



Summary :

Lyric poet from Teos (c. 570-485 BC). Only fragments of his verse, which was in praise of love and symposium and influenced the poetry of the Hellenistic and Roman period, have survived. He lived at the court of Polycrates of Samos and later near Hipparchus in Athens. He died very old in Athens or Teos after he had previously visited Thessaly.

Date and Place of Birth

circa 570 BC, Teos

Date and Place of Death

circa 485 BC, Athens or Teos

Main Role

Poet

1. Biography

Anacreon was a lyric poet and musician from [Teos](#).¹ Already from the Byzantine period there were conflicting opinions about the identity of his father, most possibly being Skythinos, according to the Suda.² He was in his prime in 531 BC, the second year of the 62nd Olympic Games.³ However, some students of antiquity thought his prime was later, around the 65th Olympic Games (520-517 BC).⁴ He died at the age of 85, circa 485 BC.⁵ Valerius Maximus reports that the poet choked to death on a grape at a very advanced age; however, because some other poets (such as Aeschylus) are reported to have died in this way, the information is considered unreliable.⁶

2. Life

The information about Anacreon's life comes mainly from autobiographical references in his poems, which inevitably has provoked arguments among modern researchers. All students agree that Anacreon with his compatriots escaped the subsequent capture of Asia Minor by the [Persians](#) and sought shelter in Abdera, the newly founded colony of Teos (545-540 BC),⁷ either directly from Teos, according to most historians, or after a brief stay in Athens. According to the prevalent view, Anacreon was then directed to Samos, at the court of the tyrant Polycrates (533-522 BC),⁸ where he became famous for his love affairs with the brilliant young aristocrats of the court.⁹ It is almost certain that Anacreon was closely connected with Polycrates, as evidenced by the fact that they were eating together when the representative of the Persian satrap Oroetes arrived at the court in 522 BC.¹⁰

Following the fall of Polycrates in the same year, Anacreon fled to Athens on board a pentikontoros sent by Hipparchus to collect him.¹¹ In Athens the poet had a love affair with the young aristocrat Crito, the grandfather of the namesake Athenian tyrant of 404 BC, for whom the poet wrote some songs.¹² It is reported that Anacreon was still in Athens and admired the art of Aeschylus when the great tragedian first took part in drama contests between 499 and 496 BC.¹³ However, most historians agree that after Hipparchus was assassinated in 514, or after the fall of the tyrant Hippias in 510 BC, Anacreon escaped to Thessaly, as indicated by the fact that he dedicated some epigrams to the king of Pharsalus Echekratidas and his wife Dyseris.¹⁴ Although two subsequent epigrams of Anthologia Palatina report that his grave was in Teos, this is quite uncertain.¹⁵ As a result, some scholars disbelieve that he left Athens, while others believe that he returned there from Thessaly and then died.¹⁶



The famous bust of Hermes found near the monastery at Daphni in Attiki provides substantial evidence about the presence of the poet in Athens as a two-verse epigram attributed to Anacreon was inscribed on it. The verses say that Callicles put up the monument, which was later restored or completed by his descendants. As long as this Callicles is identified with one of the ancestors of the tyrants of Samos, the completion of the monument is attributed to either Polycrates or his brother Syloson, who succeeded him after he had betrayed Anacreon to the Persians.¹⁷

3. Anacreon's Poetry

Anacreon is the last great Greek lyric poet. He was a love and symposium poet par excellence, and became a symbol of the indulgent, peaceable and carefree Ionian aristocracy, successfully satirised by Aristophanes.¹⁸ What is more, Didymus Chalcenterus, the famous scholar and grammarian of the Hellenistic years, wrote a treatise where he examines if Anacreon was a poet of love rather than a poet of symposium.¹⁹ It is said that his poems always started with an invocation of Aphrodite.²⁰ He accompanied his verses playing his music on the [barbitos](#), a kind of lyre he is supposed to have invented.²¹ The impression he made on the Athenians of his time is reflected in the verses of Crito, who calls him 'the soul of symposiums, enchanter of women, opponent of the flute and master lyrist'. Anacreon used three [musical modes](#): the Phrygian, the Dorian and the Lydian.²²

His works were collected in five books, the first three including lyric poetry, the fourth iambic rhythms with a satiric character and the fifth elegies. Only fragments of his verses have survived, often thanks to interest expressed by subsequent scholars thanks to rare grammatical forms or words. Finally, Crito refers to choric works of the poet performed by young women, which did not survive, though.²³

4. Assessment

Although Anacreon is now considered a poet inferior to the great Lesbian lyrist that flourished half a century before him (Alcaeus, Sappho and Terpander), he was a poetic source of inspiration from the Hellenistic to the Byzantine period. Sixty of these late and wordy poems, the so-called 'Anacreontic' poems, were collected in the last volume of *Anthologia Palatina*. They were first circulated in Western Europe in the mid-16th century, influenced deeply the European poetry and led to the movement of the German Anacreontism, where Goethe came from.²⁴

As it happened with all important figures of antiquity, the name of Anacreon was connected with anecdotes of moralistic character. When he was asked why he wrote hymns to his dear young lovers and not to gods, he answered that one's lovers are one's gods.²⁵ It is also said that he was once punished by love in Mycale, where the [Koinon of Ionians – the Panionium](#) was based, when he cursed a nanny and the baby she was carrying. The woman wished Anacreon to glorify that very child someday, which finally happened: the baby was Kleovoulos, the subsequent lover of the poet.²⁶

5. Representations of Anacreon

The stay of Anacreon in Athens caused great sensation and was reflected in the works of Aristophanes half a century later. His presence in Athenian works of art between 520 and 440 BC is equally important. The most important of all is the bronze statue Pausanias saw in the Acropolis beside the statue of Xanthippos, Perikles' father.²⁷ A marble replica of the statue has survived in Copenhagen, while there are several replicas of the poet's head.²⁸ Anacreon is represented singing and drunk. It was long ago argued that the statues of Xanthippos and Anacreon are related with each other (it



was probably a group with Xanthippos listening to the poet) as it is implied in a reference made by Himerius, the writer of the Roman period, to a poem Anacreon addressed to Xanthippos, when the poet was still in Samos. The alleged group was attributed to Phidias, who was related to Perikles, the son of Xanthippos.²⁹ However, a recent study supported that the two works Pausanias saw in the Acropolis are not related with each other, while the association of the Roman replicas with the original of the 5th century was doubted.³⁰

Three Attic red-figure vessels from the late 6th and the early 5th century are irrecusable evidence of Anacreon's activities in Athens. A kylix represents the poet naked and playing the barbitos between two adolescent komastai. A lekythos represents the Anacreon bearded and wearing the local cloth of the Ionian poets, as this is described by Aristophanes: a *mitra* (headband) on his head and a fine and elegant Ionic chiton. Finally, on the fragments of a krater the name Anacreon appears on the barbitos of a bearded komast (reveller) wearing the typical garment and having a *sakkos* on his head.³¹ These representations are associated with a wider group of about 70 vessels representing, either individually or in groups, komastai wearing the same or similar clothes, sunbonnet and, rarely, earrings and holding the barbitos. Opinions differ as to whether the representations evidence the activities of Anacreon and his companions in Athens or they are generalizing representations of poets and komastai without particular historical interest.³² As for the garments of Anacreon and his companions, there are conflicting opinions: some think of it as a sign of effeminacy, while others think it proves an eastern influence, or even both versions may be combined.³³

Later representations reveal the popularity of Anacreon in the Imperial Roman period. His name appears on a Spartan mosaic dating from the 3rd century AD. The poet has been identified as the musician playing the lyre on coins from Teos. Finally, epigrams from *Anthologia Palatina* refer to statues of the poet, though they must have never existed.³⁴

1. Aristophanes, *Th.* 160. Strabo 14.644.
2. Suda, see entry Anacreon. The other three are Eumelus, Parthenius and Aristocritus.
3. Eusebius, *Chronicle*.
4. See Suda, entry 'Anacreon', where both dates are mentioned.
5. Luc., *Macr.*, 26.
6. Val. Max. 9.8.
7. Aristoxenus, *Life of Pythagoras* 12. Suda, see entry 'Anacreon', dates wrongly the arrival of Anacreon to Abdera during the period of Histiaeus, in 500 BC.
8. Strabo 14.638.
9. Himerius, 31.4, reports that Anacreon was the teacher of Polycrates the younger, son of the king of Samos, in poetry and arts. The same writer also reports (5.3) that in the court of Polycrates Anacreon composed for a young blond called Megistes. Maximus of Tyre, 37.5, explains that Anacreon mitigated the control of Polycrates over the Samians by mixing tyranny with love, the beauty of Smerdies and Cleobulus, the music of Bathycles and Ionic songs.
10. Hdt. 3.122. Polycrates is reported by Anacreon: Strabo. 14.638. See Labarbe, J., 'Un putsch dans la Grèce ancienne', *Anc.Soc.* 5 (1974), pp. 21-41.



11. Pseudo-Plat., *Hipparch.* 228b.
12. Plato, *Chrm.* 157^e. Lover of Critias: Commentary in Aeschylus, *Prom. D.* 128.
13. Commentary in Aesch., *Prom. D.* 128.
14. *Pal.Anth.* 6.142 and 6.136.
15. *Anth. Pal.* 7.24 and 7.25.
16. The predominant reconstruction of his life is presented by Bowra, C.M., *Greek Lyric Poetry*² (Oxford 1961) pp. 284-316 : Teos – Abdera – Samos – Athens – Pharsalus – Teos. Campbell, *Greek Lyric, II* (Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge Mass. 1988), places Athens between Abdera and Samos. A similar view from Rosenmeyer, P.A., *The Poetics of Imitation. Anacreon and Anacreontics* (Cambridge 1992) p. 14, who believes that Anacreon returned to Athens from Thessaly.
17. *Anth. Pal.* 6.138= *IG I²* 1014. See Labarbe, J., "Sur l'épigramme IG I² 834", *Akten des IV. Internationales Kongress für griechische und lateinische Epigraphik, Wien 17. bis 22. Sept. 1962* (Wien 1964) pp. 202-213. La Bua, V., "Su Silosonte I e II, Anacreonte e IG I² 834", *Xenia. Scritti in onore di Piero Treves* (Roma 1985) pp. 95-101. Aloni, A., "Anacreonte a Atene. Datazione e significato di alcune iscrizioni tiranniche", *ZPE* 130 (2000) pp. 81-94.
18. Aristophanes. *Thes.* 162-163. See McIntosh Snyder, J., "Aristophanes' Agathon as Anacreon", *Hermes* 102 (1974) pp. 243-246.
19. Sen., *Ep.* 88
20. Cic. *T.D.* 4.71.
21. Cleanthes of Kyzicus in Athen. 4.175e. Sources connecting the poet with barbitos: Critias, excerpt 8D, Athen. 13.600d-e, Athen. 4.182f, *Anth. Pal.* 7.25. *Anacreontica* 2.7, 15.34, 23.3, 43.4 and 60.1.
22. Posidon. in Athen. 14.635c.
23. Critias, excerpt 8 D in Athen. 13.600d-e.
24. *Anacreontica*: Page, D.L., *Poetae Melici Graeci* (Oxford 1962); Campbell, D.A., *Greek Lyric, II* (Loeb Classical Library, Cambridge, Mass. 1988).
25. Commentary in Pind., *Isth.* 2.1.
26. Maximus of Tyre 21.7.
27. Pausanias 1.25.1.
28. A head at the Museum of the Capitolium bears the inscription 'ΑΝΑΚΡΕΩΝ ΑΥΠΙΚΟΣ'. The copy of Copenhagen, known as Anacreon Borghese, dates from the period of the Antonines (2nd c. AD). Poulsen, F., 'Iconographic Studies in the Ny Carlsberg Glyptothek I. Anacreon', *From the Collection of the Ny Carlsberg Glyptothek I* (Copenhagen 1931), pp. 1-31. Richter, G.M.A., *The Portraits of the Greeks, II* (London 1965), pp. 75-78. S.Brusini, 'L'Anacreonte Borghese: Una nuova proposta di lettura', *RdA* 20 (1996), pp. 59-74.
29. Comlex: Frel., J., *Greek Portraits in the Getty Museum* (Malibu 1981), p. 31. Others attributed it to Cresilas, Kolotes or Pythagoras from Rhegium.
30. Sismondo Ridgway, B., 'An Issue of Methodology: Anacreon, Perikles, Xanthippos', *AJA* 102 (1998), pp. 717-738.
31. Kylix: Richter, G.M.A., *The Portraits of the Greeks, II* (London 1965), pic. 291. Urn: S. Price, 'Anacreontic Vases Reconsidered', *GRBS* 1 (1990), tab. 3b. Crater: Immerwahr, H.R., 'Inscription of the Anacreon Krater in Copenhagen', *AJA* 69 (1965), pp. 152-4, tab. 47.



32. Anacreon and his Athenian companions: Papaspyridi-Karouzou, S., 'Anacréon à Athènes', *BCH* (1942-1943), pp. 248-254. Beazley, J.D., Caskey, L.D., *Attic Vase Paintings in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, II* (Oxford 1954), pp. 58-60. Generalising illustration: Frontisi-Ducroux, F., Lissarrague, F., 'De l'ambiguïté à l'ambivalence : un parcours dionysiaque', *AION* 5 (1983), pp. 11-32, tables 2-15. Price S.D., 'Anacreontic Vases Reconsidered', *GRBS* 31 (1990), pp. 133-175.
33. Effeminacy: Beazley, J.D., Caskey, L.D., *Attic Vase Paintings in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, II* (Oxford 1954), pp. 58-60. Délavaud-Roux, M.-H., 'L'énigme des danseurs barbus au parasol', *RA* (1995), pp. 227-263. Miller, M.M., 'Reexamining Transvestism in Archaic and Classical Athens: The Zewadski Stamnos', *AJA* 103 (1999), pp. 223-253. Eastern influence: De Vries, K., 'East Meets West at Dinner', *Expedition* 15.4 (1973), pp. 32-39. Boardman, J., Kurtz, D.C., 'Booners', *Greek Vases in the Getty Museum* 3 (Malibu 1986), pp. 35-70. Price S.D., 'Anacreontic Vases Reconsidered', *GRBS* 31 (1990), pp. 133-175. Combination: Frontisi-Ducroux, F., Lissarrague, F., 'De l'ambiguïté à l'ambivalence: un parcours dionysiaque', *AION* 5 (1983), pp. 11-32, tables 2-15.
34. Mosaic: *BCH* 90 (1966), pp. 795-796, pic. 1-4; Waywell, S.E., 'Roman Mosaics in Greece', *AJA* 83 (1979), p. 303, no. 49. Coins of the imperial period (Domitian, Geta, Valerian): Richter, G.M.A., *The Portraits of the Greeks, II* (London 1965), pic. 295-297. Statues: *Anth. Pal.* 9.599 and 16.306.

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Glossary :



mitra

Type of headband, coming from the East. In the beginning it was a band of cloth, which covered the head. The Greeks used also a fillet tied round the forehead.



sakkos

A typical headdress for women, also worn by symposiasts.

Quotations

ᾠναξ, ᾧ δαμάλης Ἔρωσ
καὶ Νύμφαις κυανώπιδες
πορφυρέη τ' Ἀφροδίτη
συμπαίζουσιν· ἐπιστρέφει δ'
ὑψηλὰς ὀρέων κορυφάς,
γουνούμαι σε, σὺ δ' εὐμενῆς
ἔλθ' ἡμῖν, κεχαρισμένης δ'
εὐχολῆς ἔπακούειν.
Κλευβούλω δ' ἀγαθός γενεῦ
σύμβουλος, τὸν ἐμὸν ἔρωτ',
ᾧ Δεύνησε, δέχεσθαι.

Bowra C. M., *Αρχαία Ελληνική Λυρική Ποίηση*, Β' τόμος, μετάφραση Ι. Ν. Καζάκης, Μορφωτικό Ίδρυμα Εθνικής Τραπέζης (Athens 1999), p. 67

Chronological Table

c. 570 BC: Birth of Anacreon

545-540 BC: He joined in the foundation of Abdera in Thrace

533 BC: Anacreon joined the court of Polycrates, tyrant of Samos

522 BC: Polycrates' fall

522 BC: Hipparchus sent a warship to fetch Anacreon from Samos

514 or 510 BC: After Hipparchus' death, Anacreon went to Thessaly

After 499 BC: Anacreon came to Athens, where he watched Aeschylus' tragedies and made a love affair with Critias.

485 BC: Anacreon died in Athens or in Teos