HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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Simonides (566-468 Cent. B.C.)

You will be reflecting, that the biographies, and indeed the broad historical settings, of the earliest Greek poets are hard to reconstruct in any detail. The fact is that the detail available is usually drawn from comments in later authors, often Hellenistic, or from Byzantine commentaries like the *Suda*, a tenth century A. D. Byzantine encyclopedia, or from papyrus fragments. It is from such sources that we 'know' of Simonides that he was not only an internationally prolific poet of choral dance songs—a specialty of the island of Ceos, where he was born—but a much sought after writer of epigrams, like the following supremely famous three liner attributed in the poem to the voice of the Spartan who fell defending his homeland against the Persians at the Battle of Thermopylae in 476 B.C.

Four thousand of us fought three million.
When you visit Sparta, tell them:
Here, the soldiers kept their word.

The terseness and valor of the words struggle to come through in English, but one gets the point. The ingenious author of such concise pieces was also known for a number of unusual achievements. He was apparently the first Greek lyric poet to charge for his creations, which could include preparing a dance troupe to perform his work. (The reverse of this fact is noteworthy; that for most of its history Greek literature was a public/social act, often intended for performance, but rarely commercialized.) He was later 'mythologized' as having been surpassingly wise, ingenious—he is said to have invented four new letters, which were accordingly added to the Greek alphabet, and to have devised a mnemotechnic system which was to be taken by the oral poets of antiquity as an invaluable aid in their memory-based creations. (In an oral or mixed oral/written culture the art of memorization and recital was essential.) It might finally be mentioned that Simonides was famed as a miser, one who—ironically?—insisted that money-making was the only pleasure that old age did not take away from him.