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Was Pythagoras Ever Really in Sparta?

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Abstract

This article examines the biographical evidence for a plausible connection between the philosopher Pythagoras and Sparta. It takes into consideration the sources that we have on the subject as well as their probable motivations. A variety of sources are employed to this end and they range from philosophical treatises to archaeological artefacts. It also considers other potential reasons as to why Pythagoras or Pythagorean philosophers might be interested in Sparta. These include, but are not limited to, issues of Spartan social organisation, (near) sexual equality and music.

Article

Pythagoras is a figure who is shrouded in obscurity and whose life is typically retold in mythic terms. Burkert begins his treatise on this enigmatic philosopher writing that 'Over the origins of Greek philosophy and science lies the shadow of a great traditional name',¹ that is: Pythagoras of Samos (c. 569 - c. 475 BCE). Significantly, his very name means something like 'mouthpiece of Delphi'.² This fact by itself would have aroused the interest of the Spartans (who were very keen on the Oracle at Delphi, even fighting a series of 'sacred wars' over the control of it) and, so the accounts tell us, this interest was reciprocated. Accounts report that Pythagoras made one or more visits there and to Krete in order to

¹ Burkert 1972: 1.

² Pytho(n) being a reference to the heroic mythology surrounding Apollo at Delphi; see *OCD* s.v. Pythagoras and Apollo; see too Aghion, Barbillon and Lissarrague 1996 s.v. Apollo, and see note 57 below.

study their laws before journeying to southern Italy, where he settled in Kroton around 530 BCE, and later in the Lakonian colony of Taras.³ Did he really go to all of these places in person or did the Pythagorean movement make such claims in order to bolster their own credibility? Did others make similar claims for political and/or propagandistic reasons? Let us consider the sources as we have them.

The most detailed accounts of Pythagoras' life date from the third century CE, some 800 years after his death. Diogenes Laertius (c. 200-250 CE) and Porphyry (c. 234-305 CE) each wrote a *Life of Pythagoras*. Iamblichus' (c. 245-325 CE) work is titled *On the Pythagorean Life*, which includes some limited biography but focuses more on the way of life supposedly established by Pythagoras for his followers. All of these works were written at a time when Pythagoras' achievements appear to have been heavily revised in order to serve various ideological ends. Diogenes is potentially the more objective, but both Iamblichus and Porphyry had agendas that were not particularly concerned with historical accuracy.

Iamblichus⁴ reported that Pythagoras had political dealings in Sicily, Lampaskos and Kroton (to name a few such places), and appears to have held a particular interest in the constitutional formulations of Krete and Sparta.⁵ Sparta did enjoy cultural ties with Samos in Classical and pre-Classical antiquity; but, this alone

³ Iambl. *De vita Pythagorica*.25. In both places, the Pythagorean communities supposedly held close relations with the oligarchic governments of these *poleis*. Similar stories are told of Lykourgos' travels to Crete and Ionia in search of the best laws for Sparta (Plut. *Vit. Lyk.*4). Solon is also supposed to have visited Thales at Miletus (Plut. *Vit. Sol.*6) as well as Egypt and Ionia (Plut. *Vit. Sol.*26 and Hdt.1.30).

⁴ For more discussion on the validity of Iamblichus as a source on the Pythagoreans, see de Vogel 1966: 20 and esp. Appendix D, *On Iamblichus*, 204. Also see Kingsley 1995 on recent archaeological data that provides stronger links between the Neopythagoreans of Iamblichus' time and the earlier Pythagoreans than had been previously supposed.

⁵ See Burkert 1972: 115-120, 141-145, 152 ff. for a more detailed discussion of this issue.

does not prove that Pythagoras actually went there.⁶ It does perhaps enhance the credibility of the claim, if only in a minor sense. Even so, one would not be remiss in questioning Iamblichus' intentions, with a programme of his own and so far removed from Pythagoras' own time. Who were his sources and are they reliable? Iamblichus has left us relatively little by way of a bibliography.⁷ Some are known and others may be deduced.

Iamblichus describes Pythagoras as a soul sent from the gods to enlighten humanity and then proceeds to embed Neopythagorean values in his narrative on Pythagoras' reputed ideas.⁸ In effect, his goal was to produce the Neopythagoreanization of Neoplatonism. Iamblichus strove to get across the view that Pythagoras was particularly concerned with the mystical qualities of mathematics, a key feature of Neopythagoreanism. It is not an accurate account of the original Pythagoreanism based on the earliest evidence. Porphyry, with a comparable agenda, also emphasized Pythagoras' divine aspects and may have intended to use this image of him as a rival for that of Jesus.⁹

Apart from their historical revisions and ideological emplacements, these third-century CE accounts were based on earlier sources which are now lost. Some were clearly contaminated by the Neopythagorean view of Pythagoras as the source of all true philosophy. They maintained that his ideas were plagiarised by Plato, Aristotle and all later Greek philosophers. Iamblichus cites both Nicomachus of Gerasa's and Apollonius of Tyana's biographies of Pythagoras and appears to have used them extensively even where they are not cited.¹⁰ Nicomachus (c. 50 - c. 150 CE) gives Pythagoras a patently Platonic and

⁶ Pomeroy 2002: 10-11.

⁷ As Clark 1989: xx, indicates, 'He does not, as a rule, name his sources'.

⁸ See O'Meara 1989: 35-40.

⁹ Dillon and Jackson 1991: 14.

¹⁰ *De vita Pyth.* 251 and 254; see Burkert 1972: 98 ff.

Aristotelian metaphysics in distinctively Platonic and Aristotelian terminology.¹¹ Apollonius (first century CE) venerated Pythagoras as the model for his own ascetic life, perhaps idolising him beyond all objectivity. Porphyry explicitly cites Moderatus of Gades as one of his sources.¹² Moderatus also had an agenda. He was a particularly zealous Neopythagorean of the first century CE, who asserted that Plato, Aristotle, and their pupils Speusippus, Aristoxenos and Xenocrates took for their own the fruits of Pythagoreanism, re-writing history so as to leave only superficial and trivial aspects to be associated with the original Pythagorean school.¹³ The difficulty of fully trusting such claims from these sources is clear.

Diogenes Laertius himself (third century CE) possibly had less personal motivation for revising the Pythagorean history. However, he has based much of his account of Pythagoras' philosophy on the *Pythagorean Memoirs* excerpted from Alexander Polyhistor.¹⁴ These are regarded as a forgery dating from around 200 BCE, which attributes certain essential ideas of the Platonic and Stoic schools to Pythagoras.¹⁵ Diogenes Laertius was not dependant on Alexander alone. In the biographical section of his *Life of Pythagoras*, he is drawing on the chronologies of the Alexandrian scholars Eratosthenes (c. 276-194 BCE) and Apollodorus (c. 180 BCE) amongst others. Eratosthenes of Cyrene was the third librarian of Alexandria and measured the circumference of the earth with greater accuracy than Aristotle. He is credited with having invented a scientific chronology that was carried on by Apollodorus. One of the surviving fragments of Eratosthenes' chronology potentially connects Pythagoras with Sparta via an alleged Olympic victory and may be read alongside the iconography of a Spartan

¹¹ *Introduction to Arithmetic* I.1.

¹² *De vita Pyth.* 48-53.

¹³ Dillon 1977: 346.

¹⁴ VIII.24-33.

¹⁵ Burkert 1972: 53; Kahn 2001: 79-83.

wall relief from the fourth century BCE, to which this article shall presently return.¹⁶

In Diogenes' *Life of Pythagoras*, he makes no direct mention of the latter going to Sparta at all and only alludes in passing references to the time that he spent on Krete.¹⁷ He mentions a book by Pythagoras on politics which was supposedly concerned with the inner workings of the Pythagorean society.¹⁸ Even Diogenes acknowledges that there is contention as to whether or not this *Politikon* actually existed. The fact that there is a tradition that it did exist and was supposedly based on ideas for communal living picked up during his time at Krete and Sparta (along with the fashion for long hair) resonates with the Neo-Pythagorean agendas mentioned above. The perception that such a book existed and paid tribute to Spartan customs was perhaps more significant than the book itself. Diogenes reports that Pythagoras made a bloodless sacrifice to the altar of Apollo at Delos which, as we shall see, does relate to the Spartans if indirectly.¹⁹ However, he alludes to a potentially more significant Spartan connection in the *Life of Pherekydes of Syros* (born c. 600/597, acme c. 544),²⁰ who was reputedly an immediate teacher of Pythagoras. He writes:

...he is said to have told the *Lakedaimonians* to honour neither gold nor silver, as Theopompus says in his *Marvels*; and it is reported that Herakles laid this injunction on him in a dream, and that the same night he appeared also to the kings of Sparta, and enjoined

¹⁶ *FGrH* 241 f 2. See the comments on the Spartan wall relief below as with the Olympic Games of 588 BCE to which the Eratosthenes' fragment alludes. Burkert 1972: 110, n 5. indicates that there was probably a real Pythagoras of Samos who won an Olympic victory in 588 but it is uncertain as to whether this is Pythagoras the philosopher and may be a fanciful attribution.

¹⁷ VIII.3.

¹⁸ VIII.6.

¹⁹ VIII.13.

²⁰ See Schibli 1990: 1-2.

them to be guided by Pherekydes; but some attribute these stories to Pythagoras.²¹

A tangible link between Sparta and Pherekydes is implied here, even if fictional, and, by extension, with Pythagoras as well. Interestingly, Diogenes Laertius suggests that there is a tradition which claims Pythagoras himself was actively involved in Spartan politics, rather than just studying them, but he does not tell us whom the ominous 'some' that say so happen to be. Certainly it is plausible that Pythagoras might have followed in the footsteps of his teacher, if Pherekydes was in fact his teacher.²²

It is possible to correlate some of the material on Pherekydes with recourse to Diogenes' source, Theopompus of Chios (c. 380 BCE).²³ Theopompos' father was a member of the pro-Spartan faction on Chios. Like Xenophon, he was a Lakonophile and a supporter of Aristocracy. Nothing of his original *Marvels* remains, if it ever existed as a single text, but there are surviving fragments from his voluminous *Phillipika* (of which book VIII is sometimes referred to as *On Marvels*). This is meant to be a history of Macedonia but engages in a series of digressions on numerous historical and ethnographic subjects. In it he mentions the prophetic powers of Pherekydes and makes some derogatory statements about Pythagoras and Pythagoreanism, accusing that they taught and encouraged tyranny in the governance of city-states.²⁴

²¹ I.117, on the *Marvels*, See *FGrH* 115.

²² However, Pythagoras telling the Spartans to avoid money seems odd considering that this philosopher is a popular figure on coinage, dating from the fifth century onwards, from Samos, mainland Greece and Italy. The coinage is later than Pythagoras' life and likely Diogenes, along with many of his sources, would not have known about them. See Riedweg 2002: 80, 83-2, 86, 99.

²³ *FGrH* 115.

²⁴ *FGrH* 115 ff 70-73. He reportedly predicted an earthquake as well as a ship that disappeared whilst he and his companions were watching it. See Burkert 1972: 118-9.

In another passage from Diogenes Laertius, just prior to that cited above and likewise attributed to Theopompus, Pherekydes is said to have forewarned his host in Messene to emigrate just prior to that city's conquest and enslavement by the Spartans in the Second Messenian War. This seems to be some inspired mythologising on his 'prophetic powers' and it also raises the question as to how he could have known so much about Spartan foreign policy. The same account also indicates that Pherekydes was involved in the wars between Ephesos and Magnesia/Sparta and that he revealed similarly mantic powers there. But both of these can be dismissed for chronological reasons. The latter are alluded to by the seventh-century poets Kallinos and Archilochos and, as Schibli indicates, 'like the Second Messenian War, the conflicts between Ephesos and Magnesia predate Pherekydes'.²⁵ It was apparently pleasing to some that Pherekydes, and maybe Pythagoras as well, should be seen as having been involved in several of the more celebrated moments of Spartan history and notably from its 'glory days' prior to Leuktra.

When Diogenes Laertius mentioned that 'some' have alleged that Pherekydes' prophetic powers actually belonged to Pythagoras, he is probably referring to the fourth-century BCE author Andron of Ephesos as well as to Porphyry (232-305 CE), the anti-Christian follower of the Neo-Platonist philosopher Plotinus (205-270 CE). Porphyry maintained the same view as that of Andron of Ephesus to the effect that these purportedly mantic qualities should be properly attributed to Pythagoras. He also blamed Theopompus for plagiarising the stories of Andron, changing the names and locations in what he concluded to have been a rather pathetic attempt to hide his theft.²⁶ However, Porphyry seems to have misplaced his blame since Andron's version of Pythagoras' life appears to have been largely a fabrication.²⁷ If this is the case, then it does not necessarily lend any greater

²⁵ 1990: 8. See Kallinos fr. 3 (West) and Archilochos fr. 20 (West); Strabo XIV.1.40, Athenaios XII.525c.

²⁶ Shrimpton 1991: 17; and see n. 55.

²⁷ Shrimpton 1991: 17.

degree of verisimilitude to Theopompus' account of Pherekydes' life. The former evidently agreed with sources that made the latter Pythagoras' teacher but seems to have thought little of Pythagoras as an individual, for whatever reasons of his own. His attribution of prophetic powers, often associated in other sources with Pythagoras, to Pherekydes, suggests a potential dislike for the former that is underscored by the above mentioned reference to Pythagoreanism as teaching tyranny.²⁸ Since Theopompus' agenda is clearly the defamation of this school and its founder, his version of events must also be suspect.

It is reasonable to consider that these mystical attributes, originally Pherekydes', became later associated with Pythagoras on account of the inclinations of ancient biographers to embellish their tales of famous individuals with mythical attributes. Andron's fabrication, possibly based on an earlier or contemporaneous life of Pherekydes (potentially one of Theopompus' sources), no doubt encouraged it. Unless, of course, Theopompus was actually using Andron, or Andron's source, as one of his sources and chose to associate the said qualities with Pherekydes on account of his personal disapproval for Pythagoras. The second-century BCE writer Apollonius seamlessly smoothes over this tricky issue by indicating that, later in his life, Pythagoras did not refrain from the same sort of 'miracle working' as that undertaken by his teacher.²⁹

Pherekydes composed a prose text (called variously *Heptamychos*, *Theokrasia* or *Theoginia*) that is no longer extant.³⁰ Based on the fragments that survive, it was a philosophical treatise mostly on divine matters, morality and social customs. He taught through the medium of mythic representations. Aristotle characterised his method as a mixture of myth and philosophy. Pherekydes is sometimes considered the first philosopher to declare the immortality of the

²⁸ Shrimpton 1991: 18 and n. 56.

²⁹ *Hist. Mirab.* 6; see Schibli 1990: 11-12.

³⁰ Freeman 1948: 13-15; *DK VII ff* 1-14.

soul.³¹ This would seem to connect with Pythagoreanism if it is the case that the early Pythagoreans also maintained the same belief, which is debatable. It remains contested as to whether this was the case or the desire of later scholars to reconcile philosophical traditions.

Sources that might have offered greater evidence that Pherekydes was the immediate teacher of Pythagoras are in disagreement even about occasions when the two could have met.³² One that does maintain the student/teacher relationship between them is Ion of Chios (c. 490-421 BCE), the dramatist-polymath-philosopher cum lyric poet who was a friend of Sokrates and a dramatic rival of Euripides. An epigram of his survives in Diogenes Laertius implying a connection with Pythagoras:

Ion of Chios says this about him [sc. Pherekydes]:

Thus adorned with courageous pride and reverence, he
has a pleasant life for his soul though he be dead, if
indeed Pythagoras was truly wise, who beyond all knew
and searched out the thoughts of men.³³

Another survives in Diogenes Laertius from Douris the tyrant and Samos (fourth century BCE), who was also a philosopher and historian:

³¹ Schibli 1990: 12; see too his chapter 5 along with Burkert 1972: 123.

³² Some (Diog. Laert. VIII.2; Neanthes *apud* Porphyry, *Vit. Pyth.* 1, and 15, and Dikaiarchos *apud* Porphyry 55-6) write that Pythagoras came from Italy to Delos (where Pherekydes' was alleged to have been at the time, near death) when the Pythagoreans were being oppressed at Kroton but others (Herakleides *apud* Diog. Laert. VIII.40; Porphyry, *Vit. Pyth.* 55; Nikomachos *apud* Iamblichos, *De vita Pythagorica* 15; Diodorus Siculus X.3.4) place him in Ionia at that time. See Schibli 1990; 11, n. 24.

³³ Ion of Chios (f 4) *apud* Diog. Laert. I.20 = DK 36b.4.

Douris says in the second book of his *Horai* that the following epigram was written about him [sc. Pherekydes]:

The end of all wisdom is in me; if there is anything more [of wisdom], tell my Pythagoras that he is the first of all throughout the land of Hellas. In saying this, I do not lie.³⁴

We should probably remain as sceptical of these literary connections as much as the association between Pherekydes and Pythagoras implicit in the doxographers.³⁵ The two men may never have met. The latter may have refined the doctrine on the immortality of the soul from the former's treatise on the subject without actual contact with its author. There is nonetheless the tantalising suggestion of a possible connection between these two men as teacher and student.

If correct, then there is some indication, often ignored in the mainstream scholarship on this subject, that Pythagoras also may have been inspired to some extent for his own theory of reincarnation by that of his alleged teacher.³⁶ There are a number of other sources that maintain Pherekydes also professed and taught metempsychosis.³⁷ This is not verifiable.³⁸ The origin of this notion is

³⁴ Douris *apud* Diog. Laert. I.20.

³⁵ See Schibli 1990: 13; and see the *Suda* s.v. Pherekydes.

³⁶ See Gorman 1979: 24 ff.

³⁷ Cicero, *Tusc. Disp.* I.16.38; Porphyry, *De antro nympharum* 31.

³⁸ But there is some reason to suspect it might have been the case. In the ancient world, the metaphysical views of the immortality of the soul and reincarnation often went hand in hand. The one was seen, in some ways, to justify the other as may be observed as major subjects in Plato's *Meno*, *Timaeus*, explicitly described in *Republic* X and elsewhere. *Laws* 903d ff., 904e, *Meno* 81b ff., *Phd.* 70c ff., 81, 113a, *Phdr.* 248c ff., *Rep.* 617d ff., *Tim.* 41e ff. and 90e ff.; it is also, of course, a basic tenet of Pythagoreanism and Neopythagoreanism, See Burkert 1972: 136 n.88.

variously attributed to Pherekydes as well as to Thales.³⁹ However, there is a tendency in ancient scholarship (especially in Diogenes Laertius) to despise a vacuum left by the textual sources and to fill it by attributing ‘the origin of’ this or that doctrine to a particular individual who may have happened to espouse it when no one else can be found previously who held the same beliefs.⁴⁰ Pherekydes’ and Pythagoras’ relationship still remains to be proven as does their alleged association with the Spartans.

The proposition that Pherekydes made pronouncements on Spartan legal matters with recourse to divine authority, as indicated by Diogenes Laertius (via Theopompus), is not *prima facie* unreasonable. The approximate dates of his life, as with Pythagoras, do potentially match those indicated by the archaeological evidence for Sparta’s adoption of their characteristic monetary policies, if interpreted with a modicum of liberality.⁴¹ However, as Flower indicates, ‘Theopompus seems to have been alone in attributing this warning to Pherekydes’.⁴² Aristotle, Diodorus and Plutarch all agreed that the prophecy against the use of money was given by the Oracle at Delphi, indicating: ‘the love of money and nothing else shall destroy Sparta’.⁴³ All but Aristotle, and even he to some extent, are heavily dependent on Xenophon who was not unbiased in his reports on Sparta and neither, as we have seen, were the Spartans themselves.⁴⁴

³⁹ See Schibli 1990: 104-5 and cf. Diog. Laert. I.24.

⁴⁰ Schibli 1990: 105 n. 4.

⁴¹ See Selkirk 2006: s.v. Sparta.

⁴² Flower 1997: 81-2 and esp. n.44.

⁴³ Aristotle (Rose f 544), Diodorus VII.12.5 and Plutarch *Moralia* 239 ff. Diodorus adds that the oracle was delivered to Lykourgos, but this is highly unlikely as coinage had not been introduced in his lifetime.

⁴⁴ See Flower 1997: 83. Theopompus perhaps thought, as with Plato and others, that Sparta represented the best of the existing polities and he sought to explain its decline up to and after Leuktra. He believed that this was due to ‘luxury and licentiousness’ and blamed the introduction of currency as a principle cause.

Did Pherekydes go to Sparta setting a precedent for his student? He is described as being well-travelled, much as with Pythagoras and others. However, as Schibli writes, 'whether Pherekydes actually journeyed... to the Peloponnese, Delphi, and Ephesos, simply cannot be verified from the biographical legends'.⁴⁵ The tradition of ancient wise men travelling extensively is well documented in later antiquity, almost to the point of being a literary cliché, except that some of them really did travel far in their pursuit of wisdom.⁴⁶ Over Pherekydes' life and reported journeys hangs doubt and uncertainty as well as whether he may have been Pythagoras' teacher and that he may have either had an interest in Sparta and/or went there.

Certainly from Plato's era onwards there was a perceived association between Pythagoras and Sparta.⁴⁷ There are other factors that might yet shed some light on this alleged association. After the Pythagorean supported oligarchy at Kroton was overthrown around 450 BCE, Taras (Tarentum) became the centre of Pythagoreanism.⁴⁸ Sparta's only colonial holding outside of Arcadia, Taras was

⁴⁵ Schibli 1990: 11.

⁴⁶ See Flavius Josephus, *Contra Apionem*. 1.14; Kedrenos Georgios *Compendium Historiarum* P94b; Theodoros Meliteniotes, *Fragmenta ex libro astronomia* 14; Clement of Alexandria, *Stromata* VI.7.57.3. Against the proposition that Pherekydes was his century's equivalent of a 'world traveller' are the hazards inherent in such journeys at the time along with a curious assertion from an ostensibly ancient letter attributed to Thales of Miletos (c. 624-547 BCE). It stated that Pherekydes was a 'homebody' (*chōrophileōn* – pseudo-Thales, Diog. Laert. I.44) preferring the relative isolation of his island home of Syros, and the opportunity it afforded for quiet contemplation, to the worries of travel and the bustle of cities. However, this source is not considered to be an actual letter from Thales.

⁴⁷ Plato's well-attested fondness for Sparta is another dynamic in its association with Pythagoras but that is too vast a subject to be properly treated here.

⁴⁸ According to Apollonius (*apud* Iamb. *De vita Pythagorica* 255) the conflict with the Pythagoreans was initiated by a dispute over the division of conquered territory in the war against Sybaris; although it remains unclear if Pythagoras was actually involved. As Burkert 1972: 109

founded around 706 in the wake of the Messenian conflicts and may have come about as a consequence of exacerbated social unrest resulting from those conflicts.⁴⁹ This is where Plato's friend Archytas was situated and where the former was known to have visited and associated with several Pythagoreans in his own era.⁵⁰ It is plausible to suggest that they had already established a foothold there before the civil strife in Kroton. 'It is a question, however', as Burkert writes, 'what Pythagoras had to do with these events'.⁵¹ The dates do not quite square, although a liberal interpretation might compel them to do so. There is also a tendency in the literature to refer to the Pythagoreans of this era as 'Pythagoras' in the singular.⁵²

Whatever their loyalties to the kings and customs of Sparta, the colonial government of Taras was also more amenable to commerce in coinage. This resulted in a migration of skilled labour from Lakonia to Taras in the sixth century when Sparta introduced its more rigid reforms.⁵³ By the end of the Peloponnesian Wars, Sparta was 'undoubtedly a non-monetary economy', but the possession of precious metals seems to have occurred even if officially decried.⁵⁴ Taras' difference in this respect provides further evidence to suggest that it was unlikely

points out, Aristoxenos and Dikaiarchos are in disagreement about Pythagoras' role in the revolution at Kroton.

⁴⁹ Plato, *Laws* 735 ff., indicated, with hindsight, that one way to preserve social stability is to export the socially undesirable to foreign colonies. Cartledge 2001: 123, has attempted to reconstruct the history of Taras' founding and gives merit to the story of the *Partheniai*, a group of Spartiates who were regarded as being of 'impure' birth, as its principal founders.

⁵⁰ See Burkert 1972: 27, 78, 84, 92, 198 and 201 n. 48-9.

⁵¹ Burkert 1972: 116-117. Burkert believes that there may have been two separate anti-Pythagorean movements that associated him with Kroton's political affairs, one during his lifetime and another around 450.

⁵² Even so, the 'Italian philosophers' were clearly in Taras, a Spartan colony with a curious history. Thereafter, as Kahn 2001: 7, indicates, 'Pythagorean influence in Italy is well attested for about 150 years'.

⁵³ Kahn 2001: 157.

⁵⁴ Christien 2002: 174. See Plato *Alc.* 1.122d-123a, *Greater Hippias* 283b-d and cf. *Rep.* 548a-b.

that Pythagoras advised the Spartans to avoid coinage (perhaps it really was Pherekydes), since he and his followers were so closely associated with a Spartan colony that embraced money and trade with something of a zeal. The same can be said of Kroton which, when under Pythagorean direction, became the dominant and wealthiest city in the region.⁵⁵

There is one piece of hard evidence that may support some of the literary sources in terms of a real Pythagorean connection with Lakonia, to a point. A Spartan wall relief, dated to the late fourth century BCE, depicts Pythagoras engaged in some kind of musical dialogue with Orpheus.⁵⁶ The latter is seated with a lyre and Pythagoras seems to be handing him a scroll; or, potentially, he has just received it from him. There are various animals in the background but over Pythagoras' head is an eagle which imparts to his character a mystical significance, being a symbol of Zeus and Apollo, and is both a reference to his reputed victory at Olympia along with his alleged abilities as a diviner of auguries based on the flights of birds.⁵⁷ The association with Orpheus in the wall relief should be considered in the light of evidence that Orphism originated with the Pythagorean movement and the Orphic texts themselves may have actually been composed by Pythagoras.⁵⁸ The image is clearly replete with mythic and

⁵⁵ Kahn 2001: 6-7.

⁵⁶ Riedweg 2002: 80-1, plate 1.

⁵⁷ Riedweg 2002: 80-1, plate 1. As Riedweg indicates, 'Dass über dem Kopf des von seinem Anhängern mystifizierten... Pythagoras ein Adler angebracht ist, lässt sich zu dem bei Porphyrios überlieferten Wunder in Beziehung setzen, wonach er in Olympia einer Adler aus der Luft heruntergeholt und gestreichelt haben soll (s. oben l.i.b)'. Pythagoras was alleged to have foreseen his Olympic victory through the flight of an eagle. As we have seen, the Olympian victor of 588 BCE, by name Pythagoras of Samos, may or may not have been the philosopher of the same name but there is a literary tradition that associates our Pythagoras with the Olympic games, see Burkert 1972: 141 n. 121 ff. Pythagoras is said to have stroked a white eagle at Kroton, see Ael. 4.17; Iamb. *De vita Pythagorica* 142; Plut. *Numa* 8.

⁵⁸ See Kahn 2001: 19 ff. and West 1983: 7-20. That Orphism taught the immortality of the soul, punishment or reward after death, and rebirth see Diodorus, I. 96, 4; Eusebius (260-c340b.c.e), *Praep. Evang.*, X.8, 4-5.

shamanistic symbolism. However, one is inclined to wonder whether it is merely a case of Spartan spin.

A variation of the Lakonian type of communism appears to have worked well on the small scale amongst the Pythagorean communities. They were bound together by their intimacy along with what might be termed 'ritual practices' that reinforced their mutual identity.⁵⁹ They gathered in the *homakoeion*, a place for 'hearing together' and received their *akousma* (hearing) and *symbolon* (password). 'We are told', as Kahn indicates, 'of a five-year trial period during which initiates, who had put their property in common, were to listen in silence to the voice of Pythagoras' who was concealed behind a linen curtain.'⁶⁰ They were tested in some way and, if successful, they became 'esoterics' and were allowed to meet and converse with the master. If they failed, they were supposedly given back double their surety but were then treated 'as dead' by the other initiates.⁶¹ However, all of our sources on this come from late antiquity and the term *homakoeion* is only found in Imperial era sources.

Sexual equality (or near-equality) of the sort later imagined by Plato was allegedly a feature of the first Pythagorean community.⁶² A significant number of women were purportedly involved in the *homakoeion*, including Pythagoras' own wife and daughter who were both famous for their wisdom, according to Porphyry.⁶³ Iamblichus mentions several Spartans, some of whom were women,

⁵⁹ See Hdt. II.81 on their burial practices which forbade them to be buried in wool apparently on account of their reverence for animal life.

⁶⁰ Kahn 2001: 8.

⁶¹ Diog. Laert. VIII.10, Iamblichus *De vita Pyth.* 72 ff. This report on their initiation comes from the Hellenistic historian Timaeus and may be exaggerated or even false. For a full account see Burkert 1982.

⁶² See *Laws* 753b, 814c2-4.

⁶³ *VP* 18 = DK 14.8a.

who were Pythagoreans.⁶⁴ Of his original following of 235, seventeen are asserted to have been women. Five of these were Spartans and two were from Taras (only three Spartan men are named).⁶⁵ Many of the original Pythagoreans were colonial Spartiates from Taras; Kroton supplied much of the remainder. Amongst the Spartan women were said to have been Kleaichma, the sister of Autocharidas,⁶⁶ along with Chilonis, the daughter of the sage Chilon.⁶⁷ The tradition of Spartan women being educated comparably to Spartan men seems to be a factor in the purported Pythagorean choices.⁶⁸

There may also be a double meaning to the assertion, mentioned above, that Pythagoras went there to study *Lakedaimonian* 'laws'. The word *nomos* held multiple connotations and a fluid range of meanings for the ancient Greeks over time and dependent on context. It may have originally signified 'assigned pastures' and 'appropriate dwelling places' but later came to mean something more like 'common usage' or 'custom' as well as 'law'.⁶⁹ *Nomos* also denotes a

⁶⁴ See Cartledge 2001: 115, who, in spite of the questions surrounding the authenticity of Iamblichus as a source as with all others from the Neopythagoreans, uses this example as part of his evidence for the education of Spartan women in antiquity. And see below.

⁶⁵ *De vita Pyth.* 267.

⁶⁶ One of the male Pythagoreans from Sparta; he is probably not the same general Autocharidas who led an assault on Thrace in the Peloponnesian wars (Thuc. V.15) but the name is clearly *Lakedaimonian*, and the two men may potentially be related.

⁶⁷ Who was one of the Seven Sages said to have brought the bones of Orestes back to Lakonia. See Pomeroy 2002: 10-11.

⁶⁸ See Cartledge 1981: 85 ff. and, on the education of Spartan women, see Millender 1999: 372 along with Xen. *Lak. Pol.* I.5; Plut. *Lyk.* XV.7-10 and Aristotle, *Politics* VI.1264b35-40. All of the Pythagorean initiates, of either sex, allegedly pooled their resources communally in a manner not dissimilar to that of the Spartans – or, at any rate, the manner in which the Spartans claimed to have done, if not always in reality.

⁶⁹ *LSJ*, s.v. *nomos*. See Humphreys 1987: 214 who writes that the 'idea that *nomos* was originally connected with land division is not implausible (though a connection with division and distribution of sacrificial meat is also possible; the earliest surviving use of the term, in a fragment of Hesiod, 322 MW, refers to sacrifice) but an early association specifically with written law cannot be maintained'.

'tune' or 'melody' and this twist of meaning becomes a favourite source of puns in Plato's final opus, the *Nomoi*.⁷⁰ The Aristotelian *Problemata* provides a ready summary of this play on words.⁷¹

The Pythagoreans were certainly interested in music. They, along with Platonist and Aristotelian musical theorists, measured melody and rhythm mathematically and, thus, developed a fairly precise system of notation for both.⁷² Aristoxenos of Taras (fourth century BCE), a student of Aristotle and later the Pythagorean philosophers Lamprus of Erythrae and Xenophilus, held that the notes of the scale are to be judged, not exclusively by mathematical ratios, but by the ear.⁷³ This essential differentiation separates the science of acoustics from musical *praxis* – a distinction that is at the heart of modern musical theory. Aristoxenos is credited with having initiated the nascence of musicology.⁷⁴

Music also entailed ethical and metaphysical qualities in the minds of the ancients. Different modes were thought to promote certain character types, behaviours and feelings. This theory of musical influence was largely developed by the Pythagoreans.⁷⁵ As West indicates, they 'are reported to have classified (and made systematic practical use of) types of music producing different effects, rousing or calming'.⁷⁶ Some varieties of the Lydian style were seen as mournful,

⁷⁰ *Laws* 700b, 722e, 734e, 775b, 799e. See Todd and Millett 1990: 12.

⁷¹ *Problemata* XIX.28, 'Why are the *nomoi* [play on words = 'laws' or 'songs'] that people sing called by that name? Is it because before they learned writing, they sang their laws, so as not forget them, as is the custom now amongst the Agathyrsi? And they therefore gave to the first of their later songs the same name that they gave to their first songs'. The authorship of this treatise is in dispute but this does not necessarily undercut its worth as a source here.

⁷² See Comotti 1989: 110-20.

⁷³ Three books of the *Elements of Harmony*, an incomplete musical treatise, remain. Grenfell and Hunt's *Oxyrhynchus Papyri*, volume i, 1898, contains a five-column fragment of a treatise of his on metre.

⁷⁴ See Gibson 2005: 129 ff.

⁷⁵ See Plato, *Republic* 398c ff. along with *Laws* 814-16e.

⁷⁶ West 1994: 246.

the Ionian relaxing and, more importantly here, the Dorian (Spartan) and Phrygian are considered to promote self-control and courage.⁷⁷

Musical acumen was a pan-Hellenic phenomenon but one that found its home, for a time, in Sparta. In terms of their poetical and artistic achievements, as with their mode of governance, they were extraordinary even prior to their later, martial reforms. In the seventh century, Sparta was the most important musical centre of Greece.⁷⁸ It could even be accurately described as an ancient 'centre of musical excellence'.⁷⁹ This could have made Sparta an ideal place for a philosopher interested in musical theory.

The Spartans were geographically closest of the mainland Greeks to the Egyptians and perhaps the first to imitate their musical systems. They appear to have replicated another Egyptian custom as well, namely that of artistic ossification. In the fourth century, Plato wrote that the Spartans and Kretans, like the Egyptians, refused to allow innovation in their fixed canon of dances and songs.⁸⁰ In fifth-century Sparta, as Marrou indicates, 'Tyrtaeus' elegies were still the most popular songs in the repertoire, but', he adds, 'that was because of their moral tone and because they made good marching songs'.⁸¹ It was recognized

⁷⁷ Lee 1974: 258. There is an *apropos*, though likely apocryphal, tale to the effect that Pythagoras once prevented a jealous and drunken youth in Tauromenium from burning down the house of his beloved by getting a piper on hand to play a calming melody. See West 1994: 31 and Cicero *de consiliis suis* fr. 3, p. 339 Müller; Sextus Empericus *Math.* vi.8; Lamb. *De vita Pyth.* 112.

⁷⁸ Commotti 1989: 17.

⁷⁹ See West 1994: 334 and see 36-7 on the incorporation of musical education into the Spartan pedagogical system.

⁸⁰ *Laws* 660b, cf. 799a1-2 and. 656d ff. We can assume with some degree of certainty that, if this was actually the case, then the changes in Sparta probably happened as part of the cultural reforms that followed in the aftermath of the Messenian Wars. Their manual crafts also became hereditary, as with the Egyptians.

⁸¹ Marrou 1982: 21.

that music could be designed to leave a powerful and specific impression on the listener.⁸²

We are told that Pythagoras was very interested in music on both a technical and a philosophical level. He was said to have rejected the practice of judging music by means of sensual perception alone, 'saying that its excellence was to be grasped by the mind' and so introduced a sophisticated system of measuring tonal quality utilising mathematics.⁸³ This may have been one of the first scientific experiments. Pythagoras is also credited with having invented the octave, in part, by adding an eighth string to the archaic 7-string lyre at a mathematically determined interval.⁸⁴ Music was also perceived by the Pythagoreans to have an association with metaphysical phenomena including metempsychosis and cosmology in general – *ergo* the doctrine of the Harmony of the Spheres.⁸⁵

The Spartan construction of musical experience for social control also seems to have been a subject of interest to the Pythagoreans, even if it cannot be attributed directly to Pythagoras himself. The magical powers ascribed to Orpheus, Pythagoras, and other pre-Socratic sages (even Sokrates) were recognisably shamanic and this included the art of healing through music.⁸⁶ Recall the Spartan wall relief mentioned above and its overtly Orphic

⁸² Imagine it in its Arcadian context: 'It was a dreadful but inspiring sight', declares Plutarch *Lyk.* 22., 'to see the Spartan army marching off for an attack to the sound of the oboe'.

⁸³ Pseud. Plutarch *De Musica* 37f. As Barker 1984: 244 n. 239, indicates 'the issue was, in fact much more complex than the crude opposition between perception and reason would suggest'. See Plato *Rep.* 530e-531d for an outline of the stances taken by pre-Aristoxenian musical theorists. See Barker 1984: 198, n. 57-8 and see 244 on Pythagorean *harmonia*.

⁸⁴ Nicom. 244.14 ff.

⁸⁵ See Burkert 1972: 369-71 for an analysis of ancient musical theory in regard to Plato and the Pythagoreans. On the further relationship between music, number and metempsychosis, see also Pindar *Ol.* 2.56 ff. (fr. 133), Empedokles *Katharmoi*, *passim*, Hdt. II.123 and Plato *Phaedo* 81b, *Menex.* 81a, *Phaedrus* 248d, *Rep.* 614 ff., *Gorgias* 525c.

⁸⁶ Cornford 1952: 107 ff. and see Eliade 1964.

connotations. Pythagoras, Solon and Empedokles of Akragas all harnessed the artistic medium of poetry, for manifestly didactic ends, in order to convey their ideas and to persuade. Their verses were accompanied by music and, as we have seen, with no small degree of calculation.⁸⁷

There can be little doubt about the Pythagoreans themselves and their philosophical heirs, after Pythagoras' time, being interested in Sparta. The sources on Pythagoras' life until Kroton leave much to be desired but, thereafter, there is somewhat more consistency if not always clarity. There appear to have been Spartiates actively involved in the early Pythagorean movement. It is again necessary to add the *caveat* that we may never know if that picture is accurate, and to what degree, or purely one that Iamblichus and others wanted us to receive.

There are other reasons as to why Pythagoras may have studied Sparta, as we have seen, and travelled there. A possible link exists via his alleged teacher Pherekydes. There is the case of Taras and its involvement with the Pythagoreans. The number of Spartans and Tarentines affiliated directly with Pythagoreanism seems above average. The Spartan communal system, their legal code and its 'divine' origins, their command of poetry and music, their views on the nature of the soul after death along with other cultural attributes all lend some credibility to the later reports that Pythagoras was active there but could easily be revisionist history.

The Spartans of the fifth and fourth centuries onwards might have desired to promote their Pythagorean connections for propagandistic reasons. All that can be said with confidence is that the Pythagoreans and Neopythagoreans were interested in Sparta and did have actual contact with the region – and, that there

⁸⁷ 'Some of the most influential of those whom we now categorise as early Greek philosophers', as Murray 1996: 18, indicates, 'wrote in verse'.

was a concerted effort by the Spartans to advance their alleged association with the famous philosopher. More may yet be discovered; however, for now it is necessary to be content with a Pythagoras who is still more than otherwise shrouded in mystery.

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