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Tyrtaeus (mid seventh century B.C.)

Tyrtraeus represented the militant voice of his polis, Sparta. The fragments of his work—one is below—exhort his fellow citizens to plunge into the fray, and protect their community. (We are in the early stages of the formation of the severe Spartan ethos, which was to become so instrumental to the warfare and conflicts of the fifth century classical period. In its archaic inception the finesse of Spartan culture lay in its excellence of handiworks, metallic art, clothing, but—as we see with Tyrtaeus—the pressure of military conflict began quickly to transform the ethos of the polis.) Among the few details we know, of Tyrtaeus' life, is that he was viewed as the writer of a Constitution for Sparta (the *Eunomia),* which quite naturally he composed in elegiacs, dactylic lines (as in Homer) divided up into couplets. Like Solon, Tyrtaeus was a public figure committed to the interests of the polis.

> *Let a man learn how to fight by first daring to perform mighty deeds,*
> *Not where the missiles won't reach, if he is armed with a shield,*
> *But getting in close where fighting is hand to hand, inflicting a wound*
> *With his long spear or his sword, taking the enemy's life,*
> *With his foot planted alongside a foot and his shield pressed against shield,*
> *And his crest up against crest and his helm up against helm*
> *And breast against breast, embroiled in the action—let him fight man to man,*
> *Holding secure in his grasp haft of his sword or his spear!*

This relatively intact poem replicates in its syntax the ferocity of hand to hand fighting, as the Greeks knew it. In the last four lines there are five noun repetitions calculated to enforce the clash of the referents—*foo*t, *shield*, *crest*, *helm, breast*—against one another. The patterns of sounds reinforce the entire point of the poem.

Like Archilochus, Tyrtaeus writes of the military experience, and does so in carefully crafted poetry. This is remarkably Ancient Greek. We can imagine a military person, today, who writes wonderful poetry, but it is hard to imagine such a person incorporating into that poetry the experience of actual military action.