Bacchylides was the nephew of Simonides and, like him, was born on Keos, an island in the western Cyclades. His exact dates are not known, but he appears to have been a close contemporary of Pindar. Like Pindar, with whom on occasion he shared patrons, Bacchylides composed choral lyrics in a wide variety of types, including hymns, paens, dithyrambs, epinicians, and enkomi. His works were collected by Alexandrian scholars into nine books. Substantial portions of two of these books, the epinicians (victory odes) and the dithyrambs, were discovered at the end of the nineteenth century on a fragmentary papyrus scroll in Egypt. For a brief account of the epinician as a poetic type, see the introduction to Pindar.

Bacchylides

Dithyramb 18: "Theseus"

"King of holy Athens,
lord of Ionians living in luxury,
why, just now, did the trumpet, brazen-mouthed,
sound forth a warlike song?

Is some enemy pressing close
on the boundaries of our land,
some leader of armies?

Or are pirates, contrivers of evil,
driving away the flocks by force,
in defiance of their shepherds?

If not, what is it then that tears your heart?
Speak out; for I think that if any mortal has brave young men at hand
to call on for assistance, it is you,

O son of Pandion and Kreousa."

"Just now a herald came from the Isthmus,
having made the whole long journey on foot;
and deeds beyond telling he reports, done by a mighty man: he slaughtered the overbold

Sinis, who in strength was greatest of mortals, being the child of Kronos' son, the Earthshaker and Loosener; the man-killing sow that haunted Kremmyon's glens he also killed, and reckless Skiron;
his put a halt to the wrestling school of Kerkyon; and Polypemon's mighty hammer has fallen from the hand of Prokoptes now that he has met a better man. I fear the way these things may end."

"Who does he say that this man is, and from where? How is he equipped? Is he bringing a great host with him under hostile arms,
or does he walk alone with his attendants, the way a traveler does who roams
through foreign lands,
so strong and brave
and bold that he has brought the might
and power of so many men
to naught? Surely a god is urging him along,
that he may visit justice on the unjust;
for it is not easy, doing deed on deed,
not to meet at last with calamity.
All things, in time’s long course, come to an end.”

“Two men only are at his side,
he says; about his shining shoulders
an ivory-hilted sword is strapped;
two polished spears are in his hands,
and a Lakonian cap, well-made,
sits on his head of fiery hair;
a crimson tunic
covers his chest, and a woolen cloak
from Thessaly; and from his eyes
there gleams a red
Lemnian flame. He is a boy
on manhood’s very verge; the sports of Ares
are what his mind is fixed on, war
and battle with its brazen din;
and what he seeks is splendor-loving Athens.”

This poem, like the preceding one, was classified as a dithyramb by Bacchylides’ ancient editors. Unlike the preceding poem, it is dramatic rather than narrative in form, being a dialogue between King Aigeus of Athens and an anonymous interlocutor. The formidable young man whom they are discussing is none other than Aigeus’ own son Theseus, although at this point the king is still ignorant of his identity. Years before, while visiting King Pittheus of Troizen, Aigeus had slept with Pittheus’ daughter Aithra. Before leaving Troizen, Aigeus hid a sword and a pair of sandals under a large rock and told Aithra that when their son was able to lift the rock and retrieve the tokens, he should travel north across the Isthmus of Corinth to Athens.

2 lord of Ionians Athens regarded itself as the mother city of Ionian Greeks; cf. Bacchylides 17. 4 and Solon 3.
15 According to Apollodorus (3. 15. 5), the mother of Aigeus was named Pylia, not Kreousa.