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# Seeing Alcman: the Iconographic Evidence of Alcman's Ancient Reception

## Ver Alcman: a evidência iconográfica da recepção antiga de Alcman

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**Abstract:** Although the reception of archaic Greek poets in antiquity has ignited the interest of many modern scholars, very little attention has been given to the visual representation of these poets, despite the fact that many artifacts or inscriptions date back to the late archaic and classical periods and are valuable sources of information. My aim is to examine a neglected subject on the ancient reception of Alcman, more specifically his reception through iconographic material. Despite the paucity of evidence, I suggest that the existing indications point to the direction that Alcman had a Panhellenic reception, at least from a later period on, and that he was, eventually, acknowledged as one of the classics.

**Keywords:** Alcman; reception in antiquity; visual representation.

### Introduction

The ancient reception of ancient writers seems to have become a popular topic in contemporary research<sup>2</sup>. Much scholarly emphasis has also been put on a very thorny issue; this is the reception of archaic Greek poets within antiquity<sup>3</sup>. Much attention has been given to the biographical material in such studies. Nevertheless, very little attention has been given to the visual representation of archaic poets, despite the fact that many artifacts or inscriptions date back to the late archaic and classical periods<sup>4</sup>. Despite that

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<sup>2</sup> The last decades there has been a plethora of books regarding the reception of an ancient author within antiquity. It is worthy to name a few, such as: GRAZIOSI (2002); ACOSTA-HUGHES and STEPHENS (2012); PRIESTLEY (2014).

<sup>3</sup> It is useful to mention some examples, such as: ROSENMEYER (1992); YATROMANOLAKIS (2007); RAWLES and AGOCS and CAREY (2012); NAGY (2009); NAGY and NOUSSIA-FANTUZZI (2014); RAWLES (2016).

<sup>4</sup> With the exception of YATROMANOLAKIS' approach (see YATROMANOLAKIS (2001) and YATROMANOLAKIS (2007)). ROSENMEYER (see ROSENMEYER (1992)), before him, had dedicated a chapter to the iconographic material on Anacreon.

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there seems to be a reignited scholarly interest on Alcman the last few years<sup>5</sup>, the ancient reception of Alcman is a rather neglected subject. G. Hinge briefly refers to this issue in his study of Alcman's language and makes some suggestions about Alcman's ancient reception. According to him, Alcman's poetry was relatively unknown until the Hellenistic times and only a small collection of Alcman's non-ritual songs were known outside Sparta during the classical times<sup>6</sup>. The only scholarly work on this subject was published by C. Carey<sup>7</sup>. Carey rejects some of Hinge's conclusions about Alcman's reception and attempts to find confirmation within the lyric and dramatic tradition that Alcman "was an acknowledged classic" and that his reception was a Panhellenic one<sup>8</sup>. According to Carey, Alcman has gained the status of a classic poet during the early classical times<sup>9</sup>. Carey bases his arguments mainly on Alcman's reception in the Attic theatre and suggests that the poet attained his place among the classics in Peripatus. Carey assumes that the works of lyric poets should have started to circulate in written form around 420-480 B.C.<sup>10</sup> and that Alcman's written text should have started circulating from Philochorus' time and on. Nevertheless, he does not include any

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<sup>5</sup> This is obvious from the recent publications on the poet, such as: FERRARI (2008); HINGE (2006); TSANTSANOGLIOU (2012) and RÖMER's book on alcmanic Scholia that belongs to the series *Commentaria et Lexica Graeca in Papyris Reperta* (see RÖMER (2013)).

<sup>6</sup> More recently G. HINGE suggested that some or many of Alcman's poems were composed to be performed by males in the Spartan equivalent occasion of Attic *symposia* and argued in a systematic way that this fact drastically influenced their reception. Hinge considers that the medium of their transmission and reception was oral and regards Attic *symposia* as a suitable occasion for their reperformance. He also believes that the songs reperfomed in Attic *symposia* were not *partheneia* or any other kind of ritual songs. According to him, they were originally performed in Spartan *syssitia* or other occasions similar to Attic *symposia*. This is the reason they had a different transmission (see HINGE (2006); HINGE (2009)).

<sup>7</sup> See CAREY (2011) 437-461.

<sup>8</sup> See CAREY (2011) 453.

<sup>9</sup> See CAREY (2011) 445.

<sup>10</sup> See CAREY (2011) 453; THOMAS (see THOMAS (2009) 42) also notes that in Athens, at least from the 480-470 B.C., "the very active democratic citizen" had to obtain an elevated level of literacy, thus that the aim of his education had to change. It can be assumed that there were people able and willing to read copies of the 'classics'.

evidence coming from the iconographic material to support his arguments, probably, due to the scarcity of such evidence.

Indeed, Alcman was one of the poets that were not a common subject in art. Unlike Anacreon's or Sappho's names<sup>11</sup>, Alcman's name was never inscribed next to any figure on vases of the classical era. Alcman's face does not appear in any coin or painting. No marble or vase painting has been identified and catalogued as a portrait of Alcman until the 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D. The only appearance of Alcman's face in art is encountered in a mosaic found in an artist's house in Jordan. Pausanias and some of the epigrammatists of the *Greek Anthology* do inform us, nevertheless, that there was a tomb of Alcman (in Plane-tree Grove according to Pausanias), but it is not certain whether or not this tomb was adorned by a statue of the poet. The byzantine poet Christodorus claims that there was a statue of the poet in the portico of Zeuxippus in Constantinople, at least in late antiquity.

What is significant, though, is not to observe that the evidence is limited, but to decide if the existing material can be helpful for the study of the reception of the poet within antiquity. As Richter notes<sup>12</sup>, it is more than obvious that the portraits of people who lived before the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. (when the art of portraiture began) must have been invented, so they were products of the artist's imagination. Thus, Alcman's visual representation is a source of information regarding the ancient reception of the poet. The very scarcity of evidence seems to be eloquent enough. Alcman could not have been one of the 'popular poets' (like Sappho or Anacreon), at least before the Hellenistic times. The only extant portrait of the poet, nevertheless, is

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<sup>11</sup> For the artistic representation of Sappho see YATROMANOLAKIS (2001) 159-168 and YATROMANOLAKIS (2007) 51-164. For Anacreon see ROSENMEYER (1992) 22-36. YATROMANOLAKIS (see YATROMANOLAKIS (2001) 160) notes that Alcman, Archilochus or Stesichorus did not appear in vases of the classical period, unlike Sappho or Anacreon. He states that this fact reflected the popularity of each poet during the classical period. For the visual representation of other poets (Archilochus, Stesichorus, Alkaios, Solon, Simonides, Ibycus, Pindar, Telesilla, Corinna, Pindar) see RICHTER (1965) 67-75; RICHTER (1984) 156, 177, 204.

<sup>12</sup> See RICHTER (1965) 17. Alcman is never mentioned in her book as a poet whose figure was identified and catalogued. This choice is highly indicative of the scarcity of evidence regarding Alcman's visual representation.

informative about Alcman's reception. The same is true for the descriptions of his visual representation. Despite the paucity of evidence, I suggest that the existing indications point to the direction that Alcman had a Panhellenic reception, at least from the later times and on, and that he was, eventually, acknowledged as one of the classics.

## 1) Literary Evidence of Alcman's Artistic Depiction

### a) Alcman's Tomb

Pausanias (*Description of Greece*, 3.15.1-5) mentions that Alcman's tomb was close to the shrine of Hercules and to the altar of Helen. According to him, the exact place of Alcman's tomb in Sparta was behind the portico built by the side of Plane-tree Grove near to other hero-shrines (of Alcimus, of Enaraephorus, at a little distance further the one of Dorceus, and close to the one of Sebrus). Alcman's tomb was on the right of Sebrum (the fountain near the hero-shrine of Sebrus that was named after him). Pausanias never mentions that Alcman's tomb was adorned by a statue of the poet. He does mention, though, the statue of Hercules armed to fight against Hippocoon and his sons. Pausanias believes that the enmity between Heracles and the sons of Hippocoon started when they refused to cleanse him after the death of Iphitus. The death of his cousin, Oenus, was the reason Hercules began a battle against them.

Pausanias reference of Alcman's tomb is not a sole case. In three funerary epigrams of the *Greek Anthology* we encounter similar references. Leonidas (7.19) calls Alcman graceful and a swan-singer of wedding songs. He believes that Alcman was Lydian and, possibly, a slave. Alexander Aetolus (7.709) uses the first person. In his epigram is Alcman himself the one who sings and wants to gain the attention of the passer-by. The speaker mentions that Alcman is a citizen of Sparta and does not wear ornaments of gold. He also states that he is not related to the orgiastic rites of Lydian origin. Antipater of Thessaloniki in another epigram (7.18) states that we cannot judge a man by his tomb. Alcman's was simple, but he was a great poet. He mentions the problem of his double origin and refuses to take a clear stance.

It is far from certain that Pausanias statements were close to the truth. There is no tomb of Alcman or of Hercules and Helen found in Plane-tree Grove. It is really interesting that Alcman's alleged tomb was situated near the tomb of mythical and not historical figures. It is also remarkable that near to Alcman's tomb there was a statue of Hercules fighting the sons of Hippocoon, as he was described to do in Alcman's 1 *PMGF*. Alcman, according to Pausanias, is supposed to be buried among the tombs of the central figures of his most famous *partheneion* (1 *PMGF*). This cannot be a mere coincidence. In fact, D. Clay considered Pausanias's account as an indication that Alcman was worshiped in Sparta<sup>13</sup>. No matter how much intriguing this assumption is, there is no other indication of a hero-cult of Alcman in Sparta. Nevertheless, Pausanias' description of Alcman's tomb provides evidence that Alcman was considered a very important person within the Spartan community<sup>14</sup>.

In the epigrams, there is no description of any kind of artistic depiction of Alcman. Antipater of Thessaloniki, on the other hand, warns us that Alcman's tomb was very simple; thus, we can assume that what he had in mind was a tomb of Alcman without a statue of the poet. In case the tomb of Alcman was adorned by a statue of the poet we cannot assume based in these epigrams that his portrait reflected somehow the belief that he was Lydian, thus that he was considered a more Panhellenic than an epichoric Spartan poet. Especially Alexander Aetolus states clearly that Alcman was not dressed as a Lydian.

### **b) Statue**

The only literary mention of Alcman's statue can be encountered in Christodorus (*AP*, 2.1.393-397)<sup>15</sup>. The later poet describes a statue of Alcman (or Alcmaeon) found in the portico of Zeuxippus. Christodorus mentions that this statue could have depicted two different people. The one was a prophet

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<sup>13</sup> See CLAY (2004) 108.

<sup>14</sup> NAGY (see NAGY (1989) 55) notes that any poet is a ritual substitute for the god Apollo, and relates the concept of ritual substitute with hero-cult.

<sup>15</sup> Christodorus lived during the 5<sup>th</sup>-6<sup>th</sup> century A.D. The portico described dates back to the 2<sup>nd</sup> century A.D., but the statues described were added around the 4<sup>th</sup> century A.D.

and the other was a poet. The statue he describes depicts the second one, the poet Alcman, and not the prophet Alcmaeon. While it has been suggested that the epigrams of Christodorus of Coptus may actually have been inscribed on the bases of the statues themselves<sup>16</sup>, this is unlikely in Alcman's case, because of Christodorus' use of the medium of *ekphrasis*, and the presence of the past tense in the text.

If there was a statue of Alcman in Zeuxippus' baths, then we can assume that this statue could have been taken from Alcman's tomb in Sparta, since this was not an unusual practice. Besides the literary descriptions of Alcman's tomb, there is no archaeological indication that Alcman was buried in Sparta. There is no information regarding this statue. Christodorus' account is very short and informs us only that Alcman was depicted as a poet and not as a prophet. It is interesting that Christodorus feels the need to make this distinction. In fact, in the biographical tradition of Alcman there are other references that Alcman was a seer or a prophet<sup>17</sup>.

## 2) Extant Portrait of Alcman

It might not be a mere peculiarity of the tradition that the only extant iconographic evidence found is a mosaic portrait of the 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D. coming from a dining room in Jordan. This portrait formed part of a large floor mosaic along with portraits of other Greek ancient authors (Homer, Thucydides, Stesichorus, Olympus the musician, and possibly Anacreon) and the portrait of god Dionysus<sup>18</sup>. Richter mentions that probably every poet was coupled with a Muse<sup>19</sup>. Since most of the other writers could easily have been coupled with a Muse (Homer with Kalliope, Olympus with Euterpe, Stesichorus with Ourania as Richter believes) we are left with an anonymous Muse (maybe Kleio for Thucydides), Terpsichore and Erato for Thucydides,

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<sup>16</sup> See MIGUÉLZ-CAVERO (2008) 32.

<sup>17</sup> According to Suda (s.v. *Arion*), Alcman had at least one famous pupil, Arion, like other poets or prophets. In a 2<sup>nd</sup> century B.C. papyrus, a cosmogonic poem is attributed to the poet (5 *PMGF*). According to Aelian (*Collection of Wonderful Tales*, 12.50), Alcman's exceptional abilities had, as a result, the restoration of peace in Sparta.

<sup>18</sup> See PICCIRILLO (1986) 32.

<sup>19</sup> See RICHTER (1965) 68. She believes that Stesichorus was coupled with Ourania which is a rather unusual pairing.

Alcman and Anacreon. Grossmann suggests that Erato was coupled with Anacreon<sup>20</sup>. We can assume that Alcman could have been coupled with Terpsichore, but there are no decisive clues. Alcman has a beard and he is surrounded by garlands and birds. He does not carry any musical instrument that would allow us to draw conclusions about his categorization as a poet<sup>21</sup>. His plausible pairing with Terpsichore, though, is an indication that Alcman was considered a choral poet.

This mosaic is not found in a private house, but in a house used by artists who performed the Dionysian arts (actors, poets, tragedians, dancers, musicians)<sup>22</sup>. Alcman was probably considered as one of the 'classic poets' by this group of people. His appearance in a mosaic in this particular dining room is indicative of his reception. Alcman by the 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D. was well-known outside Sparta or Athens. Moreover, he was a 'classic' poet, worth to be paired with a Muse and to be depicted along with other famous representatives of arts and literature. Everyone's poetic compositions, but Thucydides, could be useful in a gathering aiming to entertain the artists of this house. Their poetry could have been reperformed in *symposia* held there.

### Conclusions

Even the lack or paucity of evidence can be used as evidence for the study of the reception of a poet. In our case the scarcity of evidence of the artistic depiction of Alcman during the classical and Hellenistic times points to one direction: Alcman's early reception was limited compared to these of Sappho or Anacreon. Yatromanolakis in his influential article on the early representation of Sappho quotes Parson's opinion on this matter: "It is the pop singers (alive or dead) who concern the public, not the composers of cantatas"<sup>23</sup>. The references to Alcman's tomb in Sparta, and possibly of his portrait, are indicative of the importance Alcman had within the Spartan community, if not an evidence of a hero-cult of the poet in Sparta. Alcman

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<sup>20</sup> See GROSSMAN (2006) 152.

<sup>21</sup> For the reading of the depiction of musical instruments as indicative of a poet's categorization see ROTSTEIN (2010) 14, n. 4.

<sup>22</sup> See PICCIRILLO (1986) 32.

<sup>23</sup> See YATROMANOLAKIS (2001) 160. This excerpt was taken from PARSON (2001) 56.

seems to have been a very important figure in his community, even many years after his death. His figure and his poetic compositions were well-rooted in the religious life of Sparta for many centuries. From the only extant portrait of the poet we can assume that by that time (2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> century A.C.) Alcman was well-known outside Sparta and Athens. As I mentioned above, his placing in a mosaic among other famous writers is a strong indication that Alcman was regarded as a prominent representative of the art of poetry. If we press the evidence further, we can imagine that Alcman was considered at this time as the representative of his art *par excellence*, just like the other poets depicted were considered representatives of their art (e.g. Homer as a paradigmatic epic poet, Thucydides as a 'classic' historian). The literary references to Alcman's iconographic representation seem to point to the direction that Alcman was related to the religious life of the city within the Spartan community. His only extant portrait attests that, from a point and on, this image altered. Alcman outside Sparta bear no religious importance. By the time the mosaic was created he was considered as one of the classics and he was, perhaps, tied with the performance of songs during *symposia*. A double strand of Alcman's ancient reception seems to exist: on the one hand, he is a very respectable, if not religious, figure within his own community, on the other hand his poetry is tied to the *symposia* and he is a Panhellenic figure. The scarcity of evidence makes it impossible to conclude when, why and how this distinction was made. Nevertheless, even the scarce iconographic evidence is eloquent about the existence of this distinction.

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**Resumo:** Ainda que a receção dos poetas gregos arcaicos na Antiguidade tenha despertado o interesse de inúmeros estudiosos contemporâneos, escassa atenção tem sido dedicada à representação visual destes poetas, apesar de muitos artefactos e inscrições datarem dos períodos arcaico tardio ou clássico e constituírem fontes de informação valiosas. O nosso objetivo, neste artigo, é examinar um assunto negligenciado na receção antiga de Alcman, designadamente através de material iconográfico. A despeito da escassez de provas, as indicações conservadas sugerem uma receção pan-helénica de Alcman, pelo menos a partir de um período mais tardio, tendo o autor acabado por ser reconhecido como um dos clássicos.

**Palavras-chave:** Alcman; receção antiga; representação visual.

**Resumen:** Aunque la recepción de los poetas griegos arcaicos en la Antigüedad ha despertado el interés de un gran número de estudiosos contemporáneos, se ha prestado poca atención a la representación visual de estos poetas, y ello a pesar de que muchos utensilios e inscripciones datan de los períodos arcaico tardío y clásico, por lo que constituyen valiosas fuentes de información. Mi objetivo es examinar un tema que ha sido dejado de lado en la recepción antigua de Alcman, su recepción a través del material iconográfico. A pesar de la escasez de pruebas, planteo que los indicios existentes sugieren que Alcman fue objeto de una recepción panhelénica, por lo menos a partir de un período más tardío y que acabó por ser reconocido como uno de los clásicos.

**Palabras clave:** Alcman; recepción en la antigüedad; representación visual.

**Résumé:** Bien que la réception des poètes grecs archaïques de l'Antiquité ait suscité l'intérêt de la plupart des études contemporaines, peu d'attention a néanmoins été accordée à la représentation visuelle de ces poètes, et ce malgré les nombreux artefacts et inscriptions qui datent des périodes archaïques tardive ou classique et qui constituent des sources d'informations précieuses. Dans cet article, notre objectif consiste à examiner un sujet négligé dans la réception antique d'Alcman, notamment par le biais du matériel iconographique. Nonobstant la rareté de preuves, nous suggérons que les indications existantes indiquent qu'Alcman a eu une réception panhellénique, surtout à partir d'une période plus tardive, l'auteur ayant fini par être reconnu comme l'un des classiques.

**Mots-clés :** Alcman ; réception antique ; représentation visuelle.