HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
Frederic Will, Ph.D.

Alcaeus (Late 7th Cent. B.C.)

Alcaeus was from the North Aegean island of Lesbos, living in its capitol, Mytilene. He was from one the leading aristocratic families, and was deeply involved in the politics of the island, which was a powerful commercial and naval hub directly communicating with the Hellespont and Asia Minor, and for such reasons a direct competitor with Athens. (We are in that formative period of Greek democracy, when power was not yet predominately grounded in Athens; though the impetus given Athenian democracy by Solon, whom we just visited, was starting to drive history toward the Athenian polis.) Alcaeus' life, both as an active participant in island politics and as an exile, played directly into his lyrics, indeed into such lines as the historian Herodotus later recalls, in which Alcaeus is cited throwing away his shield in the midst of battle, so that he can come out unscathed. This incident, in fact, fits with the Alcaeus who pens such lines as the following drinking song:

> *Let's drink! Why are we waiting for the lamps? Only an inch of daylight left.*
> *Lift down the large cups, my friends, the painted ones;*
> *for wine was given to men by the son of Semele and Zeus*
> *to help them forget their troubles. Mix one part of water to two of wine,*
> *pour it in up to the brim, and let one cup push the other along*...

The Lesbos where Alcaeus created brought him into direct contact with his age mate, Sappho, with whom he plausibly became acquainted at a poetry ceremony—intertwined with religious ritual—at which she was performing in Mytilene. He was struck with her beauty and grace, virtually a god-like being he thought and said in fragmenrts, and shared with her not only friendship but distinctive metrical styles—the Alcaic and the Sapphic meters were used interchangeably by both poets. It is a measure of the sophistication of local states, in this period following upon the looser clan cultures of the epic period, that such a brilliant island culture developed its own distinctive styles and cultural postures. We are firmly launched on that developmental history of a Greek culture which is eminently fragmented into small political units, often conforming to the divisory landcape of a mainland/coastal/island diversity, thus of an area where inter-regional communication was difficult.