

Voices of the Polis: poetry and community in archaic Greece

Note: please be aware that the poets here are *not* arranged in chronological order. Translations are by A. Miller (with a few adaptations) unless otherwise credited.

1. Alcaeus

Alcaeus was a citizen of Mytilene on the island of Lesbos, and seems to have been born ca.625 (he was a compatriot and contemporary of Sappho). What we know of his biography from ancient sources (which themselves must be drawing on Alcaeus' poems) is inseparable from the political history of Lesbos during his lifetime. This can be summarised (not with total confidence, but with some probability) as follows:

Before Alcaeus' birth, Lesbos was governed by a hereditary aristocratic clan, the Pentilidae. These were weakened and then replaced by the tyrant Melanchrus. Some time about 610, Melanchrus was removed by a faction which included Alcaeus' brothers and a new tyrant, Pittacus, was put in his place (Alcaeus was not involved, perhaps because he was too young). He was in turn replaced by Myrsilus. Alcaeus and others in Pittacus' party were exiled, but Pittacus subsequently made an alliance with Myrsilus, much to Alcaeus' disgust. After Myrsilus' death, Alcaeus and his faction competed for power with Pittacus, but Pittacus won. Alcaeus regards Pittacus as a low-born and treacherous cheat; other sources give a much more favourable picture of a wise ruler with the support of the people. His work survives only in fragments.

fr. 38a (3 Miller)

Drink and get drunk with me, Melanippos. Why do you suppose
that when you have crossed great Acheron's

eddying stream you will see the sun's pure light
again? But come, do not aim at things so great:

for even king Sisyphos, Aiolos' son, who excelled
all men in wit, thought he had mastered death;

but, clever though he was, at fate's command a second time
he crossed the eddies of Acheron, and Zeus the king,

the son of Kronos, contrived a labour for him to undergo
beneath the black earth. But come, put such hopes aside;

now if ever, while youth is ours, we must accept
whatever of those things God gives us to experience...

Notes:

Melanippos: a man's name; we know nothing else about him.

Acheron: a river which must be crossed on the way to the underworld.

Sisyphos, son of Aiolos: having died once, he persuaded Hades (king of the dead) to allow him to return to life to punish his wife, who had not carried out proper funeral rites. Dying for the second time, he was punished by having perpetually to roll a vast stone up a mountain ("a labour for him to undergo...").

fr. 42 (4 M)

As the story tells, because of wicked deeds
bitter grief once came to Priam and his sons
from you, Helen, and Zeus with fire destroyed
holy Ilion.

A different sort was she whom Aiakos' noble son,
inviting all the Blessed to the wedding-feast,
led into marriage from the halls of Nereus,
a delicate maiden,

to Chiron's house; he loosed the chaste
maiden's girdle, and love blossomed
for Peleus and the best of Nereus' daughters;
and in a year

she bore a son, mightiest of demigods,
fortunate driver of tawny horses.
But they were ruined for Helen's sake,
the Trojans and their city.

Notes:

The contrast is between Helen, from whose adultery with Paris arose the war at Troy (= Ilios), and Thetis, who was the daughter of the sea-god Nereus and married Peleus (the son of Aiakos) before giving birth to Achilles. Chiron was a centaur who taught Achilles to hunt in the countryside; here it appears that Peleus and Thetis spend their married life in a house belonging to him.

fr.129 (6 M)

... men of Lesbos founded
this precinct, large and conspicuous,
common to all, and in it set
altars of the blessed immortals;

and Zeus they titled God of Suppliants,
and you they called Aiolian, Glorious Goddess,
Mother of All, and this third one here
they named Kemelios,

Dionysos, devourer of raw flesh. Come,
with friendly spirit listen
to our prayer, and from these hardships
and the pangs of exile deliver us.

But let the son of Hyrrhas be pursued
by *those* men's avenging Fury, since once we swore
with solemn sacrifice
never to betray a single comrade of ours,

but either to lie clothed in earth,
dead at the hands of men who at that time got the mastery,
or else, by killing them,
to deliver the people from their sufferings.

But those things Potbelly did not take
to heart; without compunction
he trampled his oaths under foot
and now devours our city...

Notes:

you... Glorious Goddess: Hera

Kemelios: this word occurs only here; context makes it clear that it is either an alternative name for Dionysos or a special adjective describing him. If it is the latter, we don't know what it means.

son of Hyrrhas: Pittacus, also called by Alcaeus "Potbelly". Alcaeus probably refers ("those men") to men who died as a result of Pittacus' treachery in abandoning Alcaeus' faction: the Furies pursue those who have killed unjustly to exact revenge on behalf of the dead. Bad rulers are thought of as growing "fat" (hence "Potbelly") by "eating" (the wealth of) the city.

fr.130b (7 M)

... I, poor wretch,
live the life of a rustic,
yearning to hear the assembly
being summoned, O Agesilaidas,

and the Council. The property which my father
and father's father grew old possessing,
among these citizens who wrong one another,
from that I am driven away,

an exile on the very edge of things, and like Onomakles
I have settled here alone amid the wolf-thickets
... war, for it is ignoble
to give up rebellion against...

... to the precinct of the blessed gods...
... stepping on the black earth...
... gatherings...
I dwell, keeping my feet clear of trouble,

where women of Lesbos, being judged for beauty,
go back and forth in their trailing robes, and all around
rings out the wondrous sound
of the women's holy cry each year...

... from many toils when will the gods
of Olympos rescue me?

Notes:

This is very nearly a whole poem; apart from the missing parts of lines (marked by ...), we lack about a line at the start and about three lines at the end.

Agesilaidas and Onomakles are both otherwise unknown.

fr.332 (13M)

Now each man must get drunk and drink
with all his might, since Myrsilos is dead...

Notes:

On Myrsilus, see intro. above.

This fragment was imitated by Horace (*Odes* 1.37) in a poem commemorating the death of Cleopatra in the Battle of Actium (31 BC) (“nunc est bibendum...”).

2. Theognis

We have nearly 1400 lines of poetry transmitted through medieval manuscripts under the name of Theognis, who seems to be a citizen of Megara (a city to the north-west of Athens) in the seventh or perhaps sixth century BC. But some of this collection is definitely later, and some parts are known elsewhere from other authors. It appears that we are dealing with an anthology, and that the oldest parts may go back to a historical poet called Theognis, who seems in particular to address a younger man called Kyrnos or Polypaides (“son of Polypaos”). Regardless of authorship, the collection speaks (among other things) of tensions in an archaic city-state, described from an aristocratic perspective.

53-68 (5 M)

Kyrnos, this city is still a city, but its people now are different,
being those who earlier knew neither judgements nor laws
but instead wore goatskins to tatters about their sides,
and grazed like deer outside of this city.
And now they are noble, son of Polypaos, while those who before had merit
now are worthless. Who could endure to look upon these things?
They cheat one another while laughing at one another,
lacking the wit to distinguish bad from good.
Son of Polypaos, make none of these citizens your friend
from the heart, not for the sake of any need;
instead, seem from your speech to be a friend to all,
but share with none of them any business whatsoever
of a serious sort. You will come to know the minds of wretched men,
how in their actions there is no place for trust,
since they have come to know tricks and deceits and cunning snares
in the manner of men who are beyond all rescue.

183-92 (7 M)

Among rams and asses and horses, Kyrnos, we look for those
of noble breeding, and a man wants them to mate
from worthy stock. Yet a noble man does not mind marrying
a base woman of base birth if she brings him money in abundance,
nor does a woman shrink from becoming the wife of a base man
with wealth; she prefers a rich husband to a worthy one.
Money is what they honour; the noble weds a base man's daughter
the base a worthy man's: wealth mixes stock.
Thus do not be amazed, son of Polypaos, that the citizens' stock
is growing feeble, for what is noble is being mixed with what is base.

257-60, trans. D. Gerber (slightly adapted)

I am a fine, prize-winning mare, but I carry a man who is utterly base, and this causes
me the greatest pain. Often I was on the point of breaking the bit, throwing my bad
rider, and running off.

Note: It appears that we are to understand the lines as describing the situation of an aristocratic woman (the mare) married to a man of lesser birth (the rider).

3. Archilochus

Archilochus seems to have been active in the middle of the seventh century BC: the solar eclipse mentioned in fr.122 (below) was probably that of 6th April 648. He came from the island of Paros, but spent time as part of a group of colonists on the island of Thasos. Ancient traditions had it that he was engaged to Neoboule, the daughter of Lycambes, but Lycambes broke off the engagement. Archilochus (according to the story) then insulted Lycambes, Neoboule, and Neoboule's sister and described in verse his sexual relations with the two sisters, and Lycambes and both sisters committed suicide from shame. This story is certainly not (or not *all*) founded on historical fact, but rather suggests how Archilochus' poems were understood and perceived later in antiquity.

fr.1 (1M)

I am a servant of Enyalios the battle lord
and of the Muses also, understanding their lovely gift.

Note: Enyalios was a war god who came to be identified with Ares.

fr.5 (4 M)

My shield's in the hands of some jubilant Thracian – a faultless
piece of equipment which I left, unwillingly, beside a bush.
Myself, I'm safe. What do I care about that shield?
To hell with it! I'll soon find another one that's no worse.

fr.21-2 (10 M)

... like the backbone of a donkey
this island stands, dense with untamed woodland...

.....
... for the place has no beauty at all, no charm
or loveliness, unlike the land about the banks of Siris.

Note: The description is of Thasos. The river Siris is probably a river which flows into the Gulf of Tarentum in southern Italy (in an area which was colonised by Greeks at this time).

fr.102 (16 M)

How the miserable dregs of all the Greeks have met
together on Thasos!

fr.122 (23 M)

“Nothing is unexpected, nothing can be sworn as impossible
or marveled at, since Zeus, the father of the Olympians,
made night out of noonday, keeping back the light
of the beaming sun; and upon mankind came fear.
Henceforth all things are to be believed, all things expected
by men. None of you should in future be amazed, not even to see
the beasts change place with the dolphins and go grazing
in the deep, holding the sea’s resounding billows
dearer than land, while dolphins love the wooded hills...”

Note: According to the quoting author (Aristotle), the speaker is a father talking about his daughter. Solar eclipses can be dated astronomically; this is probably the one which took place on 6th April 648.

fr.42 (13 M)

... like a Thracian or a Phrygian drawing beer
through a straw, she sucked away, head forward, working
hard...

fr.43 (14 M)

... his prick, like that of a he-ass from Priene
well-fed with grain, spilled over...

Note: The verb trans. as “spilled over” is understood by some as “swelled up”. Priene is on the coast of Asia Minor, near Miletus; I don’t know whether there was anything special about its donkeys.

fr.196a (39 M)

“... refraining altogether.
Enduring an equal...

But if you are in pressing haste and desire drives you on,
there is in our household
one who now longs greatly... 5

a lovely tender maiden. She has, I think,
a beauty that is faultless.
She is the one whom you should make your own.”

So much she said, and to her I replied:
“Daughter of Amphimedo, 10
that noble and wise

woman whom the mouldering earth now holds below,
the goddess offers pleasures
of many sorts to young men

apart from the divine deed: one of those will suffice. 15
These things, at leisure,
when darkness...

you and I shall deliberate, with god’s aid.
I shall do as you request;
greatly do I... 20

beneath the cornice and the gates...
Do not be grudging, dear one,
for I shall come to a halt in grassy

gardens. Now understand this: let Neoboule
be claimed by another man. 25
Alas, she is over-ripe...

the bloom has withered from her maidenhood,
and the charm which formerly she possessed;
surfeited, she has not...

and she has shown, that frenzied woman, the measure of her... 30
To the crows with her!
May this not be,

that I, possessing such a wife,
should be a source of joy to spiteful neighbours.
I much prefer you... 35

for you are neither unreliable nor two-faced,
while she in turn is too sharp
and makes many men her friends:

I fear that blind and premature results
may issue from such eager haste, 40
just like the pups of a too-eager bitch.”

So much I said; and then I took the maiden
and laid her down
among blooming flowers. Wrapping a soft

cloak about her, cradling her neck in my arms, 45
... fearful...
just like a fawn...

and with my hands I gently grasped her breasts
... revealed her youthful
flesh, the onset of her prime, 50

and, fondling all her lovely body,
I released my passion's force,
just grazing tawny hair.

Notes:

This substantial fragment is known from a papyrus first published in 1974. Many details are hard to interpret, and the translation above assumes some supplements of missing letters and words.

15 “the divine deed”: full sexual intercourse; the goddess is Aphrodite.

21ff. “between the cornice and the gates... grassy gardens”: metaphors for parts of the female body; probably the vagina is located “between the cornice and the gates,” and the “grassy gardens” are pubic hair.

39-41: the blindness of puppies was proverbially associated with the apparent promiscuity of the bitch on heat.

Bibliographical note

The following books are good sources for reading more of these poets in translation:

D. Campbell. 1991. *Greek Lyric*, Cambridge MA (“Loeb Classical Library”), Volume 1 (“Sappho and Alcaeus”).

D. Gerber. 1999. *Greek Iambic Poetry*, Cambridge MA (“Loeb Classical Library”) (Archilochus).

———. 1999. *Greek Elegiac Poetry*, Cambridge MA (“Loeb Classical Library”) (Theognis).

A. Miller. 1996. *Greek Lyric: an anthology in translation*, Indianapolis IN (source of most of the translations above).

M.L. West. 1993. *Greek Lyric Poetry*, Oxford (“World's Classics”).