

Hoplite poetry

Archaic Greek literature c. 650 BCE

1. Archilochus (c. 650 BCE) poet and mercenary:

Some barbarian is waving my shield,
 since I was obliged to leave that perfectly
 good piece of equipment behind under a bush.
 But I got away, so what does it matter?
 Life seemed somehow more precious.
 Let the shield go; I can buy another one equally good

2. Tyrtaeus (c. 650) Spartan poet and soldier

Fragment 10

It is a fine thing for a brave man to die when he has fallen among the front ranks while fighting for his homeland, and it is the most painful thing of all to leave one's city and rich fields for a beggar's life, wandering about with his dear mother and aged father, with small children and wedded wife. For giving way to need and hateful poverty, he will be treated with hostility by whomsoever he meets, he brings disgrace on his line, belies his splendid form, and every indignity and evil attend him. ...Come you young men stand fast at one another's side and fight, and do not start shameful flight or panic, but make the spirit in your heart strong and valiant, and do not be in love of life when you are fighting men. Do not abandon and run away from elders, whose knees are no longer nimble, men revered....Come let everyone stand fast, with legs set well apart and both feet fixed firmly on the ground, biting his lip with his teeth.

Fragment 11

Come, take courage, for your stock is from unconquered Heracles—not yet does Zeus hold his neck aslant—and do not fear the throngs of men or run in flight, but let a man hold his shield straight towards the front ranks, despising life and loving the black death-spirits no less than the rays of the sun. ...Those who dare to stand fast at one another's side and to advance towards the front ranks in hand-to-hand combat, they die in fewer numbers and they keep safe the troops behind them; but when men run away, all esteem is lost.

3. Archaic Cretan drinking song, *Song of Hybrias*,

I have great wealth: a spear, a sword, and the fine leather shield that protects one's skin. For with this I plough, with this I harvest, with this I trample the sweet wine from the vines, with this I am called "Master" of my serfs. Those who dare not hold a spear, a sword, a fine leather shield which protects one's skin all cower at my knee and prostrate themselves calling me "Master" and "Great King."

4. Solon (c. 590 BCE) Athenian statesman

I have given the masses as much privilege as is sufficient, neither taking away from their honor nor adding to it. And as for those who had power and were envied for their wealth, I saw to it that they too should suffer no indignity. I stood with a mighty shield cast round both sides and did not allow either to have an unjust victory.

5. Plutarch (~100 CE) quoting and ancient "Proverb from a Spartan Mother"

"Child, either bring this back (your shield), or be brought back home (dead) upon it!"