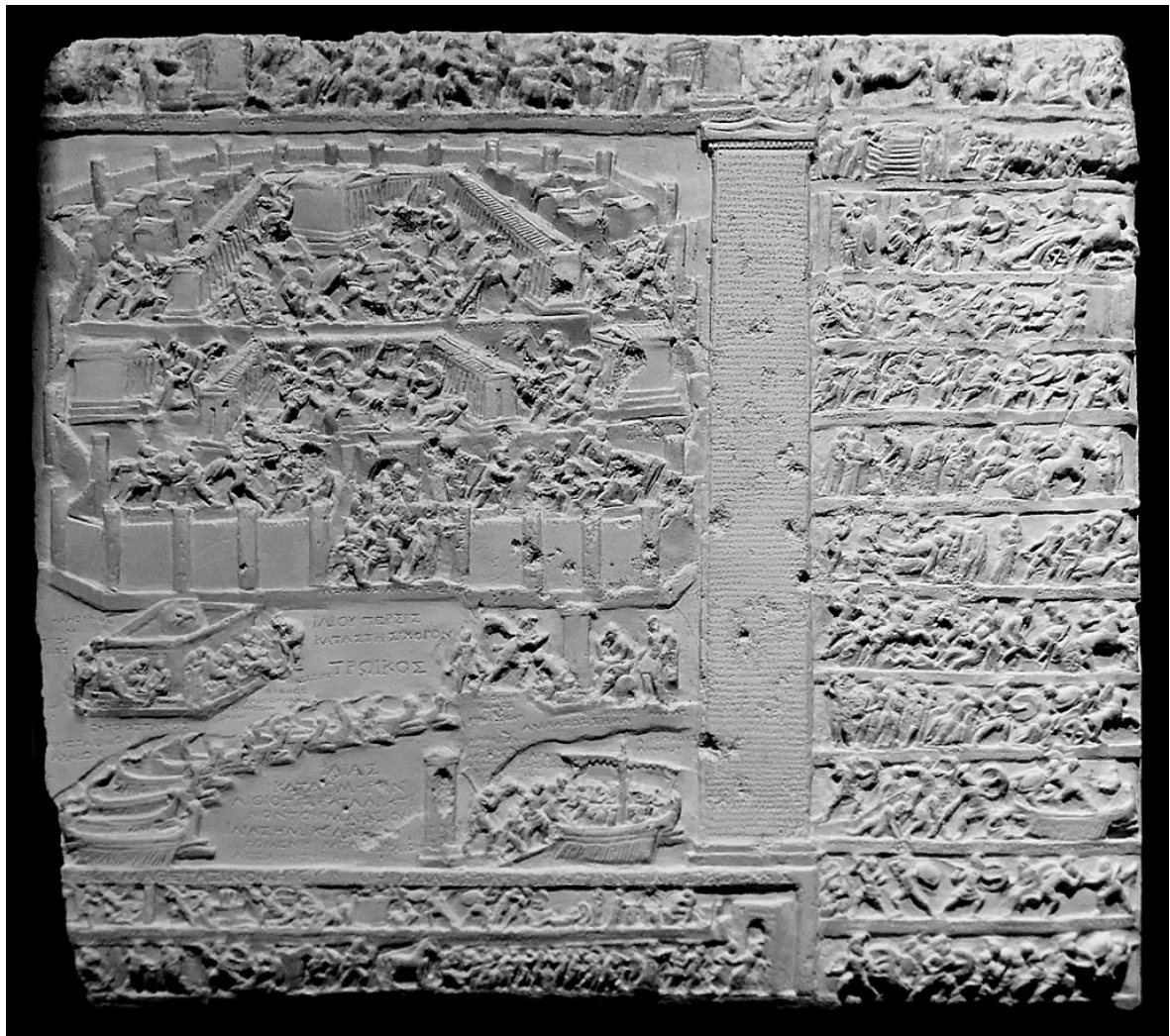
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*Bust of Stesichorus, Bellini Garden, Catania, Italy*



*A scene from the 'Tabula Iliaca', a first century AD marble relief, bearing the inscription "Sack of Troy according to Stesichorus"*

## FRAGMENTS PERTAINING TO THE LIFE OF STESICHORUS



SIMONIDES *FRAGMENT* 61:

For thus have Homer and Stesichorus sung to the peoples.

Plutarch *Music* [on Linus, Thamyris, Demodocus, etc.]: The manner of the poems of the aforesaid poets was not free and without metre, but like those of Stesichorus and the older lyric poets who made epic verse and put it to music.

The Same: We learn that the Harmatian Nome was the work of Olympus from the treatise of Glaucus on *The Ancient Poets*, where we are also informed that the poet imitated by Stesichorus of Himera was neither Orpheus nor Terpander nor Archilochus nor Thaletas, but Olympus, and that Stesichorus made use of the Harmatian Nome and the dactylic form, which according to some authorities comes from the Orthian or High-pitched Nome.

The Same: Innovations in rhythm are ascribed to Alcman, and also to Stesichorus, in both cases without departing from the beautiful manner.

Suidas *Lexicon*: Sappho: — ... flourished in the 42nd Olympiad (B.C. 612-609), in the time of Alcaeus, Stesichorus, [cf. Euseb.] and Pittacus.

Suidas *Lexicon*: Simonides: — ... In point of time he comes next to Stesichorus... He flourished in the 56th Olympiad (556-553), though some authorities have assigned him to the 62nd (532-529).

Cicero *Republic*: Stesichorus cannot have been Hesiod's grandson through his daughter as some authorities declare. For the year of his death was that of the birth of Simonides, in the 56th Olympiad (556-553).

Tzetzes *Life of Hesiod*: Aristotle the philosopher... in the *Constitution of Orchomenus* declares that Stesichorus the lyric poet was the son of Hesiod by Ctimene sister of Amphiphanes and Ganyctor and daughter of Phegeus. But this Stesichorus was a contemporary of Pythagoras the philosopher and Phalaris of Agrigentum.

Aristotle *Rhetoric* [on examples]: And secondly there is the fable, such as that of Stesichorus about Phalaris... For Stesichorus, when the Himeraeans elected Phalaris general with unlimited powers and proposed to give him a bodyguard, made a speech to them at the end of which he told them the following fable: A horse who had a meadow all to himself, found his title disputed by a stag who came and destroyed the pasturage. Desiring to avenge himself, he begged the man's help to punish the stag, which the man promised him if he would take bit and bridle of him and let him mount him javelins in hand. The bargain struck, the man got on his back; but the horse immediately found that he had received not vengeance on the stag but servitude to the man. 'Even so you,' said Stesichorus, 'should beware lest your desire to be avenged on your enemies bring you into a similar plight. You are bridled now by choosing a

dictator: if you give him a bodyguard and allow him to get on your back, you will quickly find yourselves the slaves of Phalaris.’

Aristotle *Rhetoric* [on examples]: Such cases are met by enigmatic remarks, for instance that of Stesichorus to the Locrians that they must not prove wantons, or the crickets would chirp from the ground.

Stephanus of Byzantium *Lexicon*: Mataurus: — a city of Sicily [really Calabria] of Locrian foundation: the ethnic adjective is *Mataurine*. Stesichorus son of Enphemus the lyric poet was a Mataurine by birth.

Plato *Phaedrus*: ... Stesichorus son of Euphemus, the Himeraean.

Himerius *Declamations*: Sicilian Himera is not only freed of tyrants but adorned with words, by Stesichorus.

Pliny *Natural History* [on eclipses]: ... Great men were they indeed (Thales and Hipparchus), great beyond mortal greatness, to have grasped the law of these mighty luminaries and freed the miserable human mind from the apprehension it felt, at their eclipse, of crimes or a death; an apprehension expressed, we know, by the sublime lips of poets like Stesichorus and Pindar when they saw an eclipse of the sun. [Ginzel 2. p. 525 gives 4 notable eclipses of the sun between the total eclipses of 585 and 463, of which one (557) was total.]

The *Parian Chronicle*: From the year when the poet Aeschylus first won with a tragedy and the poet Euripides was born, and when the poet Stesichorus arrived in Greece 232 years, being the archonship of Philocrates at Athens (B.C. 480).

The Same: From the year when Stesichorus of Himera, the second, won at Athens, and Megalopolis was founded... [incomplete; but the date must be B.C. 370 or 369]

Pollux *Vocabulary* [on dicing]: Moreover in dicing, the throw which amounted to eight was called *Stesichorus*; for the proverb ‘Eight all’ is said to have come from the tomb of that poet at Himera, every feature of which was eightfold.

Lucian *Longevity*: The lyric poet Anacreon lived 85 years and the lyrist Stesichorus the same.

Suid. *ἐπίτηδευμα*:— ‘profession, calling.’ Compare ‘Hicanus [*able*] by name, robber by trade’; this is the man who killed Aeschylus the flute-player and Stesichorus the singer to the lyre.

Photius *Lexicon*: — Eight all: — We are told that Stesichorus was buried sumptuously at Catana near the gate called after him Stesichorus, and the proverb arose from the monument’s having eight columns, eight steps (or bases), and eight corners. Another explanation is, that when Aletes, in obedience to an oracle, made Corinth a city he established the citizens in eight tribes and the city in eight parts.

Suidas *Lexicon*: Stesichorus: — Son of Euphorbus or Euphemus, or according to yet other authorities, of Eucleides, or again of Hyetes, or of Hesiod; his city Himera in Sicily; for he is called the Himeraean; or according to another account, Matauria in Italy. Others say that he went to Catana when banished from Pallantium in Arcadia,



and there died, and was buried before the gate which is called after him. In date he is later than the lyric poet Alcman, for he was born in the 37th Olympiad (B.C. 632-629) and died in the 56th (556-553). He had two brothers, one Mamertinus a geometer, and the other Helianax a lawgiver. He was a lyric poet. His poems are in the Doric dialect and in 26 Books. It is said that for writing abuse of Helen he was struck blind, but received his sight again on writing an encomium of her in obedience to a dream. This encomium is known as the *Palinode*. He was called Stesichorus because he first set up choruses of singers to the lyre, his original name being Teisias.

*Palatine Anthology*: On Stesichorus; by Antipater: The smoky plain of Catana hath given burial to that copious mouthpiece of an immeasurable muse, Stesichorus, in whose breast, so runs the philosophic rede of Pythagoras, the soul that had been Homer's found a second dwelling-place.

*Cicero Orations against Verres*: When Himera was destroyed, as many of the citizens as were left by the calamity of war had gathered at Thermae, within the confines of the same district and not far from their former home. These thought to be recovering the fame and fortune of their fathers by gathering in the new town the ancestral embellishments of the old. Among these was a number of bronze statues, including one of Himera herself, represented in the shape and dress of a woman, bearing the name of the town and the river upon which it stood, and also a statue of Stesichorus as an old man bending over a book, a masterpiece of art, they tell us, representing a man who dwelt indeed at Himera, but enjoyed through his genius a great and still living reputation in every part of Greece.

*Greek Inscriptions*: A fragment of a herm found at Tibur:

Stesichorus son of Eucleides of Himera.

Athenaeus *Doctors at Dinner* (see Simonides *Life* below).

Pliny *Natural History* [on the song of the nightingale]: In a word, that tiny mouth contains all that the ingenuity of human art has been able to derive from the elaborate intricacies of flute-playing, and it is beyond all doubt that a sweetness as of this bird's song was plainly foretold when she sang upon the lips of the infant Stesichorus.

Ammianus Marcellinus *History*: The story goes that Socrates, when awaiting in prison the execution of his sentence, heard a man perform with some skill a song of the lyric poet Stesichorus, and begged him to teach it him that he might sing it before it was too late, and when the musician asked him what could be the use of it replied 'I want to die knowing something more.'

Horace *Odes*: Albeit Maeonian Homer takes the higher place, the Muses of Pindar and of Ceos, of Alcaeus with her menaces, of Stesichorus with her stately ways, nevertheless shine bright and clear.

Statius *Silvae*:

and proud Stesichorus

[Longinus] *On the Sublime*: Can Herodotus alone be called ‘most Homeric’? Rather was there Stesichorus before him, and Archilochus; and more than all these Plato, who drew off rills innumerable from that Homeric spring. [of. Dio Chrys. 55 p. 559]

Dionysius of Halicarnassus *Criticism of the Ancient Writers*: Take Stesichorus. While he makes his mark with the same superior characteristics as both the aforesaid authors (Pindar and Simonides), he succeeds where they are wanting, and that is in the grandeur of the setting of his theme, in which he always has an eye to the characters and stations of his *dramatis personae*.

The Same *Literary Composition*: The older lyric poets, by which I mean Alcaeus and Sappho, wrote in short stanzas... while poets like Stesichorus and Pindar made their sentences longer and distributed them among many various metres and lines, simply from a desire for variety.

The Same: Of the others, those who practised the same golden mean may indeed appear to come a long way behind Homer when compared with him, but if they are examined on their own merits will be found worthy of study. Among lyric poets I would instance Stesichorus and Alcaeus, among writers of tragedy Sophocles, among historians Herodotus... For it would be well-nigh impossible to find better exponents than these of the art of composition.

Quintilian *Elements of Oratory*: Among the nine lyric poets Pindar stands easily first... The strength of Stesichorus’ genius is shown among other things by his subject-matter. He sings of great wars and famous chieftains, sustaining all the weight of epic poetry with a lyre. Indeed he gives his characters the dignity that belongs to them both in speech and action, and if he had only kept within proper bounds might well have been counted a good second to Homer; but he is redundant and extravagant, though indeed these are the faults of a well-stored mind.

Suidas *Lexicon*: *θεμις*: — Justice. Compare Aelian: ‘If it is just for the man of Himera to raise his eyes to Homer.’

Hermogenes *Kinds of Style*. Herein Stesichorus too appears to give peculiar pleasure by his frequent use of epithets.

Athenaeus *Doctors at Dinner*: Chamaeleon in his treatise *On Stesichorus* declares that not only Homer’s verse was sung to music, but that of Hesiod and Archilochus, and even that of Minnervus and Phocylides.

Cicero *Letters to Atticus*: If this compact with me is not being kept, then I hug myself to think how our gallant Jerusalemite plebeian-maker will know what a fine return he has made me for my brilliant orations in his behalf, to which you may now expect a super-palinode.

Suidas *Lexicon*: *παλινοδία*: — a return journey; but *παλινοδία* means a return or counter song, or saying the opposite to what one has said; the verb is *παλινοδώ*; and there is a proverb ‘singing a palinode or recantation.’

Macarius *Proverbs*; Stesichorus sings a palinode: used of those who change their minds for the better.

Suidas *Lexicon*: — The three of Stesichorus: — strophe, antistrophe, and epode; because all the poetry of Stesichorus was epodic. And when the ancients wanted to abuse an uncultivated man they said that he didn't know even the three of Stesichorus.

# FRAGMENTS FROM THE POEMS OF STESICHORUS

*[arranged in antiquity in 26 Books, some of the poems occupying more than one Book]*



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