

ROUTLEDGE REVIVALS

# Pythagoras

A Life

Peter Gorman



## Pythagoras

First published in 1979, *Pythagoras* aims to make available to a wide range of readers the events of Pythagoras's life and his theories, and to present him not primarily as a mathematician and scientific genius nor as a poetical and mystical phenomenon but as a man of his times subject to diverse influences. Today, Pythagoras is best remembered as a mathematician and for his mystical religious beliefs but his seminal influence as a thinker has been largely misunderstood.

Peter Gorman considers that the mystical and esoteric interpretations of Pythagoras' work have now been vindicated and that modern attempt to describe him in terms of more primitive cultures have been based upon mistaken ideas about Greek mentality and the civilization of the sixth century BC. The concise chronological narrative precludes a more comprehensive discussion of this civilization, exemplified by such fascinating figures as Sappho and Ibycus. Mr Gorman's lucid account, however, allows Pythagoras, his times and influence to emerge more clearly than in many larger works and in a manner comprehensible to the general reader as well as to the classical scholar.



**Taylor & Francis**

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

# Pythagoras

A Life

Peter Gorman



Routledge  
Taylor & Francis Group

First published in 1979  
by Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd.

This edition first published in 2025 by Routledge  
4 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon, OX14 4RN

and by Routledge  
605 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10158

*Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business*

© Peter Gorman, 1979

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reprinted or reproduced or utilised in any form or by any electronic, mechanical, or other means, now known or hereafter invented, including photocopying and recording, or in any information storage or retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publishers.

#### **Publisher's Note**

The publisher has gone to great lengths to ensure the quality of this reprint but points out that some imperfections in the original copies may be apparent.

#### **Disclaimer**

The publisher has made every effort to trace copyright holders and welcomes correspondence from those they have been unable to contact.

A Library of Congress record exists under ISBN:0710000065

ISBN: 978-1-041-10788-0 (hbk)

ISBN: 978-1-003-65685-2 (ebk)

ISBN: 978-1-041-10794-1 (pbk)

Book DOI 10.4324/9781003656852

# PYTHAGORAS

## A Life

---

PETER GORMAN



ROUTLEDGE & KEGAN PAUL

London, Henley and Boston

---

*First published in 1979  
by Routledge & Kegan Paul Ltd  
39 Store Street, London WC1E 7DD,  
Broadway House, Newtown Road,  
Henley-on-Thames, Oxon RG9 1EN and  
9 Park Street, Boston, Mass. 02108, USA  
Set in Palatino*

*Photoset and printed in Great Britain by  
Lowe & Brydone Printers Ltd  
Thetford, Norfolk*

© Peter Gorman 1979

*No part of this book may be reproduced in  
any form without permission from the  
publisher, except for the quotation of brief  
passages in criticism*

*British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data*

*Gorman, Peter*

*Pythagoras.*

*1. Pythagoras 2. Philosophers – Greece – Biography  
182'.2 B243 78-40701*

*ISBN 0 7100 0006 5*

# CONTENTS

---

	INTRODUCTION	1
ONE	ORIGINS	14
TWO	THE PHILOSOPHERS	24
THREE	EGYPT AND BABYLON	43
FOUR	RETURN AND EXILE	69
FIVE	MAGNA GRAECIA	88
SIX	THE SOCIETY	113
SEVEN	MYSTICAL NUMBERS	133
EIGHT	THE COSMIC MUSIC	153
NINE	THE FINAL YEARS	171
TEN	THE HERITAGE OF PYTHAGORAS	187
	NOTES	205
	SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY	209
	INDEX	211



**Taylor & Francis**

Taylor & Francis Group

<http://taylorandfrancis.com>

# INTRODUCTION

---

A readable biography of Pythagoras is long overdue. Although a great deal has been written about this sage's theories no satisfactory account of his life exists in any language. One must of course exclude from this judgment the three ancient biographies upon which any attempt at a biography of Pythagoras must necessarily be based, yet even these works of ancient scholarship are in many ways inadequate. Before these inadequacies are discussed one should turn to the productions of the moderns to see how they have handled the subject.

It is irrelevant here to list the various attempts at a Pythagorean biography, but there have not been many, although Thomas Taylor translated Iamblichus' *Life of Pythagoras* into English in 1818, and Albrecht into German, and Porphyry's biography in English is available in M. Hadas and M. Smith, *Heroes and Gods*, London, 1965. Again in the biographical field the Germans have led the way with the two biographies of Baltzer and Roeth. It was inevitable that nineteenth-century German scholarship would produce at least some biographies of Pythagoras, but they are in no sense compelling achievements. The slim volume of Baltzer and the monumental effort of Roeth, if taken together, offer a dreary, but complementary view of the material relating to the life of Pythagoras. Baltzer's work possesses at least some literary elegance, whilst Roeth's ponderous volumes afford only scholarship. Baltzer, employing a narrative style, gives a simple summary of the ancient subject matter; Roeth, on the other hand, tries to discuss every piece of information relating to Pythagoras, a titanic struggle, since perhaps no other person is mentioned more frequently in the ancient authors than

## INTRODUCTION

---

Pythagoras. This again testifies to his incredible fame in the ancient world. In the modern world he is chiefly remembered for an achievement almost certainly not his: the theorem concerning the hypotenuse and sides in a right-angled triangle.

The present work attempts to maintain a mean between the extremes of the two German biographies and offers an interpretation of Pythagoras which is in the spirit of his ancient biographers; namely, Porphyry and Iamblichus who both flourished in the third century of the Christian era. Thus it might be termed a Neoplatonic interpretation, or rather a Neopythagorean one, as the two ancient biographers mentioned were avowed vegetarians and revivers of many of the features of the teachings of Pythagoras. However, the third ancient biography, that of Diogenes Laertius, who was neither Pythagorean nor Neoplatonist, is in essential agreement with those of Porphyry and Iamblichus so that the present work is also following a tradition dating back beyond the Neoplatonists. In fact, the so-called Neoplatonists were Pythagoreans who interpreted Plato as a Pythagorean. In order to comprehend the Pythagorean philosophy and way of life one must be familiar with the totality of Hellenic religious and philosophical thought. This necessarily entails a knowledge of the period in which our three ancient biographies were written: the third and fourth centuries of the Christian epoch. This no previous writer on Pythagoras possesses to any great degree. We see Pythagoras most distinctly through the eyes of the Pythagorean revival in the late Roman period for it is then that his religious and mystical message is pitted against the various other sects vying for supremacy and dominion over men's minds. Classical authors like Empedokles, Heraclitus, Isocrates and Plato had shown Pythagoras to be a charismatic figure with the typical traits of a guru. Such authors as Apollonius, Porphyry and Iamblichus, the avant-garde of the pagan revival, seized upon these mystical qualities in the Pythagorean legend as a possible counterpoise to other religious figures. I. Lévy in *La Légende de Pythagore de Grèce en Palestine*, Paris, 1927, has suggested parallels between the biographies of Pythagoras and of Christ in the New Testament. He points out similarities between accounts of the birth of Pythagoras and the nativity (p. 306). He alleges that the miraculous cures by Christ are like those of Apollonius of Tyana, a

## INTRODUCTION

---

biographer of Pythagoras and a late Roman copy of him. He traces the parable back to the Pythagorean akousmata and the one told by Pythagoras to Leon of Phlius (p. 308); quotes several akousmata borrowed by the writers of the New Testament; relates the parable of the two roads to heaven and hell and the one concerning the strait gate to Neopythagorean speculations about the letter Y which a Neopythagorean named, oddly enough, Pythagoras likened to a path forming two branches (p. 313). The birth in a manger is like the nativity of Apollonius in a meadow or of Apollo beneath a palm in rustic surroundings; the *Gloria in excelsis* imitates the choir of Apolline swans circling overhead. The good tidings the angel gives to Joseph in a dream of the coming birth are like the words of the Delphic oracle to Mnesarchus, father of Pythagoras, about the conception of the sage (p. 297). He notices the echoes of the tale of Pythagoras and the fishermen in similar stories about Christ (p. 301). He says (p. 300) that John the Baptist plays the role of Zaratas the Babylonian who purified Pythagoras in water after a forty-day fast, Pythagoras ascended bodily into heaven, just as Empedokles and Apollonius, were to do, an ascension imitated by New Testament writers (pp. 64 ff.) Lévy quotes numerous other parallels, some of which are quite convincing, others not. Thus there is a definite purpose behind the biographies of Iamblichus and Porphyry, especially the latter who was notoriously anti-Christian. Probably Porphyry incorporated his knowledge of these similarities between the story of Pythagoras and the New Testament into his voluminous work, *Against the Christians*, composed in Sicily in A.D. 270, the year of the death of Plotinus, who according to von Harnack (*Porphyrius, Gegen die Christen*, Berlin, 1916) may have inspired the work.

This polemical streak in the ancient biographies certainly cannot be ignored for it exaggerates the mystical and miraculous at the expense of Pythagoras the thinker. However, those writers who have interpreted Pythagoras as a pure philosopher with a rational system have overlooked the fact that the Pythagorean philosophy is basically mystical and intuitive, rather than scientific and rationalistic. It is rational because it offers arguments for its mystical conclusions and does not rely on faith or credulousness like revealed religion; and yet it is irrational or suprarational in its insistence on the reality of the unseen as opposed to the visible, whether these invisibles be the

## INTRODUCTION

---

music of the spheres or the cosmos of divine numbers or the ecstatic vision of the One. This triad of viewless reality embraces the mystical worlds of Pythagoras, Plato and Plotinus. It is this continuity and dynamicism of Pythagoras' message which is neglected by contemporary scholarship.

The ancient material relating to the life of Pythagoras can be divided into three categories. The first concerns the writers who mention Pythagoras and who flourished before the time of Aristotle. These authors are as follows: Empedokles, Heraclitus, Ion, Xenophanes, Herodotus, Isocrates and Plato. This list is impressive for no other ancient person was so often mentioned by posterity; yet some scholars have the temerity to state that we know nothing certain about Pythagoras! If we know nothing of Pythagoras then we certainly are in the dark about Alexander or Caesar or, in fact, any ancient individual. Other scholars allege that we have no contemporary witness to the accomplishments of Pythagoras. But this overlooks the testimony of both Heraclitus and Empedokles who certainly lived within the period covered by Pythagoras' extremely long life (he was ninety-nine when he died, according to one reliable chronology). Both of these eyewitnesses testify to the twin features inherent in the Pythagorean myth: his love of learning and his miraculous powers. Heraclitus is critical of Pythagoras' polymathy and hints that he is a charlatan, whilst Empedokles eulogizes his master (for according to ancient authority Empedokles heard the words of Pythagoras the teacher) in the following verses of his immortal poem, *The Purifications*:

There was among them a man who knew a vast amount,  
who possessed in fact a very great wealth of understanding,  
and especially was he capable of all sorts of wise work, for  
whenever he exerted himself with all his understanding,  
then easily did he see each of all the things that are, in his  
ten or even twenty lives. (Fr. 129, Diels, trans. Cameron.)

Empedokles implicitly refers to the almost magical aura surrounding the life and works of Pythagoras for the 'wise work' certainly includes thaumaturgy and wonders. In fact, Empedokles states that Pythagoras knew more than any man could learn in ten or twenty lives. It is this intelligence of Pythagoras which distinguishes him from other prophets and

## INTRODUCTION

---

sons of the divine: intelligence, learning, memory and other intellectual faculties are central to his message, whereas faith and hope do not figure very eminently. Like the Buddha he converted his followers by producing an inward change in them, yet he held them spellbound, not by threats or admonitions, but by his sheer psychic and intellectual power. He was not essentially a moralist or an ascetic, but a thaumaturge and intellectual who had triumphed over the boredom of pedantry and transformed learning into something mystical. He also had the tremendous advantage over other religious teachers in being a musician of genius who could control both animals and humans by the power of his playing the kithara (the forerunner of the modern guitar). This instrumental genius of Pythagoras accompanied his singing, but the latter does not figure as prominently as his virtuoso playing of stringed instruments. Like Orpheus he had discovered the secret musical correspondences in the cosmos. Surprisingly enough this musical power does not appear as impressive to these early ancient writers who mention him. This is probably due to the fact that all educated Greeks knew how to play the kithara or flute or both.

Xenophanes, Herodotus and Isocrates stress the religious character of Pythagoras. The theory of reincarnation is mentioned by Xenophanes, whilst Herodotus refers to both immortality and reincarnation. Isocrates introduces Pythagoras as an initiate in many of the oriental religions. He underwent these initiations not to gain favour from the gods, for every Hellene knew that the gods cannot be bribed by ritual and external action, but to gain fame amongst men. It is this fame of Pythagoras which Isocrates stresses even to the point where the sage is tacitly transmuted into a sophist whose bruited renown wins him many followers and pupils amongst the youth of the Hellenic cities. Likewise Plato testifies to the influence of Pythagoras in the field of practical conduct and the creation of a way of life which attracted many followers. What this way of life was Plato does not tell us, yet elsewhere in the *Republic* he mentions the Pythagoreans with reference to musical theory and the perception of the harmonic intervals so that he may have external sources for the musical content in the education and way of life of the Pythagoreans. Plato explicitly stresses the

## INTRODUCTION

---

need for a mathematization of the harmonic intervals, an inspiration he may have derived from the historical Pythagoras. In any case, Plato is the first to discuss Pythagoras or the Pythagoreans in a musical context.

The second period of Hellenic literary history important for material relevant for the biography of Pythagoras is that stretching from the late fourth century B.C. to the first century B.C. This embraces roughly what has been termed the Hellenistic era. It evinces a growing scepticism towards the figure of Pythagoras and an increasing rationalization of his teachings. It was a materialistic age and its writings demonstrate a Hellenism in decay and falling away from the acme of classical perfection. In many ways it is akin to the agnosticism and cynicism of modern materialism. Apart from the followers of Plato and his Academy who retained some of the mystical doctrines of the Pythagoreans, such as Speusippus, who followed the Pythagoreans in adopting number as the supreme metaphysical reality, the philosophies of the Hellenistic Age were either materialistic and behaviouristic, such as the Peripatetics and the Stoics, or overtly sceptical and cynical, such as the followers of Pyrrho and Diogenes. The Pythagoreans in this age became the objects of ridicule, and Pythagoras himself was treated as a mountebank who deceived his followers. Even professed Pythagoreans like Aristoxenus who was in touch with the remnants of a Pythagorean community in Tarentum, tried to rationalize the mystical beliefs of Pythagoras. According to Aristoxenus Pythagoras was not a vegetarian and ate all meats except those of the ox and sheep. Likewise Aristoxenus rejects the Pythagorean doctrine of psychic immortality, substituting for it a theory of the psyche as a harmony of the body.

Aristotle is our most important informant of this period concerning the theories of the Pythagoreans. Strangely enough in his extant writings he does not mention Pythagoras by name (except once in the *Metaphysics* which dates him as a contemporary of Alcmaeon). Instead Aristotle refers to the 'so-called Pythagoreans'. Apart from a great deal of metaphysical theory which Aristotle attributes to these anonymous Pythagoreans in his extant writings, one can also glean a lot of useful information concerning the life of Pythagoras from the fragments of Aristotle's lost works preserved for us in later writers. In his lost

## INTRODUCTION

---

work *Concerning the Pythagoreans* Aristotle has a great deal of information about the miraculous powers of Pythagoras. For instance, from Aristotle come the marvel of Pythagoras speaking with the Daunian bear and many of his predictions which came true. Aristotle also alludes to the belief of Pythagoras' followers that their teacher was the incarnation of a god, the Hyperborean Apollo. One must also bear in mind that Apollo was the supreme god of the Pythagoreans, the name of the One or mystical monad. The Hyperborean strain in the Pythagoras legend is extremely important for it is the hub of the mystical energies which haloed the figure of Pythagoras and made him appear more than man. The Hyperboreans (literally, the dwellers beyond the north wind) were a mythical folk who dwelt in the far north of the inhabited world. They were a particularly pious and happy people who enjoyed the presence of the gods and were especially loved by Apollo. Deciding to erect a temple to that god, the Hyperboreans dispatched the priest of Apollo, Abaris, to the south in order to collect gifts for the dedication and building of the Apolline temple. On this mission Abaris came to Pythagoras with a wondrous arrow which acted as a sort of compass and flying machine. Of course, Abaris and the Hyperboreans were not only mentioned by Aristotle. The Homeric hymns, Pindar and Plato also refer to them. But it was the testimony of Aristotle which first linked them with Pythagoras. Thus in Aristotle we meet with many fantastic episodes in the life or legend of Pythagoras which later Neoplatonic biographers played up. It is also interesting to notice that miraculous features antedate both the New Testament and the Neoplatonic biographies, refuting the theories often heard that the later lives of Pythagoras were modelled on the story of the Gospels and the life of Apollonius.

Another useful source for the Pythagoras legend from the Hellenistic area is Heraclides Ponticus who was primarily a follower of the Platonic Academy, but who also adopted some Aristotelian ideas. He wrote many dialogues concerned with the supernatural and was completely under the spell of the legend of Pythagoras. He even bribed somebody to fake the appearance of a serpent at his burial in order that he might appear to be a god or, at least, a daimon, for the snake symbolized deification and its epiphany near a dead man meant that the deceased had

## INTRODUCTION

---

become a hero or daimon, a lot superior to that of mere mortals. Appropriately Porphyry in his life of Plotinus introduces the snake-motif in order to show that the Pythagorean Plotinus had become a daimon. Heraclides has been termed an untrustworthy source, and, indeed, he bears many of the stigmas of the charlatan. He was probably the innovator who transformed Abaris' arrow into a flying machine. From Heraclides we also have the dialogue of Pythagoras with the tyrant of Phlius, Leon, in which Pythagoras stated that the spectators at the Olympic Games are more important than the actual competitors. This is a parable of life: theory or contemplation is more important than action.

Other Hellenistic authors who wrote on the life and times of Pythagoras include Callimachus, Hermippus and Dicaearchus. Most of Callimachus' poetry has been lost, but the fragments which survive are tantalizing enough. In Callimachus Pythagoras appears as an extraordinary human being, the reincarnation theme being featured in one of the fragments. It is a Pythagoras who recollects that he had been the Homeric hero Euphorbus who was killed by Menelaus before Troy. This idea of 'anamnesis' or the recollection of one's previous incarnations is chiefly associated with the name of Plato, but this theme of Pythagoras recollecting his earlier lives certainly belongs to an epoch before Plato. Anamnesis is an early Pythagorean doctrine, most likely enunciated by the master himself to vindicate his superhuman powers. Recollection is also a common enough idea in oriental religions. This does not, however, prove any mutual interdependence, but rather that it is a universal phenomenon. It is well known that Pythagoras wanted to visit the Far East, but did not get further than Persia. The same fate awaited Plotinus who wished to meet the Brahmans, but only got as far as Mesopotamia. Callimachus also introduces Euphorbus-Pythagoras as a teacher of geometry, a characteristic not stressed and even neglected by earlier authors.

Timaeus and Dicaearchus are important Hellenistic sources for the political attitudes of Pythagoras and his followers. Of these two Dicaearchus is the more trustworthy because he does not show Pythagoras as a reactionary supporter of aristocracy; instead, he appears as a moderate in Dicaearchus and a sincere reformer. But it is to Aristoxenus that the best information about

## INTRODUCTION

---

Pythagoras' political activity is due. According to von Fritz (*Pythagorean Politics in Southern Italy*, New York, 1940) Aristoxenus was the first to write a proper biography of Pythagoras (p. 7), and in all passages quoted by other authors from Aristoxenus Pythagoras and the Pythagoreans appear as lovers of freedom (p. 16). Pythagoras filled the enslaved Italian cities with a spirit of freedom and caused them to revolt against their tyrannical governments. This picture of Pythagoras and the Pythagoreans is not entirely consistent with many later spurious Pythagorean writings, but it does harmonize with Pythagoras' own eccentric and wayward character. It is noteworthy that he was said to have freed his slave Zalmoxis and made him his friend. Later Pythagoreans like Plotinus and Porphyry also dispensed with having slaves or servants in the name of self-sufficiency and inner freedom. The modern equivalent of this would be to renounce the use of all machines. This is perfectly consistent with the Pythagorean notion that contemplation or 'theoria' is superior to action.

During the first century B.C. in Rome a slow revival of interest in Pythagoras and Pythagoreanism began. A leading figure in this was Nigidius Figulus. Even in the frivolous poet Ovid one discerns a great interest in Pythagoras, especially in his doctrine of reincarnation which accords well with the theme of metamorphosis in Ovid's most famous work. The Romans were interested in Pythagoras because that sage had spent a lot of his life in 'Magna Graecia' or Southern Italy. Also Sicily and Italy were the leading ancient centres of Pythagoreanism. It was to Sicily that Plato came in order to buy the famous Pythagorean book of Philolaus from Archytas, a leading Pythagorean politician and mathematician of the fourth century B.C. Empedokles, the pupil of Pythagoras, had leapt into a Sicilian volcano to prove his godhead, and it was in a ruined city of the Pythagoreans in the vicinity of Rome, that Plotinus had wanted to found 'Platonopolis', the last attempt at founding a Pythagorean community in the Roman Empire. It is not necessary here to discuss the progress of the 'Neopythagoreanism', as German scholars first called it, in the Roman Empire with such figures as Nicomachus and Apollonius; needless to say it culminated in the pagan revival of the fourth century A.D. when there was a widespread resurgence of the ancient religion led by

## INTRODUCTION

---

Julian the Emperor and Iamblichus. A major weapon in the arsenal of the pagan cause was Porphyry's *Against the Christians*, all copies of which Constantine had ordered to be burnt earlier in the fourth century; but this order was abortive for Theodosius II and Valentinian were still burning copies in 448. Julian also wrote an anti-Christian work which survives in fragments. This work of mad dog Porphyry, as his opponents called him, has been described as follows:

It was a compendium of the arguments advanced by Jews and Greeks in opposition to the spread of the Gospel, and in that capacity it went beyond all other works of its kind in antiquity, if not of all time, for bulk, abundance of learning, thoroughness of treatment, and general effectiveness. (A.B. Hulén, *Porphyry's Work 'Against The Christians'*, Scottsdale, 1933.)

It is against such a background that two of the biographies of Pythagoras were composed.

Before turning to the two extant biographies from the pens of Porphyry and Iamblichus, one must examine the life of Pythagoras to be found in the work of Diogenes Laertius who wrote *The Lives of the Philosophers* in either the second or third century A.D. Unlike the writers of the other two biographies Diogenes was not a follower of either Plato or Pythagoras, but probably belonged to the school of Pyrrho or to that of Epicurus. Whatever his philosophical persuasion his life of Pythagoras contains much the same sort of material as the other two. All in all it is a somewhat garbled effort, but has some interesting sources. The most reliable of these is Alexander Polyhistor (first century B.C.) from whom Diogenes borrowed a delineation of the philosophical tenets of Pythagoras. Alexander in his turn owes much of his material to earlier Pythagorean sources. Pythagoras emerges as a dualist whose basic philosophical principles were the monad and the indefinite dyad from which are generated the other numbers which compose all of physical reality. The numbers form points and lines and eventually three-dimensional bodies. There are also some interesting theories concerning astronomy and psychology which may go back to the historical Pythagoras. Diogenes is also interesting in that he ascribes certain writings to Pythagoras whilst the other

## INTRODUCTION

---

biographies are silent on this matter. There is likewise a great deal of miraculous material in the biography of Diogenes. Most noteworthy is the fragment from Heraclides Ponticus which names and discusses the previous avatars of Pythagoras.

Porphiry wrote his biography of Pythagoras some time in the late third century A.D. It is a fairly short fragment, but again has some reliable sources. In fact, it is the most coherent and readable of the three ancient biographies, yet it too suffers from bad arrangement, a congeries of ill-digested facts and a lack of interpretative skill. There are four main components in this biography of Porphyry. The first is some learned biography probably composed in Hellenistic times upon which Porphyry has based many of the more credible incidents he relates. This may have been the biography of Pythagoras written by Aristoxenus. Porphyry's second source is the novel of Antonius Diogenes entitled *The Wonders of Ultima Thule*. From this Porphyry has borrowed many wonders, for Thule was a boreal land associated with the Hyperborean myth. The novel of Antonius is purportedly a description of the journey of the author to marvellous places and narrates many wonders and portents. Third, Porphyry employed the biography of Pythagoras written by the Neopythagorean Nicomachus who also wrote an interesting work on the mathematics of the Pythagoreans. Lastly, Porphyry consulted the *Placita* of Moderatus, another Neopythagorean, who was anxious to demonstrate that Plato and Aristotle and many other Greek philosophers had stolen their ideas from Pythagoras and the Pythagoreans. These sources of Porphyry are better than those of Iamblichus, and Porphyry exhibits a far more critical approach to them than Iamblichus' rather naïve effusions. For instance, Porphyry acknowledges that the teachings of Pythagoras, since they were a closely guarded secret, can never be reconstructed with any certainty. Porphyry also names his sources, something which Iamblichus does not do.

Iamblichus' biography is possibly the worst and least reliable of the three, yet even it has some memorable information. It is by far the longest of the ancient biographies and would have been even more voluminous if it had escaped mutilation in many key passages. Iamblichus is more prolix than either Diogenes or Porphyry and expands his material into a novel

## INTRODUCTION

---

about Pythagoras. If the style had been more lucid and elegant the biography would have been a success, but the problems of form and arrangement are never overcome by Iamblichus. It is not even written in chronological order and contains many irrelevant stories about later Pythagoreans when material relating to Pythagoras is lacking. He does not interpret the facts sufficiently and is too uncritical. He has employed two main sources. The first which accounts for approximately half of the biography is the work of Nicomachus. The other half is based on the writing of Apollonius of Tyana, another Neopythagorean, who in his own life tried to emulate Pythagoras as much as possible. Iamblichus also insinuates many Platonic ideas into the biography, passing them off as genuine thoughts of Pythagoras. This undoubtedly stems from the contention of Moderatus that Plato's thoughts were borrowed from Pythagoras; but there is also another reason. It is related to the pagan revival of the fourth century. Iamblichus, like Porphyry, needs an ancient sage and thaumaturge to counter the rising tide of oriental cults; and after Apollonius of Tyana had failed in the bid for the title, Iamblichus turned to Pythagoras as the source of all wisdom. In the preface to his biography Iamblichus says some rather strange things. He complains that Pythagoreanism has been neglected and falsified by many pseudo-Pythagorean writings, but we have already seen that Neopythagoreanism was a living force and its followers had been extremely active since the first century B.C. Also his complaint about Pythagorean forgeries does not ring true for he quotes these sources very freely himself. The main reason for his preface is to draw the reader's attention to the fact that Pythagoreanism is the 'divine philosophy' and no other stands beside it. It is the contention of Iamblichus that the philosophy of Pythagoras is the universal truth revealed to many sages including Orpheus, Plato, Apollonius of Tyana, Plotinus, and, of course, Iamblichus himself. The biography is only one of a series of monographs on the totality of the Pythagorean philosophy. This encyclopaedia of Pythagorean wisdom was one of the cornerstones of the pagan revival. All polytheistic religions have a dim intuition of the truth manifest only in Pythagoreanism, hence Iamblichus delights in narrating Pythagoras' many initiations into the pagan mysteries of all countries. Iamblichus omits all references

## INTRODUCTION

---

to both monotheistic religions, implying that Pythagoras did not consider monotheism worthy of his attention.

Thus the ancient background to the life of Pythagoras is seen to be a mixture of objectivity with religious and even political controversy. Since the ancient material is so immense one must be selective in a narration of Pythagoras' life. We have a lot of information about Pythagoras, but much of it is unreliable. He stands midway between myth and history, but the situation is not as desperate as it appears to many critics. Even in the historical narratives of the exploits of Alexander the Great many mythical features intrude, and not just in the book of pseudo-Callisthenes, but also in Arrian. One has only to recall the wondrous fountain in the oasis of Siwah, seat of the oracle of Ammon-Zeus. The ancients tended to deify any extraordinary individual so that the myth is in many ways as real as the historical truth, for it had a similar effect upon posterity and influenced the course of history profoundly. The present biography is firmly based on the ancient sources and most of the references in the text refer to those ancient authors who mention or discuss Pythagoras.

# ONE

## ORIGINS

---

Samos, where the early years of Pythagoras were spent, is a large, undulating Aegean island opposite the coast of Asia Minor. At its nearest point it is only a few kilometres from Asia, significant for the later development of Pythagoras. Asia Minor or Ionia, as the Greeks called it, was the site of many prosperous Hellenic cities such as Ephesus and Miletus, and beyond Ionia lay the legendary Lydia, realm of Croesus, whose amazing rescue from a pyre was effected by the god Apollo who took the former king, together with his wife and children, to the land of the Hyperboreans, whilst the Persian army seized his capital Sardis. Beyond the luxurious Lydia stood the bleak landscape of Anatolia. At the time of Pythagoras' birth in the fifty-fourth Olympiad or 569 B.C. these Ionian cities and the islands of Samos and Lesbos enjoyed a freedom and luxury which gave birth to a cultural and scientific renaissance, a brief flowering before it was destroyed by the tyranny of the Persians. The end of Croesus as described by Bacchylides is a symbol of the passing of a beautiful and civilized era. Pythagoras is often described as a primitive shaman or totemistic figure, but this is untenable when one examines the refined and elegant culture of Ionia and Lesbos exemplified in the poetry of Alcaeus and Sappho. Here palaces shine with brass, and banquets with golden trinkets and cups of silver; from ceilings of ivory, myrrh and incense rain down upon the revellers. It was a dream which lasted until the Persian invasion. Luckily this rather barbarous people was confined in the mountains beyond Mesopotamia when Pythagoras was a young man. But the Persian menace overtook him in his later years, and he spent some years of captivity at Babylon. However, Pythagoras profited by his captivity for he was instructed in the religion and philosophy of