

# Alcman's *Partheneion*

Translated by Gregory Nagy

The *Partheneion* 'Maidens' Song' of Alcman (PMG 1), performed at a grand public festival in Sparta, on a seasonally-recurring basis, by a *choros* 'chorus, song-and-dance ensemble' of local maidens specially selected for the occasion, who take on the roles of the names featured in the song. The two premier roles are Hagesikhora and Agido, who are to be two competing choral leaders. Note the use of the word *chorēgos* 'chorus-leader' in the song, as it applies to Hagesikhora. The name Hagesikhora means the same thing as *chorēgos*.<sup>1</sup>

[...fragmentary lines...]<sup>2</sup>

35 Having devised evil deeds, they<sup>3</sup> suffered [*paskhein*] in a way that cannot be forgotten.

There is such a thing as retribution from the gods.

Blessed [*olbios*] is he who, with a sound disposition,

weaves through the time of day

without punishment that makes him weep. And I sing

40 the radiance of Agido, seeing

her as the sun, which for us

is shown by Agido—she is the eyewitness

to shine [*phainein*] with its sunlight. But for me to praise [*ep-aineîn*] her

or to blame [*mōmēsthai*] her is not allowed by the glorious [*kleenna*] leader of the chorus [*chorēgos* = Hagesikhora]

45 No, she does not allow me. For that one [Hagesikhora] appears radiantly to be

outstanding, as when someone

sets among grazing cattle a horse,

well-built, a prize-winner, with thundering hooves,

something from out of those dreams that happen underneath a rock.

50 Don't you see? One is a racehorse  
from Paphlagonia. But the mane  
of the other one, my kinswoman  
Hagesikhora, blossoms on her head  
like imperishable gold.

55 And the silver look of her face—  
what can I tell you openly?  
She is Hagesikhora.  
But whoever is second to Agido in beauty,  
let her be a Scythian horse running against a Lydian one.<sup>6</sup>

60 I say this because the Pleiades,  
as we bring the sacred veil for the Dawn Goddess,  
are passing through the ambrosial night, rising up over the horizon  
like Sirius the star, to do battle with us.  
It is true: all the royal purple

65 in the world cannot resist.  
No fancy snake-bracelet,  
made of pure gold, no headdress  
from Lydia, the kind that girls  
with tinted eyelids wear to make themselves fetching.

70 No, even the hair of Nanno is not enough.  
Nor goddess-like Areta,  
nor Thylakis and Kleesithera;

you wouldn't say so even if you went to the house of Ainesimbrotos.

Even if Astaphis were mine,

75 or Philylla gazed at me,

Damareta too, and lovely Ianthemis,

still, it is Hagesikhora who wears me down.

For she, with her beautiful ankles,

Hagesikhora, is not there.

80 She stays at the side of Agido.<sup>7</sup>

And she gives authority to our festive actions.

So, from them...<sup>8</sup>

...receive! It is through the gods that there is fulfillment

and reaching the *telos*. As the one who sets up the *khoros*,<sup>9</sup>

85 I should speak. I am the one,

the virgin who has sounded forth to no avail,

an owl. But it is also I who, most of all, to the Dawn Goddess

lust to give pleasure. Of our ordeals [*ponoi*]

she has become the healer.

90 But it is thanks to Hagesikhora<sup>10</sup> that young girls

have found their way to a peacefulness that is lovely.

For the tracehorse...<sup>11</sup>

In this way...<sup>12</sup>

Just as the helmsman must be

95 heeded on board a ship.

But she is, more than the Sirens,

capable of song...<sup>13</sup>

For they are goddesses. Instead of...<sup>14</sup>

young ones, this group of ten...<sup>15</sup>

100 It makes a sound,...<sup>16</sup>...on the banks of the river Xanthos ['golden-haired'],

the swan does. And she, with her lovely golden hair...<sup>17</sup>

## Notes

[ [back](#) ] **1.** In what follows, note especially the image of a wondrous horse conjured up in the simile describing the beauty of the maiden Hagesikhora, center of attention in the song-and-dance ensemble: "a horse, well-built, a prize-winner, with thundering hooves, from out of those dreams underneath the rock" (lines 47-49).

[ [back](#) ] **2.** The Louvre Papyrus, our source for the *Partheneion*, preserves the first column of its text for this song only in the most fragmentary condition.

[ [back](#) ] **3.** The Hippokoöntidai, a set of male heroes who died on account of deeds of *hubris*.

[ [back](#) ] **4.** Hagesikhora.

[ [back](#) ] **5.** Hagesikhora.

[ [back](#) ] **6.** Scythia and Lydia would be considered two extremes of the known world. The racehorses are so exotic as to be otherworldly. Both kinds of racehorse are so superior that the imagination boggles, in the words of the song, at the very thought of matching them against each other.

[ [back](#) ] **7.** The gaps in the papyrus at this line make the interpretation less than certain.

[ [back](#) ] **8.** Gaps in the papyrus. The idea seems to be: "receive their offerings, O gods!"

[ [back](#) ] **9.** The syntax here is not clear. There may be a shift of speakers here.

[ [back](#) ] **10.** It is possible that the speaker is referring to herself by name here.

[ [back](#) ] **11.** Gaps in the papyrus. The idea seems to be: the chorus-members must follow Hagesikhora as if she were a tracehorse.

[[back](#)] **12.** Gaps in the papyrus.

[[back](#)] **13.** Gaps in the papyrus. Some assume a missing negative.

[[back](#)] **14.** Gaps in the papyrus.

[[back](#)] **15.** Gaps in the papyrus. Some interpret: one girl has been taken away, and only ten remain from an original set of eleven.

[[back](#)] **16.** Gaps in the papyrus.

[[back](#)] **17.** Gaps in the papyrus, and the next and fourth column of the song is completely lost.

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