

**Classic Poetry Series**

**Alcman**  
**- poems -**

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# Alcman()

Alcman (7th century BC) was an Ancient Greek choral lyric poet from Sparta. He is the earliest representative of the Alexandrian canon of the nine lyric poets.

There were six books of Alcman's choral poetry in antiquity (ca. 50-60 hymns), but they were lost at the threshold of the Medieval Age, and Alcman was known only through fragmentary quotations in other Greek authors until the discovery of a papyrus in 1855(?) in a tomb near the second pyramid at Saqqâra in Egypt. The fragment, which is now kept at the Louvre in Paris, France, contains approximately 100 verses of a so-called partheneion, i.e. a song performed by a chorus of young unmarried women. In the 1960s, many more fragments were discovered and published in the collection of the Egyptian papyri from a dig of an ancient garbage dump at Oxyrhynchus. Most of these fragments contain partheneions, but there are also other kinds of hymns among them.

## Dialect

Pausanias says that even though Alcman uses the Doric dialect, which is normally not particularly euphonious, it has not at all spoiled the beauty of his songs.

Alcman's songs were composed in the Greek Dorian dialect of Sparta (the so-called Laconian dialect). This is seen especially in the orthographic peculiarities of the fragments like  $\alpha = \alpha$ ,  $\alpha = \alpha\alpha$ ,  $\alpha = \alpha\alpha$ ,  $\alpha = \alpha$  and the use of the Doric accentuation, though it is uncertain whether these features were actually present in Alcman's original compositions or were added either by Laconian performers in the subsequent generations (see Hinge's opinion below) or even by Alexandrian scholars who gave the text a Doric patina using features of the contemporary, and not the ancient, Doric dialect.

Apollonius Dyscolus describes Alcman as  $\alpha\alpha\alpha\alpha\alpha\alpha\alpha\alpha$  "constantly using the Aeolic dialect". However, the validity of this judgment is limited by the fact that it is said about the use of the digamma in the third-person pronoun  $\alpha\alpha$  "his/her"; it is perfectly Doric as well. Yet, many existing fragments display prosodic, morphological and phraseological features common to the Homeric language of Greek epic poetry, and even markedly Aeolic and un-Doric features ( $\alpha\alpha = \alpha$ ,  $-\alpha\alpha\alpha\alpha = -\alpha\alpha\alpha\alpha$ ) which are not present in Homer itself but will pass on to all the subsequent lyric poets. This mixing of features adds complexity to any analysis of his works.

# Desire

Alcman

# Night

Over the drowsy earth still night prevails;  
Calm sleep the mountain tops and shady vales,  
The rugged cliffs and hollow glens;  
The cattle on the hill. Deep in the sea,  
The countless finny race and monster brood  
Tranquil repose. Even the busy bee  
Forgets her daily toil. The silent wood  
No more with noisy hum of insect rings;  
And all the feathered tribes, by gentle sleep subdued,  
Roost in the glade, and hang their drooping wings.

Alcman

# Slumbering Are The Mountains

Alcman

# The Mountain Summits Sleep

Alcman