



Alcaeus  
Collected Fragments

DELPHI  CLASSICS

Ancient Classics Series

*Collected Fragments of*

**ALCAEUS**

(c. 625/620-c. 580 BC)



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Life of Alcaeus (1922) by J. M. Edmonds

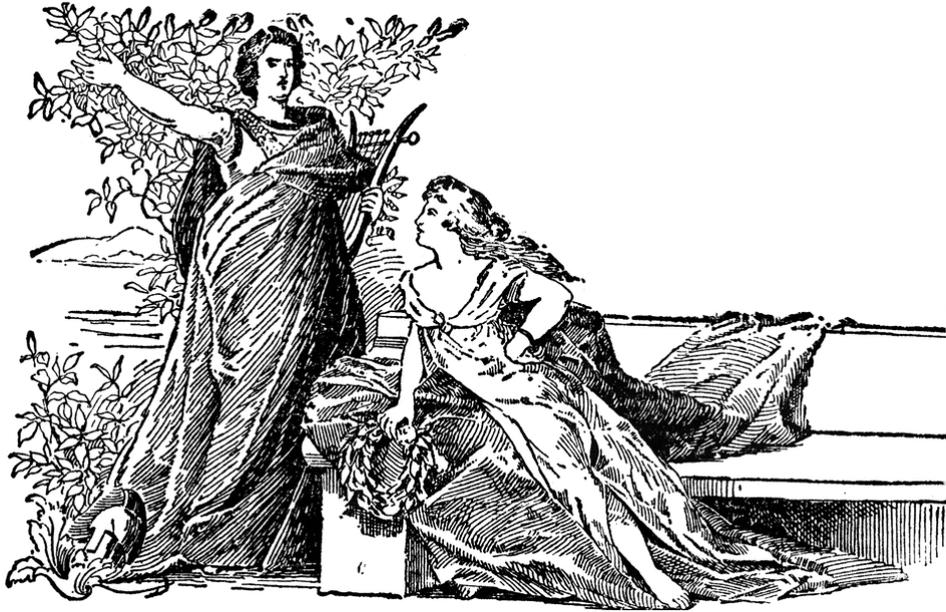
*The Delphi Classics Catalogue*



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Version 1

*Collected Fragments of*  
**ALCAEUS OF MYTILENE**



*By Delphi Classics, 2022*

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## *Collected Fragments of Alcaeus*

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## The Translation



*Mytilene, the capital of the Greek island of Lesbos — Alcaeus' birthplace*



*Ancient ruins at Mytilene*

## The Fragments



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

Alcaeus of Mytilene (c. 625/620 – c. 580 BC) was a lyric poet from the Greek island of Lesbos, who is credited with inventing the Alcaic stanza (which consists of two Alcaic hendecasyllables, followed by an Alcaic enneasyllable and an Alcaic decasyllable). A contemporary of Sappho, also from Lesbos, he was included in the canonical list of nine lyric poets by the scholars of Hellenistic Alexandria. He was born into the aristocratic governing class of Mytilene, where he was involved in political disputes and feuds. By the end of the seventh century BC, Mytilene was the most influential of all the North Aegean Greek cities, with a strong navy and colonies securing its trade-routes in the Hellespont. The city had long been ruled by kings born to the Penthilid clan, but during Alcaeus's life, the Penthilids were a depleted force and rival aristocrats and their factions contended for supreme power. Alcaeus and his older brothers were passionately involved in the struggle, though they experienced little success.

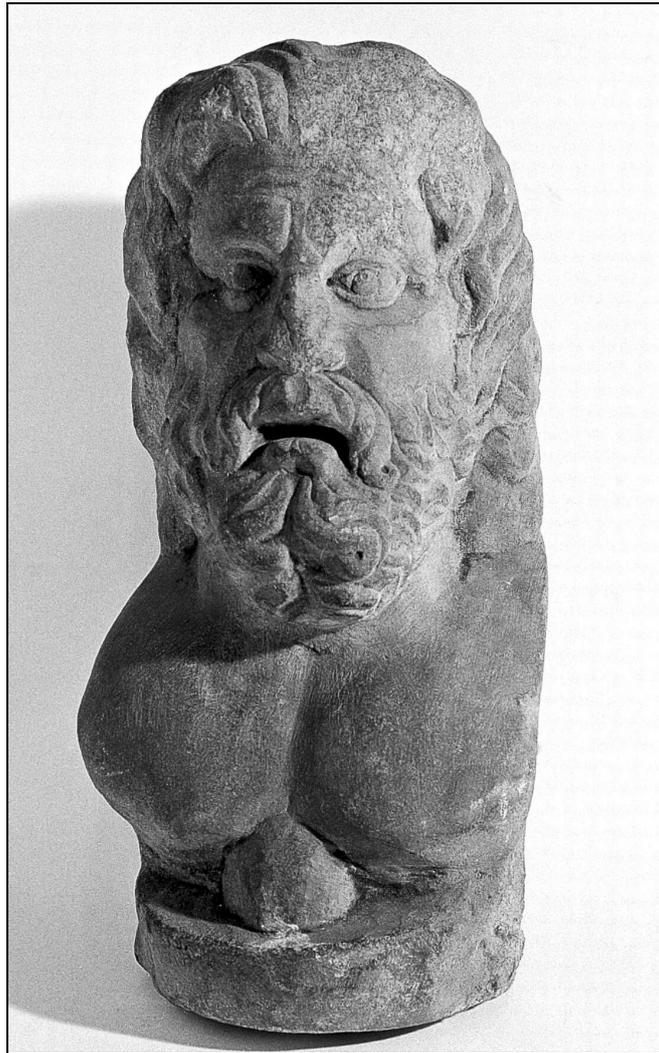
At some point prior to 600, Mytilene fought Athens for control of Sigeion and Alcaeus is believed to have taken part in the fighting. According to Herodotus, he threw away his shield to make good his escape from the victorious Athenians and then celebrated the occasion in a poem that he sent to his friend, Melanippus. It is thought that Alcaeus travelled widely during his years in exile, including at least one visit to Egypt. He wrote numerous verses in celebration of Antimenides' return, including a reference to his valour in slaying the larger opponent and he proudly describes the military hardware that adorned his family home.

Since both Alcaeus and Sappho composed for the entertainment of Mytilenean friends, they would have had opportunities to associate with each other, including at such events as the Kallisteia, an annual festival celebrating the island's federation under Mytilene, held at the 'Messon', where Sappho is known to have performed with female choirs. Alcaeus refers to Sappho in his poetry in terms more typical of a divinity, as "holy/pure, honey-smiling Sappho", which may have been inspired by the witnessing of her performances. The works of Sappho and Alcaeus represent for many the high point of brilliance for the development of early Greek lyrical poetry.

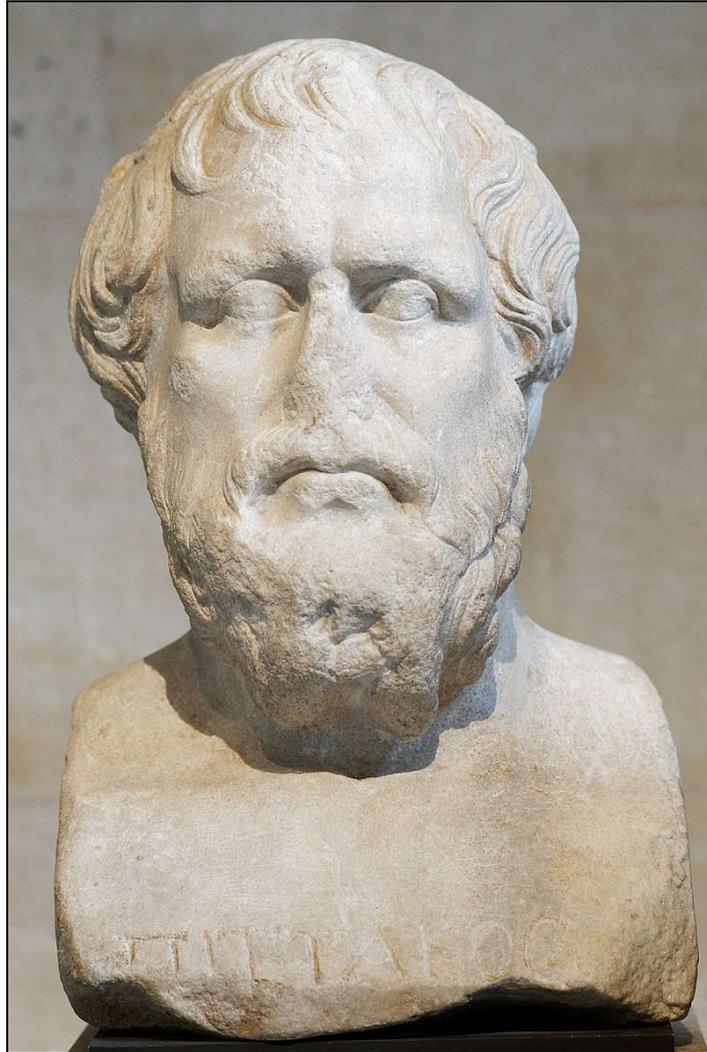
Alcaeus' poems were collected into ten books, with elaborate commentaries, by the Alexandrian scholars Aristophanes of Byzantium and Aristarchus of Samothrace sometime in the 3rd century BC. Sadly, today his verses exist only in fragmentary form, varying in size from mere phrases to entire groups of stanzas. Some ancient critics held Alcaeus even higher than Pindar in their estimation of his poetical abilities. Dionysius of Halicarnassus wrote: "Observe in Alcaeus the sublimity, brevity and sweetness coupled with stern power, his splendid figures, and his clearness which was unimpaired by the dialect; and above all mark his manner of expressing his sentiments on public affairs", while Quintilian, after commending Alcaeus for his excellence "in that part of his works where he inveighs against tyrants and contributes to good morals; in his language he is concise, exalted, careful and often like an orator"; goes on to add: "but he descended into wantonness and amours, though better fitted for higher things".

The poems are conventionally grouped according to five genres.

- *Political songs*, covering the power struggles on Lesbos with the passion and vigour of a partisan, cursing his opponents, rejoicing in their deaths, delivering blood-curdling homilies on the consequences of political inaction and exhorting his comrades to heroic defiance.
- *Drinking songs*: According to the grammarian Athenaeus, Alcaeus made every occasion an excuse for drinking and he has provided posterity several quotes in proof of it. Alcaeus exhorts his friends to drink in celebration of a tyrant's death, to drink away their sorrows, to drink because life is short, to drink through winter storms and to drink through the heat of summer.
- *Hymns*: Alcaeus sang about the gods in the spirit of the Homeric hymns, to entertain his companions rather than to glorify the gods and in the same meters that he used for his 'secular' lyrics.
- *Love songs*: Almost all Alcaeus' amorous verses have vanished without trace. There is a brief reference to his love poetry in a passage by Cicero. Horace, who often wrote in imitation of Alcaeus, sketches in verse one of the Lesbian poet's favourite subjects: Lycus of the black hair and eyes.
- *Miscellaneous*: Alcaeus wrote on a wide variety of subjects and themes that contradictions in his character emerge. Athenaeus has preserved some verses about perfumed ointments to prove just how unwarlike Alcaeus could be and he quoted his description of the armour adorning the walls of his house as proof that he could be unusually warlike for a lyric poet.



*An assumed bust of Alcaeus, Wellcome Collection, London*



*Roman bust of Pittacus (c. 640 – 568 BC), an ancient Mytilenean military general and one of the Seven Sages of Greece. He was the dominant political figure of Alcaeus's time, voted supreme power by the political assembly of Mytilene. Pittacus appears to have governed well (590-580 BC), even allowing Alcaeus and his faction to return home in peace.*

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*'Sappho and Alcaeus' by Lawrence Alma-Tadema, The Walters Art Museum, 1881*

## **BOOK I. HYMNS**

# 1. TO APOLLO

Himerius *Orationes*: I will tell you likewise one of Alcaeus' tales, a tale which he sang in lyric verse when he wrote a paean to Apollo. And I tell it you not according to the Lesbian verse — for I am not of poetic humour — but changing the actual metre of the lyric verse into prose. When Apollo was born, Zeus furnished him forth with a golden headband and a lyre, and giving him moreover a chariot to drive — and they were swans that drew it — , would have him go to Delphi and the spring of Castaly, thence to deliver justice and right in oracles to Greece. Nevertheless once he was mounted in the chariot, Apollo bade his swans fly to the land of the Hyperboreans. Now when the Delphians heard of it, they set a paean to a tune and held dances of youths about the tripod, and besought the God to come back thence. Yet Apollo dealt law among those of that country for a whole year. Then, when he thought it was time that the tripods of Delphi, too, should give sound, he bade the swans fly back again from the Hyperboreans. Now it is summer, and the very midst of summer, when Alcaeus brings Apollo back from that land, and therefore with the summer brightly shining and Apollo present, the lyre, too, puts on a summer wantonness concerning the God. Nightingales sing to him as birds might well sing in Alcaeus, swallows also sing and crickets, not announcing their own fortunes in the world but telling in all their tunes of the God. Castaly, in poetic style, flows with springs of silver, and great Cephissus lifts himself with his waves all shining, in imitation of the Enipeus of Homer. For Alcaeus, like Homer, perforce makes the water able to know that a God is present.

Hephaestion *Handbook of Metre*: The epionic trimeter *a majore* is acatalectic, the so-called Alcaic eleven-syllable... for instance:

O King Apollo, son of great Zeus, e.g. whom thy father did furnish forth at thy birth with golden headband and lyre of shell, and giving thee moreover a swan-drawn chariot to drive, would have thee go to Delphi and the water which is Cephissus' gift to Castaly, there to deliver justice and right in oracles unto Greece; nevertheless, once mounted, thou badest thy swans fly to the land of the Hyperboreans; and although when the Delphians heard of it they set a paean unto flutes and dances of youths around the tripod and besought thee to come e.g. thence, yet for a whole year dealtest thou law in that country; then when it was time for the tripods of Delphi, too, to give sound, thou badest the swans fly back thither. Now it was summer and the midst of summer when thou returnedst from the Hyperboreans; the nightingale sang and the swallow, the cricket sang also to tell mankind of thy fortunes, while Castaly flowed with springs of silver, and great Cephissus lifted his shining waves well knowing that a God was come home.

## 2-5. TO HERMES

Hephaestion Handbook of Metre: As an epichoriambic type of this kind of verse we may compare the so-called Sapphic eleven-syllable, for instance: (Sa. 1)...; it also occurs in Alcaeus — and it is uncertain which of the two poets invented it, though it is called Sapphic — , for instance:

Hail, thou ruler of Cyllene! thee it is my will to sing, whom Maia bare upon the breezy heights unto the love of the omnipotent Son of Cronus.

### 3

Menander Declamations [on genealogic hymns].... But since this literary form is found among the ancients, and some ere this have sung of the birth of Dionysus and others of the birth of Apollo, and Alcaeus of that of Hephaestus also and again of that of Hermes, I have made it a separate class.... The form is useful only to the poet, never to the prose-writer; for the one deals with the midwifery of the Graces and the nursing of the Seasons and the like, whereas the other will of necessity express himself as briefly as possible. [Men. seems to imply that A. did not write a hymn to Dionysus, but cf. 174]

Pausanias *Description of Greece*: Apollo's delight in oxen is shown by Alcaeus in the *Hymn to Hermes*, where he says that Hermes stole oxen from Apollo.

Porphyrio on Horace Ode 1. 10 ['Mercury, thou eloquent son of Atlas' daughter']: A hymn to Mercury by the lyric poet Alcaeus.

The Same ['Thee it was, at whom once Apollo smiled when as a babe thou tookest his quiver while he sought to terrify thee with threats because of thy theft of his oxen']: This story (the theft of the quiver) originated with Alcaeus, and thus for the second time Mercury is made the discoverer of thieving because of the deception wrought by oratory, the art he invented.

Scholiast on Iliad ['Apollo wielder of gold']: Hermes, the son of Zeus and Maia daughter of Atlas, discovered the lyre, and having stolen the oxen of Apollo was found out by the God's power of divination. But when Apollo threatened him, he stole the very bow and arrows that were upon his shoulder. Whereat the God smiled, and gave him the divining-staff from which Hermes came to be called 'God of the golden wand,' and received from him the lyre which has given him the name of 'the wielder of gold' from the strap to which the lyre is fastened.

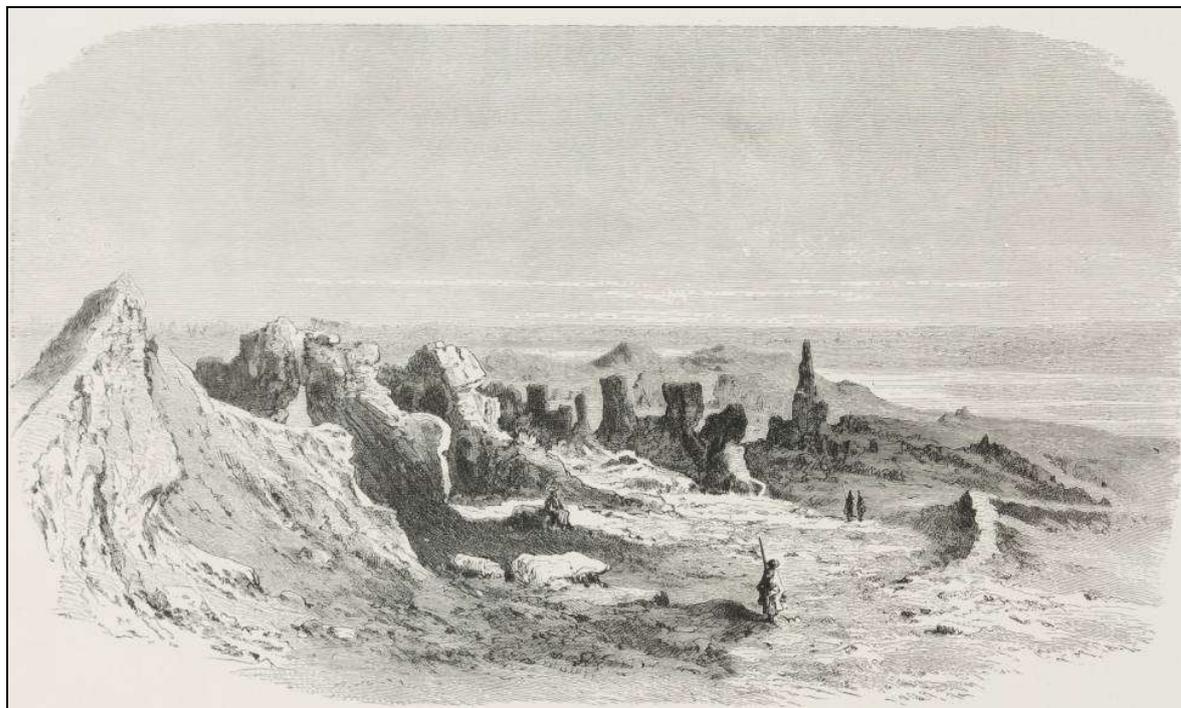
e.g. And when thou stolest away the oxen of Apollo, 'tis true he found them, being Lord of divination; but when he threatened thee full direly, then thou stolest away the very bow and arrows that were upon his shoulder: whereat he smiled, and gave thee the divining-staff from which men know thee to this day as 'God of the golden wand,' and himself received from thee the lyre whence he is called 'Wielder of gold.'



**fr. 424**

τερέων  
**fr. 439**  
Πιτάνα

## The Biography



*Ruins at Sais, Egypt. Sais was the capital of Egypt from 664 to 525 BC, XXVI dynasty, during Alcaeus' lifetime — it is believed that the poet travelled widely during his years in exile, including at least one visit to Egypt.*

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