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Alcman (seventh century B.C.)

Alcman carries a foggy biography with him. In many references—these are the papyrus fragments or later Greek scholia (references to authors which are typically about other topics)—he is said to have been from Sardis, in Lydia, in Asia Minor. (Sardis was a sophisticated city, known for its wealth and culture.) Alcman is also claimed by Sparta, and the dialect of his poetry supports that claim. (On such slim threads hang the identities we can reconstruct for ancient Greek literary figures.)

What we know of Alcman's poetry is typically a tale of loss: we know that there were six books of Alcman's choral poetry—poetry written for dancing and reciting teams—which were themselves lost at the beginning of the Middle Ages, but then that new work of Alcman was discovered in a tomb near the second Pyramid of Saqqara in Egypt, in 1855. (Chance discoveries like this continue to intertwine the findings of archeology with the history of achievements in the arts.) From that papyrus we inherit, though in battered and fragmentary state, one hundred lines of a *partheneion* of Alcman; a choral dance poem written for unmarried young women. The following is a sample of the not easily graspable energy of this poetry:

There is such a thing as the vengeance of the gods:
That man is blessed who devoutly weaves to the
End the web of his day unweeping.
And so I sing of the brightness of Agido; I see her
Like the sun, which Agido summons to shine on us as
Our witness.

Who Agido was we don't know, but that this maiden dance song belongs to a tradition of harvest-promoting and broadly generative cult themes we have some reason to believe. Throughout these poems of Alcman, which originally included a great many 'hymns,' we find implications of homoeroticism, and in contexts where the fertility of the land seems to be implicated as well as human desires. We have no reason to doubt that this was the larger ritual framework, into which the eroticism of the early Greek lyric fitted. Eros was, and remained, for the Greeks a relational force, bringing together individuals but also the forces of fertility in the world at large.