Sappho and the Greek Lyric Poets

SAPPHO AND OTHERS

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Σαπφὼ καὶ οἱ λυρικοί

Translated from the Greek with AI (Claude) and edited



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INTRODUCTION

Between about 680 and 450 BC, before tragedy and philosophy, Greek poetry was mostly short, personal and sung. Soldiers, aristocrats and choruses of girls sang to the lyre or the pipe at drinking parties, weddings, festivals and funerals, about love, war, wine, politics, old age and the gods. Almost all of it is lost. What survives are a few complete poems and many fragments, quoted by later grammarians and critics or recovered from torn papyrus found in the sands of Egypt.

This selection gathers the best known: Sappho's Hymn to Aphrodite and her poem of jealous longing, "He seems to me equal to the gods," with the papyrus poems on Anactoria and Atthis; Alcaeus' ship of state and drinking songs; Archilochus on the shield he threw away; Tyrtaeus urging Spartans to fight in the front line; Mimnermus and Solon on youth, age and justice; Alcman's song for a Spartan girls' chorus; Ibycus and Anacreon on desire; Simonides' Danae and his epitaphs for the dead of Thermopylae; and three of Pindar's victory odes. Sappho comes first, followed by Alcaeus, from the same island of Lesbos; the other poets follow in rough chronological order. Each poem keeps the number it has in the edition used, so the reader opens on Sappho fr. 1, the Hymn to Aphrodite.

The poems are shown line by line, with gaps in the text marked [...]. Fragments often begin or end mid-sentence because the ancient author who quoted them stopped there.

Sappho

Of Lesbos (around 600 BC): the Hymn to Aphrodite, "He seems to me equal to the gods," Anactoria, Atthis, weddings.

HYMN TO APHRODITE

Sappho calls Aphrodite down from heaven once more to help her win a girl who flees her.

Sappho fr. 1
Immortal Aphrodite on your many-colored throne,
child of Zeus, weaver of wiles, I beg you:
do not crush me with anguish or with grief,
lady, in my heart;

Sappho fr. 1.5
but come here, if ever at another time
hearing my voice from far away
you listened, and leaving your father's house
of gold you came,
yoking your chariot; and lovely,
swift sparrows drew you over the black earth,
whirling their wings thick and fast, down from the sky
through the middle air.

Sappho fr. 1.13
Quickly they arrived; and you, blessed one,
smiling with your immortal face,
asked what I had suffered this time, and why
I was calling this time,
and what I most wanted to happen for me
in my maddened heart. "Whom now do you want
Persuasion
to lead into your love? Who,
Sappho, is wronging you?

Sappho fr. 1.21
For if she flees, soon she will pursue;
if she refuses gifts, she will give them;
if she does not love, soon she will love,
even against her will."
Come to me now, too, and free me
from cruel cares; whatever my heart longs
to see fulfilled, fulfill; and you yourself
be my ally.

HE SEEMS TO ME EQUAL TO THE GODS

Watching a girl laugh with a man, Sappho feels her tongue break, fire under her skin, near death.

Sappho fr. 2
He seems to me equal to the gods,
that man, whoever he is, who sits facing
you and, close beside you, to your sweet voice
listens,
and to your lovely laughter—which, I swear,
sets the heart in my breast fluttering;
for the moment I look at you, no voice
is left in me;

Sappho fr. 2.9
but my tongue breaks, and a thin
fire has suddenly run beneath my skin,
my eyes see nothing at all, my ears
are drumming.
Sweat pours down me, trembling
seizes all of me, greener than grass
I am, and little short of dying
I seem—another woman.
But everything must be endured, [since even a poor man][1]

1 The last line begins a new stanza; the rest of the poem is lost.

STARS AROUND THE MOON

The stars hide their light when the full moon shines on the earth.

Sappho fr. 3

The stars around the beautiful moon
at once hide away their shining form
whenever, at her fullest, she shines most brightly
on the earth [...]
[...] silvery.

THE APPLE ORCHARD

Cool water murmurs through apple branches, and sleep streams down from the leaves.

Sappho fr. 4

And all around, cool water murmurs through branches
of apple, and from the trembling leaves
slumber streams down.

COME, CYPRIAN

Sappho asks Aphrodite to pour nectar in golden cups at the feast.

Sappho fr. 5

[...] Come, Cyprian,
in golden cups, gracefully,
nectar mingled with our festivities
pour it for us like wine.[2]

I LOVED YOU ONCE, ATTHIS

A single line remembering an old love for Atthis.

Sappho fr. 33

I loved you once, Atthis, long ago.

2 The Cyprian is Aphrodite, who was said to have come ashore on Cyprus at her birth.

A SMALL CHILD

Sappho recalls how young and graceless the girl once seemed.

Sappho fr. 34 You seemed to me a small child, and graceless.

TWO MINDS

A single line: the poet does not know what to do.

Sappho fr. 36 I don't know what to do: I am of two minds.

TOUCHING THE SKY

A single line: she does not expect to reach the sky with her arms.

Sappho fr. 37 I don't expect to touch the sky with my two arms.

LIKE A CHILD TO ITS MOTHER

A single line comparing herself to a child fluttering after its mother.

Sappho fr. 38 And like a child after its mother, I have fluttered.

THE NIGHTINGALE

A single line on the nightingale, messenger of spring.

Sappho fr. 39 Spring's messenger, the nightingale with a voice of desire.

BITTERSWEET

Limb-loosening Love shakes her again, a bittersweet creature no one can resist.

Sappho fr. 40 Once again limb-loosening Love shakes me—
bittersweet, irresistible, a creeping thing.

ATTHIS FLIES TO ANDROMEDA

Atthis has tired of Sappho and turns to her rival Andromeda.

Sappho fr. 41

Atthis, you have come to hate
thinking of me, and you fly off to Andromeda.

WIND ON THE MOUNTAIN OAKS

Love shakes her heart like a wind falling on mountain oaks.

Sappho fr. 42

Love shook my heart again—
a wind on the mountain falling on oaks.

MIDNIGHT

The moon and the Pleiades have set; it is midnight, and she sleeps alone.

Sappho fr. 52

The moon has set,
and the Pleiades; it is the middle
of the night, the hour goes by,
and I sleep alone.

AROUND THE ALTAR

Under a full moon, women take their places as if around an altar.

Sappho fr. 53

The moon appeared full,
and they took their places as if around an altar.

TO A WOMAN WITHOUT CULTURE

A woman with no share in the Muses' roses will be forgotten after death.

Sappho fr. 68

Dead, you will lie there, and no memory of you
will remain, then or later; for you have no share in the roses
of Pieria; unseen in the house of Hades too
you will drift among the dim dead, flown away.[3]

A GIRL OF SUCH WISDOM

No girl who ever sees the sun will have such wisdom as this one.

Sappho fr. 69

I don't think any girl who looks upon the light of the sun
will ever have wisdom, at any time to come,
like hers.

THE COUNTRY GIRL

Sappho mocks a rival who cannot even arrange her dress.

Sappho fr. 70

What country girl bewitches your mind,
one who doesn't even know how to pull her dress down
over her ankles?

SWEET MOTHER

A girl cannot work at her loom, overcome with longing for a boy.

Sappho fr. 90

Sweet mother, I really can't work my loom;
longing for a boy has crushed me, by slender Aphrodite's
will.

3 Pieria, near Mount Olympus, was the birthplace of the Muses.

WEDDING SONG

Builders are told to raise the roof-beam high for a giant of a bridegroom.

Sappho fr. 91

Raise high the roof-beam—
Hymenaeus!
lift it, you builders!
Hymenaeus!
The bridegroom is coming, the equal of Ares,
Hymenaeus!
far bigger than a big man.
Hymenaeus![4]

THE APPLE

A bride is like the apple left on the topmost bough, out of the pickers' reach.

Sappho fr. 93

Like the sweet apple reddening on the topmost bough,
top of the topmost: the apple-pickers forgot it—
no, not forgot it: they couldn't reach it.

THE HYACINTH

A hyacinth trampled by shepherds on the mountains.

Sappho fr. 94

Like the hyacinth in the mountains that shepherd men
trample underfoot, and on the ground the flower lies purple
[...]

4 "Hymenaeus" was the ritual cry of wedding songs, calling on the god of marriage.

EVENING STAR

The evening star brings home the sheep, the goat and the child.

Sappho fr. 95

Evening Star, bringing back everything that shining Dawn
scattered:
you bring the sheep, you bring the goat, you bring the child
home to its mother.

BEAUTIFUL AND GOOD

Beauty is only for looking at; the good man will be beautiful too.

Sappho fr. 101

The man who is beautiful is good just to look at,
but the man who is good will at once be beautiful too.

VIRGINITY

A single line: a bride asks whether she still longs for her girlhood.

Sappho fr. 102

Do I still long for my virginity?

SOME SAY AN ARMY

The most beautiful thing is whatever one loves: Helen proves it, and Sappho thinks of Anactoria.

Sappho Suppl. 5

Some say an army of horsemen, some of foot soldiers,
some a fleet of ships, is on the black earth
the most beautiful thing; but I say it is whatever
one loves.[5]

5 This poem survives on a papyrus found in Egypt; the editor has restored many damaged letters.

Sappho Suppl. 5.5
It is perfectly easy to make this understood
by everyone; for she who far surpassed
all mortals in beauty, Helen, judged the man
the best of all
who destroyed all the majesty of Troy,
and for neither child nor dear parents
did she spare a single thought, but was led astray,
in love, by the Cyprian.

Sappho Suppl. 5.13
[...] for easily bent [...]
[...] lightly [...] considers.
Now it has made me think of Anactoria, far away,
who is gone,
whose lovely walk I would rather see
and the bright glancing light of her face
than the Lydians' chariots and, in armor,
men fighting on horseback.
We know well that this cannot happen
among humans; but to pray to share[6]

THE WEDDING OF HECTOR AND ANDROMACHE

A herald announces Hector's bride, and all Troy comes out to welcome the pair.

Sappho Suppl. 20
Cypr[...]
a herald came running [...]
Idaeus, [...] this [...] appearing, the swift messenger:
"[...]
and of the rest of Asia [...] undying glory:
Hector and his comrades are bringing a girl with sparkling eyes[7]

6 Lydia was a rich kingdom in western Asia Minor, with its capital at Sardis, across the sea from Sappho's island of Lesbos.

7 A papyrus poem on the wedding of the Trojan hero Hector and Andromache; Idaeus is the herald of Troy.

Sappho Suppl. 20.a6
from holy Thebe and ever-flowing Placia,
delicate Andromache, in ships over the salt
sea; and many golden bracelets, and robes
of purple, and lovely embroideries too, many-colored
trinkets,
and countless silver cups, and ivory."
So he spoke. Quickly the dear father sprang up,
and the news went through the wide city to their friends.
At once the Trojans, under the smooth-wheeled carriages,
led the mules; and the whole throng climbed aboard,
women and slender-ankled girls together;[8]

Sappho Suppl. 20.a16
and apart, in their turn, came the daughters of Priam.
And men led horses under the curved chariots,
all the young men; and grandly [...]
[...] charioteers [...]
[...] drove out [...]
[...]
[...] like gods
[...] holy, all together
[...] to Ilium

Sappho Suppl. 20.b4
[...] was mingled
[...] and then the girls
[...]
[...]
[...]
date-palm and cassia and frankincense were displayed.
And the women, all who were older, raised a shrill cry,
and all the men sent up a lovely, high-pitched
paean, calling on the Far-Shooter, lord of the fine lyre,
and sang of godlike Hector and Andromache.[9]

8 Thebe, below Mount Placus near Troy, was Andromache's home town.
9 The Far-Shooter is Apollo; a paean was a hymn of praise sung to him.

PARTING

A girl leaves Sappho in tears, and Sappho reminds her of all they shared.

Sappho Suppl. 23
Honestly, I wish I were dead.
She left me in tears;
she said many things, and this, to me:
"Oh, how terribly we've suffered,
Sappho; truly, I leave you against my will."
And I answered her this:
"Go, be happy, and remember
me, for you know how we looked after you.
And if you don't, then I want
to remind you—since you forget—
of all the tender, lovely things we shared:

Sappho Suppl. 23.12
for many wreaths of violets
and of roses, braided together,
and [...] you put on beside me,
and many garlands for the neck,
woven, around your tender throat,
made of lovely flowers;
and with plenty of rich perfume,
royal brenthos oil,
you anointed [your lovely-haired head?].[10]

Sappho Suppl. 23.21
and on a bed [...]
soft, beside [...]
you would satisfy your longing [...]
and neither any [...]
holy place nor [...]
there was, where [...]
no grove [...]

10 Brenthos was a costly perfumed oil.

ATTHIS' FRIEND IN LYDIA

A girl now in Sardis outshines the Lydian women like the moon and longs for Atthis.

Sappho Suppl. 25

[...] from Sardis
[...] often turning her thoughts this way.
When we lived together, she thought you
the image of a goddess, Arignota,
and in your singing most of all she delighted.
But now she stands out among the Lydian women,
as sometimes, when the sun
has set, the rosy-fingered moon,
outshines all the stars; and her light spreads
over the salt sea
and the flower-filled fields alike.

Sappho Suppl. 25.12

and the lovely dew has fallen, and there bloom
roses, and tender chervil,
and flowering melilot.
And often, as she wanders to and fro, she remembers gentle
Atthis, and with longing
her tender mind is consumed, and grief devours her heart.
And she cries aloud for us to come there; and this—not
unheard by us—the many-eared night
calls out across the sea [...]

Alcaeus

Of Lesbos (around 600 BC): the ship of state, the armory, tyrants overthrown, and drinking songs.

THE ARMORY

Alcaeus describes a hall hung with helmets, greaves, corslets and swords, ready for war.

Alcaeus fr. 15

The great house gleams with bronze; the whole roof is
decked out for Ares
with shining helmets, and down from them white horsehair
crests
nod, ornaments for the heads of men; bronze greaves hang
on pegs
round about, hiding them, shining, a defense against the
strong arrow;
and new corslets of linen, and hollow shields lie thrown
down;
beside them Chalcidian swords, beside them many belts
and tunics.
These we cannot forget, from the moment we first took on
this work.[1]

1 Chalcis, on the island of Euboea, was famous for its metalwork.

THE SHIP OF STATE

A ship caught between waves in a storm, its sail torn and its hold flooding.

Alcaeus fr. 18

I can't make out the quarrel of the winds:
for one wave rolls in from this side,
another from that; and we in the middle
are carried along with our black ship,
laboring hard in the great storm;
the bilge is up around the mast-foot,
the whole sail is see-through now,
and there are great rents along it;
and the halyards are slackening.

ANOTHER WAVE

A new, higher wave comes on, and the crew will have to bail.

Alcaeus fr. 19

Here again comes a wave, higher than those before;
it marches on, and will give us much toil
bailing, once it gets into the ship's
hold.

MYRSILUS IS DEAD

Alcaeus calls for drinking to celebrate the death of the tyrant Myrsilus.

Alcaeus fr. 20

Now we must get drunk, and every man must drink with all
his might,
since Myrsilus is dead.[2]

2 Myrsilus was tyrant of Mytilene on Lesbos and Alcaeus' political enemy.

WINTER

Against the winter storm: build up the fire and mix sweet wine.

Alcaeus fr. 34

Zeus sends rain; from the sky comes a great
storm, and the running streams are frozen.
[...]
Beat down the storm: pile up the
fire, and mix the wine unsparingly,
honey-sweet, and around your temples
wrap [...] a soft woolen pad.

WINE FOR TROUBLES

Grieving gets us nowhere, Bycchis; the best medicine is wine.

Alcaeus fr. 35

We must not surrender our hearts to troubles;
we'll get nowhere by grieving,
Bycchis: the best medicine
is to bring in wine and get drunk.

DOG DAYS

In the heat of high summer the cicada sings, and the only cure is wine.

Alcaeus fr. 39

Soak your lungs with wine, for the star is coming round,
and the season is harsh, and everything thirsts in the heat.
From the leaves the cicada sounds sweetly, and from under its wings
pours down its shrill song, thick and fast, when summer,
spread blazing over the land, parches everything.
The thistle is in flower; now women are at their most lustful,
and men are weak, since Sirius parches both head and knees.[3]

3 The star is Sirius, the Dog Star, whose rising marked the hottest part of summer.

LET US DRINK

Only a finger of daylight is left: bring out the big cups and pour.

Alcaeus fr. 41

Let's drink! Why wait for the lamps? Only a finger of
daylight is left.
Take down the big cups, my friend, the painted ones;
for the son of Semele and Zeus gave wine, to make us forget
our cares,
to humankind. Pour it, mixing one and two,
full to the brim, and let one cup push
the next along.[4]

PLANT THE VINE FIRST

A single line: plant no tree before the vine.

Alcaeus fr. 44

Plant no other tree before the vine.

TO SAPPHO

Alcaeus wants to say something to Sappho, but shame holds him back.

Alcaeus fr. 55

Violet-haired, holy, sweetly smiling Sappho,
I want to say something, but shame holds me back.

WINE AND TRUTH

A single line: wine, dear boy, and truth.

Alcaeus fr. 57

Wine, dear boy, and truth.

4 The son of Semele and Zeus is Dionysus, god of wine.

Archilochus

Soldier-poet of Paros (seventh century BC): the abandoned shield, war, wine, love and mockery.

SERVANT OF TWO MASTERS

Archilochus is both a soldier of the war god and a poet of the Muses.

Archilochus fr. 1

I am the servant of lord Enyalius,
and I know the lovely gift of the Muses.[1]

MY SPEAR

His bread, his wine and his drinking all depend on his spear.

Archilochus fr. 2

On my spear is my kneaded barley bread, on my spear my wine
from Ismarus, and I drink leaning on my spear.[2]

THE SHIELD

Archilochus left his shield behind in battle, saved his life, and does not care.

Archilochus fr. 6

Some Saian is delighted with my shield, which by a bush
I left—a flawless piece of armor—against my will;
but I myself escaped the end of death. That shield—
to hell with it! I'll get another just as good.[3]

1 Enyalius is a war god, often identified with Ares.
2 Ismarus, in Thrace, was famous for its wine.
3 The Saians were a Thracian tribe.

ENDURE

Friends have drowned at sea; the gods gave endurance as the cure for grief.

Archilochus fr. 9

These are griefs to make us groan, Pericles, and no one in town
will find fault with our mourning and take joy in feasts, nor will the city;
for such men has the wave of the loud-roaring sea
washed under, and swollen with pain are
our lungs. But the gods, for incurable ills,
my friend, have set strong endurance
as the remedy. These ills come now to one man, now to another: now toward us
they have turned, and we groan over a bloody wound,
but later they will pass on to others. So, as quickly as you can,
endure, and thrust aside this mourning, fit for women.[4]

GYGES' GOLD

The speaker wants neither the wealth of Gyges nor a tyrant's power.

Archilochus fr. 25

Gyges and his gold mean nothing to me,
I have never been seized by envy, nor do I resent
the works of the gods, and I have no passion for great tyranny;
it lies far away from my eyes.[5]

4 This Pericles is a friend of the poet, not the later Athenian statesman.
5 Gyges was a king of Lydia, proverbial for his wealth.

THE GENERAL

Give me not a tall, curled dandy of a general but a short, bow-legged, brave one.

Archilochus fr. 58

I don't like a tall general, or one who swaggers with legs
apart,
or one proud of his curls, or one clean-shaven;
but give me a short man, who looks, about the shins,
bow-legged, but plants his feet firmly, full of heart.

HEART, MY HEART

Archilochus tells his heart to stand firm, rejoice and grieve in measure, and know life's rhythm.

Archilochus fr. 66

Heart, my heart, churned up by troubles past help,
rise up, ward off your enemies, thrusting
your chest against them, taking your stand close to the
enemy's ambush,
firmly; and when you win, don't gloat openly,
nor, when beaten, slump down at home and wail;
but rejoice in joys and grieve in troubles
not too much: know the rhythm that holds human beings.

THE ECLIPSE

After Zeus turned midday to night, nothing is impossible any more.

Archilochus fr. 74

Nothing now is past expecting, nothing can be sworn impossible,
nothing is a wonder, since Zeus, father of the Olympians,
made night out of midday, hiding the light
of the shining sun; and sickly fear came over men.
From then on anything may be believed, anything expected
by men. Let none of you be amazed any more at what he sees,
not even if wild beasts trade their pasture with the dolphins
in the sea, and the sea's roaring waves
grow dearer to them than the land, while the dolphins love the hills.[6]

PIERCED BY LONGING

Longing has pierced the poet through to the bones.

Archilochus fr. 84

Wretched, I lie gripped by longing,
lifeless, with cruel pains, by the gods' will,
pierced through my bones.

LIMB-LOOSENING DESIRE

A single line: limb-loosening longing overpowers him.

Archilochus fr. 85

But limb-loosening longing, my friend, overpowers me.

MIST OVER THE EYES

Desire coiled under his heart has poured a mist over his eyes.

Archilochus fr. 103

For such a desire for love, coiled up beneath my heart,
poured a thick mist down over my eyes,
stealing the tender wits from my breast.

6 The poem refers to a total eclipse of the sun, usually dated to 6 April 648 BC.

THE FOX AND THE HEDGEHOG

The fox knows many things, the hedgehog one big thing.

Archilochus fr. 118

The fox knows many things, but the hedgehog one big thing.

Tyrtaeus

The Spartan war poet (seventh century BC): it is a fine thing to fall fighting in the front line.

IT IS A FINE THING TO DIE IN THE FRONT LINE

Dying for one's country is fine; exile and begging are the worst disgrace.

Tyrtaeus fr. 10

It is a fine thing to die, fallen in the front line,
a good man fighting for his own country.
But to leave his own city and rich fields
and go begging is the most painful thing of all,
wandering with his dear mother and aged father
and his little children and his wedded wife.
For he will be hated among those he comes to,
giving way to need and hateful poverty;
he shames his family, belies his splendid looks,
and every dishonor and wretchedness follows him.[1]

Tyrtaeus fr. 10.11

If, then, a wandering man gets no regard
at all, no respect, no consideration, no pity,
let us fight with all our heart for this land, and for our children
let us die, and spare our lives no longer.
Young men, fight, standing fast beside each other,
and do not lead the way to shameful flight or panic,
but make the heart in your breast great and strong,
and do not love your lives when you fight with men;

1 Tyrtaeus composed his war elegies for Sparta in the seventh century BC.

Tyrtaeus fr. 10.19
and the older ones, whose knees are no longer nimble,
do not abandon them and run—the old men;
for this is a shameful thing: that, fallen in the front line,
an older man should lie out in front of the young,
his head already white and his beard gray,
breathing out his valiant spirit in the dust,
clutching his bloody genitals in his own hands—
a shameful thing for the eyes, an outrage to see—
his body stripped bare. But for the young all is fitting,
while he has the glorious flower of lovely youth;

Tyrtaeus fr. 10.29
to men he is a wonder to look at, to women desirable,
while he lives, and beautiful when he has fallen in the front line.
But let each man take a firm stride and stand fast, both feet
planted on the ground, biting his lip with his teeth.

YOU ARE THE RACE OF HERACLES

Tyrtaeus urges the Spartans to stand together, shield to shield, and close with the enemy.

Tyrtaeus fr. 11
Come, you are the race of unconquered Heracles,
so take heart: Zeus has not yet turned his head away;
do not dread the mass of men, and do not panic,
but let each man hold his shield straight toward the front line,
counting his life his enemy, and the black
spirits of death as dear as the rays of the sun.
For you know the ruinous work of Ares, bringer of tears;[2]

2 The Spartan kings claimed descent from Heracles.

Tyrtaeus fr. 11.8
you have learned well the temper of grim war,
and often you have tasted both fleeing and pursuing,
young men; you have had your fill of both.
For those who dare, standing fast beside one another,
to go into close combat and the front line,
fewer of them die, and they save the people behind them;
but when men tremble, all courage is lost.
No one could ever finish telling, one by one,
all the evils that come to a man if he suffers disgrace.[3]

Tyrtaeus fr. 11.17
For it is a ghastly thing to strike from behind at the back
of a man fleeing in deadly war;
and shameful is a corpse lying in the dust,
its back driven through from behind by a spear's point.
But let each man take a firm stride and stand fast, both feet
planted on the ground, biting his lip with his teeth,
his thighs and shins below, and his chest and shoulders
covered by the belly of his broad shield;

Tyrtaeus fr. 11.25
in his right hand let him brandish his mighty spear,
and let him shake the terrible crest above his head;
let him learn to do mighty deeds, making the enemy reel,
and not stand out of range of missiles, holding his shield.
But let each man close in, hand to hand, and with long spear
or sword strike down and kill a man of the enemy;

Tyrtaeus fr. 11.31
setting foot beside foot and pressing shield against shield,
crest against crest and helmet against helmet
and chest against chest, let him close with a man and fight,
gripping either the hilt of his sword or his long spear.
And you, light-armed men, crouching here and there
under a shield, pelt them with great stones,
and hurl your polished javelins at them,
standing close beside the men in full armor.

3 "Courage" here renders *aretē*, elsewhere translated "excellence."

TRUE EXCELLENCE

No skill or wealth makes a man good unless he stands firm in the front line.

Tyrtaeus fr. 12

I would not mention a man or take any account of him
for excellence in running or in wrestling,
not even if he had the size and strength of the Cyclopes
and beat Thracian Boreas in a race,
not even if he were more handsome in build than Tithonus
and richer than Midas and Cinyras,
not even if he were more kingly than Pelops, son of Tantalus,
and had the honey-voiced tongue of Adrastus,
not even if he had every glory except furious valor;[4]

Tyrtaeus fr. 12.10

for a man does not become good in war
unless he can bear to look upon bloody slaughter
and, standing close, reach for the enemy.
This is excellence, this is the best prize among men
and the finest for a young man to win.
This is a common good for the city and all the people,
when a man stands his ground in the front line, legs set firm,
unflinching, and forgets shameful flight altogether,
staking his life and his enduring heart,
and, standing by the man beside him, encourages him with words;

4 Boreas is the north wind; Tithonus, Midas, Cinyras, Pelops and Adrastus were legendary for beauty, wealth, kingship and eloquence.

this man becomes good in war.
Tyrtaeus fr. 12.20 Swiftly he routs the ranks of hostile men,
rough as they are, and by his effort checks the wave of battle;
and he who falls in the front line and loses his dear life,
bringing glory to his town and people and father,
struck many times through his chest and his bossed shield
and through his breastplate, from the front—
him young and old alike lament,
and the whole city grieves with painful longing;

Tyrtaeus fr. 12.29 and his tomb and his children are pointed out among men,
and his children's children, and his line after him.
Never does his noble fame perish, nor his name,
but even though he is under the earth he becomes immortal,
the man whom, as he fights his best, standing firm
for land and children, furious Ares destroys.

Tyrtaeus fr. 12.35 But if he escapes the doom of death that lays men low,
and, victorious, wins the splendid glory of the spear,
all honor him, young and old alike,
and after many delights he goes down to Hades;
growing old, he stands out among the citizens, and no one
wants to cheat him of respect or of justice,
and on the benches young men and those his own age
make way for him, and older men too.
Let each man now strive to reach the height of this excellence
with all his heart, never slackening in war.

Alcman

Choral poet of Sparta (late seventh century BC): the maiden-song for Agido and Hagesichora, and the night.

PARTHENEION

A Spartan girls' chorus tells a myth of vengeance, then praises its leaders Agido and Hagesichora.

Alcman fr. 23

[...]
[...] Polydeuces.
I do not count Lycaethus alone among the dead,
[...] and Enarsphorus and swift-footed Sebrus,
and Bocolus the violent,
and [...] the helmeted,
and Euteiches, and the warlike lord,
[...] outstanding among the demigods.[1]

1 This is Alcman's maiden-song (partheneion), a choral song for Spartan girls preserved on a papyrus with gaps. It opens with the myth of the sons of Hippocoon, killed by Heracles and the twin heroes Castor and Polydeuces.

Alcman fr. 23.8
[...] the leader
[...] great, and Eurytus
in the tumult of Ares,
and Alcon, the best of men,
[...] we shall not pass over.
[...]
[...] unforgettable
were the things they suffered, for they plotted evil.
There is a vengeance from the gods.
Happy is the one who, with a glad heart,
weaves the day through to its end,

Alcman fr. 23.39
[...]. But I sing
of Agido's light. I see it
like the sun, which for us
Agido calls as witness
to shine. But me, neither to praise her
nor to find fault with her does our famous chorus-leader
permit at all; for she herself seems
as outstanding as if someone
set [among the ...] a horse,
sturdy, a prizewinner with thundering hooves,
[...] of the dreams that live beneath the rock?[2]

2 The word left in capitals here is unreadable in the papyrus; it is often taken to mean "among grazing herds."

Alcman fr. 23.50 Don't you see? The one is a racehorse
from Enetia; but the hair
of my cousin
Hagesichora blooms
like pure gold,
and her silver face—
why spell it out plainly for you?—
here she is, Hagesichora herself.
And she who is second to Agido in looks
will run like a Colaxaean horse against an Ibenian.[3]

Alcman fr. 23.60 For the Pleiades, against us,
as we bring a robe to Orthia,
through the ambrosial night like the star
Sirius, rise up and do battle.[4]

Alcman fr. 23.64 For no wealth of purple
is enough to protect us,
nor a spangled snake
of solid gold, nor a headband
from Lydia, the pride
of [...] young girls,
nor Nanno's hair,
nor even godlike Erata,
nor Sylacis and Cleesithera;
nor will you go to Aenesimbrota's and say:

3 Enetic, Colaxaean and Ibenian horses were famous breeds from distant lands; the Enetoi lived at the head of the Adriatic.

4 Orthia was a Spartan goddess, later identified with Artemis; the "Pleiades" (literally "doves") may be a rival choir or the star cluster.

Alcman fr. 23.74
"If only Astaphis were mine,
and Philylla would speak to me,
and Damagora and lovely Ianthemis"—
no, it is Hagesichora who watches over me.
For is not fair-ankled
Hagesichora here,
staying close by Agido,
and praising our festival with her?

Alcman fr. 23.82
But, gods, [...] of these,
accept—
and the end—
I might say: I myself, in everything,
a girl, in vain—
an owl; but I [...] most of all
long to please; for of our toils
she has become our healer.
And thanks to Hagesichora young girls
have set foot on lovely [...].

THE KINGFISHER

Too old to dance, the poet wishes he were a seabird flying with the halcyons.

Alcman fr. 26
No longer, girls with honey voices, voices of desire,
can my limbs carry me. If only, if only I were a cerylus,
who flies over the flower of the wave with the halcyons,
with a carefree heart, the sea-purple bird of spring.[5]

5 The cerylus was a seabird said to be carried on the wings of the halcyons (kingfishers) when it grew old.

NIGHT

Mountains, beasts, bees, sea creatures and birds all lie asleep.

Alcman fr. 60

Asleep are the mountain peaks and the ravines,
the headlands and the gullies,
and the leaves, and the creeping things, all that the black
earth feeds,
the beasts that live on the mountains and the race of bees
and the monsters in the depths of the purple sea;
asleep are the tribes
of the long-winged birds.

Mimnermus

Elegist of Colophon (late seventh century BC): golden Aphrodite, and youth as brief as the leaves.

GOLDEN APHRODITE

Without golden Aphrodite life has no pleasure; old age is hateful.

Mimnermus fr. 1

What life is there, what pleasure, without golden
Aphrodite?
May I die when these things no longer matter to me—
secret love and honeyed gifts and bed,
which are the flowers of youth, eagerly seized
by men and by women. But once painful
old age comes on, which makes even the handsome man
ugly,
bad cares always wear away at his mind,
and he takes no joy in looking on the rays of the sun,
but is hateful to boys and of no account to women:
so grievous a thing has the god made old age.

LIKE THE LEAVES

Human youth is as brief as spring leaves, and old age and death wait beside us.

Mimnermus fr. 2

And we, like the leaves that the flowery season
of spring puts forth, when they quickly grow in the rays of the sun—
like them, for a forearm's span of time, in the flowers of youth
we take our pleasure, knowing from the gods neither bad
nor good. But the black Fates stand beside us,
one holding the end that is grievous old age,
the other that of death. Brief is youth's
fruit, lasting as long as the sun spreads over the earth.

Mimnermus fr. 2.9

But once this season comes to its end and passes,
at once it is better to be dead than to live;
for many evils come about in the heart: sometimes a household
is ruined, and poverty does its painful work;
another, again, lacks children, and longing for them
most of all he goes beneath the earth to Hades;
another has a disease that destroys the heart; and there is no one
among men to whom Zeus does not give many evils.

Solon

Athenian lawgiver and poet (around 600 BC): good order, justice, the ages of man, and a defense of his reforms.

OUR CITY

Athens will fall not by the gods' will but by its citizens' greed; good order is the cure.

Solon fr. 4

Our city will never perish by the decree of Zeus
and the will of the blessed immortal gods;
for so great-hearted a guardian, daughter of a mighty father,
Pallas Athena, holds her hands over it.
But they themselves want to ruin the great city by their folly,
the citizens, won over by money,
and so does the unjust mind of the people's leaders, for whom it is in store
to suffer many pains for their great arrogance;
for they do not know how to restrain excess, nor how to order
the present joys of the feast in quiet.[1]

1 Solon was the Athenian statesman and lawgiver whose reforms (594 BC) ended slavery for debt; he argued for them in verse.

Solon fr. 4.11
[...]
and they grow rich, won over by unjust deeds,
[...]
sparing neither sacred property nor anything public,
they steal by plunder, one from here, another from there,
and they do not respect the solemn foundations of Justice,
who in silence knows what is happening and what was before,
and in time she comes, without fail, to exact payment.
This now comes upon the whole city as a wound none can escape,

Solon fr. 4.18
and it quickly falls into wretched slavery,
which awakens civil strife and sleeping war,
which has destroyed the lovely youth of many;
for at the hands of its enemies a much-loved city
is quickly worn down in conspiracies dear to the unjust.
These are the evils that go about among the people; and of the poor
many reach a foreign land,
sold and bound in shameful fetters,
and they bear the hateful evils of slavery by force.

Solon fr. 4.27
So the public evil comes home to each man,
and the courtyard doors no longer care to hold it back;
it leaps over the high wall and finds him all the same,
even if he runs and hides in the inmost corner of his chamber.
These things my heart bids me teach the Athenians:
that lawlessness brings the city very many evils,
but good order makes all things orderly and sound,
and often puts fetters on the unjust;

Solon fr. 4.35
it smooths what is rough, stops excess, dims arrogance,
and withers the blossoms of ruin as they grow;
it straightens crooked judgments, and arrogant deeds
it calms; it stops the works of dissension,
it stops the anger of grievous strife, and under it
all things among men are sound and wise.

WHAT I GAVE THE PEOPLE

Solon gave the people enough power and protected the rich, holding his shield over both.

Solon fr. 5
To the people I gave as much power as is enough,
neither taking from their honor nor reaching for more;
and those who had power and were admired for their wealth,
for them too I saw to it that they suffered nothing unseemly.
I stood holding my strong shield over both sides,
and did not let either side win unjustly.

PRAYER TO THE MUSES

Solon prays for honest wealth and reflects on Zeus' justice and the uncertainty of human effort.

Solon fr. 13
Shining children of Memory and Olympian Zeus,
Muses of Pieria, hear me as I pray:
grant me prosperity from the blessed gods, and from all men always to have a good name;
and so to be sweet to my friends, and bitter to my enemies,
to the first a man to respect, to the second a terror to look at.
Money I do long to have, but to have gained it unjustly
I do not want; justice always comes in the end.

Solon fr. 13.9
The wealth the gods give stays with a man,
firm from the lowest base to the top;
but the wealth men court through arrogance does not come
in due order; won over by unjust deeds,
it follows unwillingly, and ruin quickly mingles with it.
Its beginning comes from something small, as with a fire:
trivial at first, but grievous in the end;
for the works of arrogance do not last long for mortals.

Solon fr. 13.17
But Zeus watches over the outcome of all things; and suddenly,
as a wind quickly scatters the clouds,
a spring wind, which churns the barren, many-waved sea
to its floor, and over the wheat-bearing earth
lays waste the fine tilled fields, then reaches the steep seat of the gods,
the sky, and makes clear weather to be seen again;
the strength of the sun shines over the rich earth,
beautiful, and not a cloud is left to see:

Solon fr. 13.25
such is the vengeance of Zeus. Not over each single thing,
like a mortal man, does he grow quick to anger;
but he never fails, from first to last, to notice whoever has a sinful
heart, and in the end that one is always revealed.
But one pays at once, another later; and if they escape
themselves, and the fate the gods send does not overtake them,
it comes all the same, later: the innocent pay for those deeds,
either their children or their descendants after them.
We mortals, good and bad alike, think like this:

Solon fr. 13.34
each holds on to the opinion he himself has,
before he suffers something; then at once he laments; but until then
we gape and take pleasure in empty hopes.
And whoever is pressed by grievous diseases
has convinced himself of this: that he will be healthy;
[another, being a coward, thinks he is a good man,
and handsome, though he has no graceful form;]
and if someone is without means, and the works of poverty force him,
he thinks he will surely acquire a great deal of money.

Solon fr. 13.43
Each hurries in a different direction: one wanders over the sea
in ships, eager to bring gain home,
the fish-filled sea, carried by grievous winds,
setting no store at all by his life;
another, plowing the tree-filled land, year in, year out,
slaves away, one of those whose care is the curved plow;
another, having learned the works of Athena and Hephaestus of many crafts,
gathers his living with his two hands;

Solon fr. 13.51
another, taught the gifts that come from the Olympian Muses,
understanding the measure of lovely wisdom;
another the lord Apollo, who works from afar, has made a seer,
and he recognizes the evil coming to a man from far off,
if the gods stand by him; but what is fated
no bird of omen and no sacrifice will ward off;
others, who have the work of Paeon of many drugs,
are doctors; and for them too there is no sure outcome;[2]

2 Paeon was the healer of the gods, later identified with Apollo.

Solon fr. 13.59
often from a small pain a great agony grows,
and no one could relieve it by giving soothing drugs;
yet another, tormented by bad and grievous diseases,
he touches with his hands and at once makes healthy.
Fate brings mortals bad and good alike,
and the gifts of the immortal gods cannot be escaped.
Risk attends every action, and no one knows
where it will come to rest, when a thing is just beginning;

Solon fr. 13.67
but the one who tries to act well, without foreseeing,
falls into great and harsh ruin,
while to the one who acts badly the god gives, in everything,
good fortune, a release from his folly.
No limit to wealth lies revealed for men;
for those of us who now have the largest living
strive for twice as much: who could satisfy them all?
The immortals have granted mortals gains,
but ruin appears out of them, and whenever Zeus
sends it to exact payment, one man has it now, another then.

THE TEN AGES OF MAN

A man's life runs in ten stages of seven years, from losing his milk teeth to death.

Solon fr. 27
A boy, still a child and not yet grown, the fence of teeth
that he has grown he first sheds within seven years;
when the god completes another seven years for him,
he shows the signs of youth coming on;
in the third, while his limbs are still growing, his chin
turns downy, as the bloom of his skin changes;
in the fourth seven, every man is at his very best
in strength, which men hold to be the signs of excellence;

Solon fr. 27.9 in the fifth, a man should be mindful of marriage in its season
and seek a line of children to come after him;
in the sixth, a man's mind is trained in all things,
and he no longer wants to do reckless deeds as before;
in seven sevens he is at his very best in mind and tongue,
and in eight: fourteen years for the two together;
in the ninth he still has power, but softer
for great excellence are his tongue and his wisdom;
and when the god completes the tenth seven years,
he would not be untimely if he met his portion of death.

BLACK EARTH MY WITNESS

Solon defends his reforms: he freed the land and the people from debt slavery.

Solon fr. 36 My witness to these things in the court of Time would be
the greatest mother of the Olympian gods,
best of all, black Earth, from whom I once
pulled up the boundary-stones planted everywhere:
a slave before, now she is free.[3]

Solon fr. 36.6 And many to Athens, their god-founded fatherland,
I brought back who had been sold, one unjustly,
another justly, and others who, under the force of need,
were citing an oracle, no longer the Attic tongue
speaking, as men will who have wandered far and wide;
and those right here, who had the shameful
ways of slavery, trembling before their masters,
I set free. These things, by my power,
fitting force and justice together,
I did, and I carried them through as I had promised.

3 The boundary-stones marked land pledged against debt; Solon's cancellation of debts removed them.

Solon fr. 36.16

Laws alike for the bad and the good,
fitting straight justice to each,
I wrote. Another man, had he taken the goad as I did,
a man of evil counsel and greedy for possessions,
would not have held the people back, nor stopped
before he had stirred things up and taken the cream from
the milk.

Ibycus

Of Rhegium (sixth century BC): spring gardens and the storm of desire.

SPRING

Quince trees and vines bloom in spring, but love gives Ibycus no rest in any season.

Ibycus fr. 1

In spring the Cydonian
quince trees, watered by the streams
from the rivers, where the Maidens'
untouched garden lies, and the vine-buds,
swelling under the shady shoots
of the vine, flourish; but for me love
lies at rest in no season; as, blazing under the lightning,
the Thracian north wind,
rushing from the Cyprian with parching madness, dark and
fearless,
masterfully, since boyhood, keeps hold of
my heart.[1]

1 The "Maidens" are probably the Nymphs; Cydonian quinces are named for Cydonia in Crete.

LOVE AGAIN

Love casts him into Aphrodite's nets, and he trembles like an old racehorse.

Ibycus fr. 2

Again Love, from under dark eyelids gazing at me meltingly
with his eyes,
with enchantments of every kind into the boundless
nets of the Cyprian throws me.
I tremble, I swear, at his coming,
as a prize-winning horse that bears the yoke, near old age,
unwilling,
goes with the swift chariot into the race.

Anacreon

Of Teos (sixth century BC): love, wine and old age, lightly sung.

TO ARTEMIS

Anacreon prays to Artemis, who watches over a city on the Lethaeus.

Anacreon fr. 1

I implore you, deer-shooter,
fair-haired child of Zeus, lady
of wild beasts, Artemis,
who now, I think, beside the Lethaeus'
eddies, on a city of bold-hearted
men look down
gladly; for they are not untamed,
the citizens you shepherd.[1]

1 The Lethaeus is a river at Magnesia in Asia Minor, where Artemis had a famous temple.

TO DIONYSUS

Anacreon asks Dionysus to persuade the boy Cleobulus to accept his love.

Anacreon fr. 2

Lord, with whom Love the tamer
and the dark-eyed Nymphs
and purple Aphrodite
play together, as you roam
the high peaks of the mountains:
I implore you; come to us
kindly, and to a prayer
that pleases you, give ear.
To Cleobulus be a good
counselor; make him accept my love,
Dionysus.[2]

CLEOBULUS

Three lines repeating the name of the boy the poet loves.

Anacreon fr. 3

Cleobulus I love,
over Cleobulus I'm mad,
at Cleobulus I gaze.

BOY WITH A GIRL'S GLANCE

The boy does not know he holds the reins of the poet's soul.

Anacreon fr. 4

Boy with a girl's glance,
I'm searching for you, but you don't hear,
not knowing that you are
the charioteer of my soul.

2 Cleobulus is a boy loved by Anacreon, named in several of his poems.

THE GIRL FROM LESBOS

Love sends a girl to play, but she mocks the poet's white hair.

Anacreon fr. 14

Once again with a purple ball
golden-haired Love strikes me
and with a girl in fancy sandals
calls me out to play;
but she—since she comes from well-built
Lesbos—my hair,
because it's white, she finds fault with,
and gapes after someone else.

BREAKFAST

After a little cake and a jar of wine, the poet serenades his girl.

Anacreon fr. 17

I breakfasted, breaking off a small piece of thin honey-cake,
and drained a jar of wine; now, delicately, the lovely
harp I pluck, serenading my dear and delicate girl.

OLD AGE

Gray-haired and with little life left, the poet fears the way down to Hades.

Anacreon fr. 43

My temples are already gray and my head is white,
graceful youth is no longer with me, and my teeth are old;
of sweet life not much time is left any more.
And so I often sob, afraid of Tartarus.
For the depths of Hades are terrible, and grievous the way
down to them; and it's certain that one who goes down does
not come up.

DRINKING WITH MEASURE

Mix the wine with water, and drink to song, not like the Scythians.

Anacreon fr. 63
Come now, bring us, boy,
a bowl, so that in one long draft
I can drink a toast, pouring in ten
of water and five of wine,
ladles, so that, without going too far,
I may once again play the Bacchant.

Anacreon fr. 63.7
[...]
Come on, let's no longer, as now,
with clatter and with whooping,
practice Scythian drinking over our wine,
but, to the sound of fine
hymns, sip slowly.[3]

THE THRACIAN FILLY

The poet tells a skittish girl, as a filly, that he could break her in.

Anacreon fr. 75
Thracian filly, why do you look at me sidelong
and run from me without pity, and think I don't know a thing about it?
Believe me, I could fit the bit on you neatly,
and, holding the reins, wheel you round the turning-posts of the course.
As it is, you graze the meadows, frisking lightly at play,
for you have no skilled rider to mount you.

3 The Scythians, nomads north of the Black Sea, were proverbial among Greeks for drinking their wine unmixed.

Simonides

Of Ceos (around 556–468 BC): Danae in the chest, the dead of Thermopylae, and the hard task of being good.

THOSE WHO DIED AT THERMOPYLAE

The dead of Thermopylae have an altar for a grave and glory that time cannot dim.

Simonides fr. 4

[...]
Of those who died at Thermopylae
glorious is the fortune, fine the fate;
their grave is an altar; for mourning, memory; for pity, praise.
Such a shroud as this neither mold
nor all-conquering time will dim.
This shrine of good men has taken the glory
of Greece to live in it; and Leonidas bears witness too,
king of Sparta, who has left behind a great
adornment of excellence and everlasting fame.[1]

1 At Thermopylae, a coastal pass in central Greece, Leonidas, king of Sparta, and his small force died holding back the Persian army in 480 BC.

TO SCOPAS

It is hard to be truly good; Simonides praises anyone who does nothing shameful willingly.

Simonides fr. 5

To become a truly good man
is hard, foursquare in hands and feet and mind, fashioned without blame;
whoever is neither bad nor too reckless, and knows the justice that helps the city,
is a sound man; I will not
find fault with him; for of fools
the breed is endless.
All things are fine, I tell you, in which nothing shameful is mixed.[2]

Simonides fr. 5.8

Nor does that saying of Pittacus
ring true to me, though it was spoken by a wise man: "It is hard," he said, "to be good."
A god alone could have that prize; but a man cannot help being bad
when irresistible misfortune brings him down.
For every man who fares well is good,
and bad, if he fares badly;
and for the most part the best are those whom the gods love.[3]

2 This poem is known from its quotation and discussion in Plato's *Protagoras*.
3 Pittacus of Mytilene, counted among the Seven Sages, ruled his city around 600 BC.

Simonides fr. 5.15

For this reason I will never, searching for what cannot
come to be, throw my share of life away on empty, fruitless
hope:
a wholly blameless human being, among all of us who reap
the fruit of the broad-based earth;
and if I find him, I'll let you know.
But I praise and love all,
whoever willingly does
nothing shameful; against necessity not even the gods fight.

DANAE

Adrift in a chest at sea, Danae sings her sleeping baby to rest and prays to Zeus.

Simonides fr. 37

When she lay in the finely wrought chest,
and the blowing wind and the heaving sea carried her
along,
fear crept over her then, her cheeks not dry of tears,
and she put her loving arm around Perseus and said: "My
child,
what suffering is mine! But you sleep;
with a suckling's calm you slumber in this cheerless
bronze-bolted wooden box,
stretched out in the lightless night and the dark-blue
gloom.[4]

4 Danae and her infant son Perseus were shut in a chest and set adrift at sea by her father Acrisius.

Simonides fr. 37.9

The deep spray above your hair
from the passing wave you do not heed, nor the wind's
roar; in a purple
blanket you lie, your face pressed against mine.
If what is fearful were fearful to you,
you would turn your small ear to my words.
But I tell you: sleep, my baby, and let the sea sleep,
and let our measureless trouble sleep;
and may some change appear, father Zeus,
from you; and if I pray a bold word,
beyond what is right, forgive me."

EPITAPH FOR THE PELOPONNESIANS AT THERMOPYLAE

Four thousand men fought three million here.

Simonides fr. 91

Here once against three million fought
four thousand from the Peloponnese.[5]

EPITAPH FOR THE SPARTANS AT THERMOPYLAE

Tell the Spartans that we lie here, obedient to their words.

Simonides fr. 92

Stranger, tell the Spartans that here
we lie, obedient to their words.

5 Epitaph for the Greeks who held the pass of Thermopylae against the Persian army in 480 BC.

EPITAPH FOR MEGISTIAS

A seer who foresaw his death at Thermopylae but would not leave the Spartans.

Simonides fr. 94

This is the memorial of famous Megistias, whom once the Medes
killed when they had crossed the river Spercheius—
a seer, who, though he knew clearly then the doom that was coming,
could not bring himself to desert the leaders of Sparta.[6]

6 Megistias, a seer from Acarnania, foresaw the defeat at Thermopylae but stayed and died with Leonidas; "the Medes" are the Persians.

Pindar

Of Thebes (518–after 446 BC): victory odes for Hieron of Syracuse and Aristomenes of Aegina.

OLYMPIAN 1: FOR HIERON OF SYRACUSE

Pindar praises Hieron's Olympic win and retells the myth of Pelops, Tantalus and Poseidon.

Pindar O. 1.1

Best is water, and gold, like blazing fire
that shines out in the night, stands out above all lordly wealth;
but if to sing of contests
you long, my heart,
do not look, beyond the sun,
for any other star by day more warming and bright through the empty sky,
nor shall we proclaim a contest greater than Olympia's.[1]

Pindar O. 1.8

From there the far-famed hymn is cast around
the minds of the wise, for them to sing aloud
of Cronus' son, when they come to the rich
and blessed hearth of Hieron,
who wields the scepter of justice in flock-rich
Sicily, plucking the peaks of every excellence,
and is made splendid too
in the finest flower of music,

1 An epinician (victory ode) for Hieron, tyrant of Syracuse, whose horse won the single-horse race at Olympia in 476 BC.

Pindar O. 1.16
the kind we men often play around
the friendly table. Come, take the Dorian lyre down from its peg,
if the delight of Pisa and of Pherenicus has in any way
brought your mind under the sweetest thoughts,
when he sped beside the Alpheus, his body
offering ungoaded in the race,
and joined his master to victory,
the Syracusan king who delights in horses. His fame shines
in the colony, rich in brave men, of Lydian Pelops;[2]

Pindar O. 1.25
with whom the mighty Earth-holder fell in love,
Poseidon, after Clotho lifted him out of the pure cauldron,
his shoulder gleaming, fitted with ivory.
Truly, there are many marvels, and somehow mortals' talk, too, goes beyond the true account:
tales embroidered with intricate lies deceive.
And Grace, who fashions everything sweet for mortals,
by bestowing honor has contrived that even the incredible is credible
many a time;
but the days to come
are the wisest witnesses.

2 Pherenicus was Hieron's racehorse; Pisa is the district around Olympia, and the "colony of Pelops" is the Peloponnese.

Pindar O. 1.35 It is fitting for a man to speak well of the gods; the blame is less.
Son of Tantalus, I will tell of you, unlike those before me,
how, when your father called the gods to the most well-ordered
feast at his beloved Sipylus,
giving them a banquet in return,
then the Lord of the Splendid Trident carried you off,
his mind overpowered by desire, and on golden horses
transported you to the highest house of wide-honored Zeus,
where at a later time
Ganymede also came
to Zeus for the same service.[3]

Pindar O. 1.46 When you vanished, and men searching far and wide did not bring you back to your mother,
one of the envious neighbors at once said in secret
that into water boiling hard on the fire
they had cut you limb from limb with a knife,
and at the tables, for the last course, your flesh
they shared out among themselves and ate.

Pindar O. 1.52 For me it is impossible to call any of the blessed ones a glutton. I stand back.
Loss is often the lot of slanderers.
If ever the watchers of Olympus did honor
any mortal man, it was this Tantalus; but to digest
his great prosperity he could not, and through excess he won
overwhelming ruin: the father hung over him a mighty stone,
and forever longing to cast it from his head, he wanders far from joy.

3 Sipylus, a mountain in Lydia, was Tantalus' seat. Ganymede was the Trojan boy whom Zeus carried off to be his cupbearer.

Pindar O. 1.59
He has this helpless life of unending toil,
a fourth labor with three others, because he stole from the immortals
and to his drinking companions of his own age
the nectar and ambrosia
he gave, by which the gods had made him
immortal. If a man hopes, in doing anything, to escape a god's notice, he is wrong.
Therefore the immortals sent his son back again
once more among the short-lived race of men.

Pindar O. 1.67
And when, toward the flowering of his youth,
down began to darken his chin,
he set his mind on a marriage that lay ready:
from her father of Pisa the glorious Hippodamia
to win. Going near the gray sea, alone in the darkness,
he called on the deep-thundering
Lord of the Fine Trident; and to him
he appeared, right there at his feet.

Pindar O. 1.75
He said to him: "Come, if the Cyprian's dear gifts, Poseidon, earn any
thanks, fetter the bronze spear of Oenomaus,
and carry me on the swiftest of chariots
to Elis, and bring me to victory.
For, having killed thirteen men
who courted her, he keeps putting off the marriage
of his daughter. Great danger does not take hold of a man without courage.[4]

4 Oenomaus, king of Pisa, challenged his daughter's suitors to a chariot race and killed those he overtook.

Pindar O. 1.82 And for those who must die, why should anyone coddle a nameless
old age to no end, sitting in darkness,
without a share in anything fine? No—for me this contest
shall be mine to face; and you, grant me the success I long for."
So he spoke, nor were the words he spoke left unfulfilled. Honoring him, the god
gave him a golden chariot and tireless winged horses.
He overcame the might of Oenomaus, and took the maiden to share his bed;

Pindar O. 1.89 and she bore him six sons, leaders of the people, eager for excellence.
And now in the splendid
blood offerings he has his share,
lying by the stream of the Alpheus,
with his much-visited tomb beside the altar thronged by strangers. And the fame
shines from afar in the racecourses of the Olympic games,
the fame of Pelops, where speed of foot contends
and the bold-laboring peaks of strength;

Pindar O. 1.97 and the victor, for the rest of his life,
has honey-sweet fair weather
because of the games. But the good that comes day by day
is the highest that comes to any mortal. To crown
that man with a horseman's tune
in Aeolian song
is my task; and I am sure there is no host
at all, more versed in fine things and with power more sovereign,
among those now living, for me to embellish in the glorious folds of hymns.

Pindar O. 1.106
A god who is your guardian takes thought,
with this as his concern, Hieron,
for your ambitions; and if he does not soon desert you,
I hope to celebrate a still sweeter
triumph with the swift chariot, finding a helpful road of words
when I come to the sunny hill of Cronus. For me, then,
the Muse is nursing her mightiest arrow in strength for me;
some are great in one thing, others in another. But the very highest
reaches its peak in kings. Look no further.
May you walk on high for the time you have, and may I keep company
with victors as often, renowned for wisdom among Greeks everywhere.

PYTHIAN 1: FOR HIERON OF AETNA

The golden lyre calms Zeus' eagle; Typhon lies under Etna; Pindar advises Hieron to rule justly.

Pindar P. 1.1
Golden lyre, shared possession of Apollo and the violet-haired
Muses by right: the dancing step listens to you, the start of festivity,
and the singers obey your signals
whenever, quivering, you strike up the opening notes of the preludes that lead the chorus.[5]

5 Pythian 1 celebrates Hieron's chariot victory at Delphi in 470 BC, which he had proclaimed in the name of Aetna, the new city he founded beneath the volcano.

Pindar P. 1.5
You quench even the spear-pointed thunderbolt
of everlasting fire. And on the scepter of Zeus the eagle
sleeps, letting his swift wings droop on either side,
the lord of birds; and a dark-faced cloud over him,
over his curved head, a sweet seal on his eyelids, you have
poured; and he, slumbering,
heaves his supple back, held fast by your
pulsing notes. For even violent Ares, leaving far behind the
harsh
point of spears, warms his heart
in slumber; and your shafts enchant the minds of the gods
as well, through the wisdom of Leto's son and the deep-
bosomed Muses.

Pindar P. 1.13
But all that Zeus has not loved shrinks in terror at the voice
of the Muses of Pieria when they hear it, on land and on the
raging sea,
as does he who lies in dread Tartarus, the gods' enemy,
Typhon of the hundred heads, whom once
the famous Cilician cave reared; but now
the sea-fenced cliffs above Cumae
and Sicily press on his shaggy chest; and the pillar of
heaven holds him down,
snowy Etna, nurse all year round of piercing snow;[6]

6 Typhon, the monster who fought Zeus, was said to be pinned beneath Etna and the volcanic lands as far as Cumae near Naples.

Pindar P. 1.21
from her belch forth the purest springs of unapproachable fire
out of her depths; and by day her rivers pour out a stream of smoke,
blazing; but in the darkness rocks
are swept by a red rolling flame down to the deep plain of the sea with a crash.
It is that monster that sends up the most terrible
fountains of Hephaestus: a portent marvelous to behold, a marvel even to hear of from those who have been there,
how he is bound among the dark-leaved peaks of Etna
and the plain, and his bed scratches and goads the whole of his back stretched against it.

Pindar P. 1.29
May it be, Zeus, may it be mine to please you,
who rule this mountain, brow of a fruitful land, whose name
the famous founder has glorified in the city
next to it; and at the Pythian racecourse the herald proclaimed it, announcing Hieron's splendid victory
in the chariot race. For seafaring men the first blessing,
as they set out on a voyage, is that a following wind should come; for it is likely
that at the end too they will meet with a better homecoming. And this saying,
given these happy chances, brings the expectation
that the city will in future be famous for garlands and horses
and renowned for tuneful festivities.

Pindar P. 1.39 Lycian Phoebus, lord of Delos, who love the Castalian
spring of Parnassus,
may you be willing to keep this in mind and make the land
rich in good men.
For from the gods come all the means for mortal
excellence,
and men are born wise and strong of hand and eloquent.
And as for that man,
I hope, in my eagerness to praise him,
not to throw, as it were, the bronze-cheeked javelin outside
the field, brandishing it in my hand,
but with a long cast to outdo my rivals.

Pindar P. 1.46 If only all time would keep his prosperity and the gift of
possessions on this straight course, and grant
forgetfulness of his toils.
Surely it would remind him in what battles of war
he held his ground with an enduring soul, when they won
at the gods' hands such honor
as no other Greek reaps,
a proud crown of wealth. And now, following Philoctetes'
way,
he has taken the field; and under necessity, as a friend,
even one who was proud fawned on him. They say that
from Lemnos, worn by his wound, they came to bring
him over,
the godlike heroes, the archer son of Poeas:[7]

7 Hieron had gone on campaign though ill; Philoctetes, the archer left on Lemnos with a festering wound, had to be brought to Troy before it could fall.

Pindar P. 1.54
he sacked Priam's city and brought the Danaans' labors to an end,
walking with a feeble body, but it was fated.
So may a god be Hieron's upholder
in the time that is creeping on, giving him due measure of what he desires.
Muse, by Deinomenes' side as well, to sing aloud
the reward for the four-horse chariot, heed me: a father's victory is no strange joy to a son.[8]

Pindar P. 1.60
Come, then, let us find a friendly hymn for the king of Aetna,
for whom, with god-built freedom, that city
Hieron founded under the rule of Hyllus' laws. And the descendants of Pamphylus
and of the Heraclids too,
who live below the slopes of Taygetus, wish to remain forever under the ordinances of Aegimius,
Dorians. Prosperous, they took Amyclae,
setting out from Pindus, deeply glorious neighbors of the Tyndarids with their white horses, and the fame of their spears flowered.[9]

8 Deinomenes, Hieron's son, had been installed as king of the new city of Aetna.
9 Hyllus (son of Heracles), Pamphylus and Aegimius were legendary founders of Dorian law; the Tyndarids are Castor and Polydeuces, the divine twins of Sparta.

Pindar P. 1.67 Zeus Fulfiller, may such a lot always, by the water of the Amenas,
be judged by the true report of men to be the citizens' and the kings'.
With your help a man who leads,
giving charge to his son too, may honor the people and turn them to harmonious peace.
I beg you, son of Cronus, nod assent, that peacefully
the Phoenician and the war cry of the Etruscans stay at home, having seen their arrogance bring groans to their ships before Cumae—[10]

Pindar P. 1.73 what they suffered when overcome by the leader of the Syracusans,
who cast their youth from their swift ships into the sea,
dragging Greece out of heavy slavery. I shall earn
from Salamis the Athenians' gratitude
as my wage, and in Sparta from the battles before Cithaeron,
in which the Medes with curved bows were laid low,
and by the well-watered shore of the Himeras by completing a hymn for the sons of Deinomenes,
which they earned by their excellence, when the enemy men were laid low.[11]

10 The Amenas is the river of Aetna. "The Phoenician" is Carthage; Hieron destroyed an Etruscan fleet off Cumae in 474 BC.
11 Salamis (480 BC) and Plataea under Mount Cithaeron (479 BC) were the great victories over Persia. At Himera (480 BC) the sons of the elder Deinomenes, Hieron and his brother Gelon, defeated Carthage.

Pindar P. 1.81 If you speak to the point, drawing the strands of many
things together
in brief, less blame from men follows. For excess
wearies and blunts quick hopes;
and what citizens hear weighs heavy on their secret hearts,
most of all about the good fortunes of others.
But still, since envy is better than pity,
do not pass over fine things. Steer your people with a just
rudder; forge your tongue on an anvil free of lies.
If even a trivial thing flies off, it is borne as something great
coming from you. You are steward of many things; many
are the witnesses to be trusted for both.
Abiding in a flourishing temper,
if you love always to hear sweet report of yourself, do not
tire too much of spending;

Pindar P. 1.91 let out, like a helmsman,
your sail to the wind. Do not be deceived, my friend, by
shifty gains. The proud acclaim of fame that outlives a
man
alone reveals the way of life of men who are gone
to chroniclers and poets alike. The kindly excellence of
Croesus does not fade;
but him who burned men in the bronze bull, pitiless of
mind,
Phalaris, hateful report holds down everywhere,
nor do the lyres in the hall receive him into gentle
fellowship with the songs of boys.
To fare well is the first of prizes; to be well spoken of, the
second share; and the man
who meets with both and takes them has received the
highest crown.[12]

12 Croesus, king of Lydia, was famed for his generous offerings; Phalaris, tyrant of Acragas, was said to roast his victims inside a bronze bull.

PYTHIAN 8: FOR ARISTOMENES OF AEGINA

Pindar praises Tranquility and Aegina, and calls man the dream of a shadow.

Pindar P. 8.1 Kindly Tranquility, of Justice
the daughter who makes cities great,
of councils and of wars
holding the supreme keys,
receive this honor of a Pythian victory for Aristomenes.
For gentleness, both to do it and to undergo it alike,
you understand, with unerring timing;[13]

Pindar P. 8.8 but you, whenever someone drives relentless
rancor into his heart,
harsh toward the hostile,
meeting their might, you put
Arrogance in the bilge. Porphyrion did not know you either
when he provoked you beyond measure. Gain is dearest
if one takes it from the house of a willing giver.[14]

Pindar P. 8.15 Violence trips up even the boastful in time.
Cilician Typhon of the hundred heads did not escape her,
nor did the king of the Giants; they were laid low by the thunderbolt
and the arrows of Apollo, who with kindly mind
welcomed the son of Xenarces back from Cirrha, crowned
with Parnassian grass and a Dorian revel.

13 Pythian 8 (446 BC) celebrates Aristomenes of Aegina, winner in wrestling at Delphi; Hesychia (Tranquility) is the civic peace of a well-ordered city.
14 Porphyrion was king of the Giants who rose against the gods.

Pindar P. 8.21
It has not fallen far from the Graces,
this island of just citizens, which has laid hold
of the famous excellences
of the Aeacids; and it holds perfect
glory from the start. For it is sung by many
for having reared, in prize-winning games and in swift
battles, heroes beyond all others;
and it stands out in its men too.[15]

Pindar P. 8.29
But I have no leisure to dedicate
the whole long tale
to the lyre and the gentle voice,
lest excess come and grate. But let what runs before my feet,
your due, boy, the newest of glories, go forth,
winged by my craft.
For in wrestling you follow in the tracks of your mother's brothers:
you do not shame Theognetus at Olympia,
nor Cleitomachus' bold-limbed victory at the Isthmus;

Pindar P. 8.38
and, increasing the clan of the Midylidae, you bear out the word
which once the son of Oicles, seeing at seven-gated
Thebes the sons standing fast with the spear, uttered in riddles,
when from Argos they came
on the second expedition, the Epigoni.
So he spoke while they fought:
"By nature the noble spirit shines out
from fathers in their sons. I see clearly
the dappled serpent on his blazing shield, Alcmaeon
wielding it, first at the gates of Cadmus.[16]

15 The island is Aegina, home of the Aeacids, the heroic line of Aeacus (Peleus, Telamon, Achilles, Ajax).
16 Amphiaraus, son of Oicles, was a seer who died in the first attack of the Seven on Thebes; the Epigoni ("Descendants") were their sons, who took the city.

Pindar P. 8.48 And he who suffered in the earlier disaster
now meets with better
tidings from the bird of omen,
the hero Adrastus; but at home
he will fare the opposite. For alone of the Danaan host,
having gathered the bones of his dead son, by the gods' fortune
he will arrive, his people unharmed,
at the broad streets of Abas." Such were the words
Amphiaraus uttered. And I myself, rejoicing,
pelt Alcmaeon with garlands and sprinkle him with song too,[17]

Pindar P. 8.58 because, my neighbor and the guardian of my possessions,
he met me as I was going to the famous navel of the earth,
and took up prophecy with the arts born in his family.
And you, Far-Shooter, who govern the all-welcoming
and glorious temple
in the hollows of Pytho,
there the greatest of joys
you granted; and at home, before, the coveted gift
of the pentathlon you bestowed at your festivals.[18]

Pindar P. 8.67 Lord, with a willing mind I pray
to look with some harmony
on everything I approach.
Beside the sweet-singing revel
Justice has taken her stand; and the gods' regard,
ungrudging, I ask, Xenarces, for your fortunes.

17 Adrastus led the first, failed expedition against Thebes and lost his son in the second; "the streets of Abas" are Argos, after an early king.
18 Alcmaeon had a shrine near Pindar's house in Thebes; the "navel of the earth" is Delphi (Pytho).

Pindar P. 8.73 For if someone has won good things without long toil,
to many he seems a wise man among fools,
arming his life with rightly counseled devices;
but these things do not rest with men; a god bestows them,
now throwing one man on high, now another beneath his hands
he brings down, by measure. At Megara you hold a prize,
and in the hollow of Marathon, and Hera's local contest
with three victories, Aristomenes, you mastered by your deeds;

Pindar P. 8.81 and you fell from above on four
bodies, with harm in mind,
for whom no homecoming like yours,
so joyful, was decided at the Pythian games,
nor, when they came back to their mothers, did sweet laughter all around
stir up delight; but along the back lanes, keeping clear of enemies,
they slink, stung by their misfortune.

Pindar P. 8.88 But he who has won some fine new thing,
in his splendor, out of great
hope takes flight
on the wings of his manhood, having
ambition greater than wealth. But in a short time mortals'
delight grows; and just so it falls to the ground,
shaken by an adverse purpose.

Pindar P. 8.95 Creatures of a day! What is someone? What is no one? A dream of a shadow
is man. But when a god-given radiance comes,
a bright light rests on men, and life is sweet.
Aegina, dear mother, on a voyage of freedom
keep this city safe, with Zeus and lord Aeacus,
with Peleus and noble Telamon, and with Achilles.