

PATHS OF THE ANCIENT SAGES: A PYTHAGOREAN HISTORY

Peter Kingsley, Ph.D.

In the present article, we follow the trail of Pythagorean wisdom as it wends its way from the Greek islands through the Mediterranean to the world of Sufis and alchemists. Peter Kingsley is an honorary professor both at the University of New Mexico and at Simon Fraser University in Canada. Dr. Kingsley believes his work is to bring back to life, and make accessible again, the extraordinary mystical tradition that lies forgotten right at the roots of the Western world. He has worked together with many of the most prominent figures in the fields of classics and anthropology, philosophy and religious studies, ancient civilizations and the history of both healing and science. He is the author of [In the Dark Places of Wisdom](#); [Reality](#); and [Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic](#). For further information about Dr. Kingsley and his work, visit www.peterkingsley.org.

The year: 1191. At Aleppo in Syria a man called Shihab al-Din Yahya al-Suhrawardi was executed on direct instructions from the great Islamic ruler, Saladin. He was thirty-eight years old.

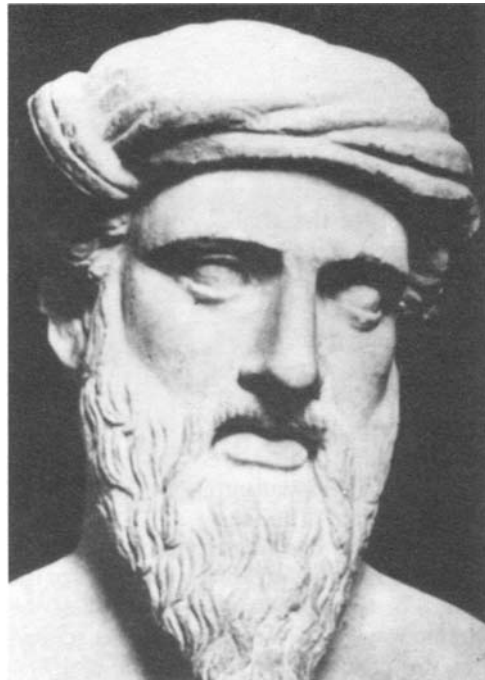
His death and short life might seem to have nothing to do with Pythagoras, or the Pythagoreans of ancient Greece. But that's not the case.

Suhrawardi has been known in Persia since his death as "The Sheikh of the East," or simply as "He who was killed." While still alive he taught and wrote about how he had discovered a continuous line of esoteric tradition: a tradition that started in the East, passed to the early Greek philosophers, then was carried from Greece to Egypt where it traveled a long way up the Nile and

eventually was transmitted from southern Egypt back to Persia.

For him this tradition wasn't just a matter of history. He presented himself as its living representative in his own time. And he explained that he was the person responsible for bringing it to its fulfillment by returning it, full circle, to its roots in the East.

The few people in the West who study Suhrawardi nowadays like to believe his vision of the past is strictly symbolic; that his interpretations of history aren't to be taken literally, or seriously. And yet Suhrawardi was very serious about what he said. So were his successors—people who down to the present day claim they have perpetuated intact an esoteric tradition based not on theorizing or reasoning about reality, but on direct



Bust of Pythagoras. Roman Copy of a Greek Original. Rome, Capitoline Museum.

experience gained through spiritual struggle and specific techniques of realization.

For them this tradition was alive, incredibly powerful. Suhrawardi described it as an eternal “leaven,” capable of transforming whatever it touches, of raising people who are ready into another level of being. And just as yeast acts subtly but irresistibly—transforming from the inside, unrestrainable,

Western philosophy is presented nowadays as strictly a Greek phenomenon, explainable in Greek terms alone. Claims made by ancient sources that the earliest philosophers traveled to distant places in search of wisdom are dismissed as romantic fantasies, dreamed up by Greek writers long after the time of the people they were writing about.

Historians like to speak about what they call the “Oriental mirage”—the exotic illusion conjured up by Greeks that their culture owed a great deal to the East. But the real mirage is the “Greek mirage,” the illusion that the Greeks grew up in a self-enclosed world of their own.

precisely because it’s so subtle—the theologians in his time saw that the only way to try and stop his teaching would be to kill him. But they killed nothing.

And Suhrawardi, like his successors among Persian Sufis, was quite precise about his ancestors. He mentions two early Greek philosophers in particular: Pythagoras, and a man from Sicily called Empedocles. He also states, as we’ll see, the name of the town in southern Egypt where the tradition eventually arrived. And he gives the name of the man responsible for carrying it out of Egypt in the ninth century—nearly one and-a-half thousand years after Pythagoras and Empedocles.

As we’ll also see, he knew what he was saying. But let’s start at the beginning.

One Vast, Interrelated Whole

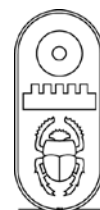
Those who specialize in the history of classical Greece naturally tend to dislike any talk about contacts with the ancient East. It can be disconcerting to find that the area one has given one’s life to studying is nothing but a tiny square on a far vaster chess board, that the details one has been analyzing are just the marks left behind by chess pieces being moved from somewhere one doesn’t know about to somewhere one doesn’t understand.

The trouble is that, in the case of Pythagoras, the reports about him traveling far and wide go back more or less to the time when Pythagoras was alive. Historians like to speak about what they call the “Oriental mirage”—the exotic illusion conjured up by Greeks that their culture owed a great deal to the East. But the real mirage is the “Greek mirage,” the illusion that the Greeks grew up in a self-enclosed world of their own.

The reality is this: the ancient world was one vast, interrelated whole. Everything was intimately and subtly interconnected. You only have to look at what happened in Pythagoras’s own lifetime and you find Babylonian astrological traditions being introduced into Egypt by Persian Magi. Further to the east, the same traditions were being carried by Magi to India.

Everywhere nowadays it’s written or said that Alexander the Great was responsible for opening up the East, centuries after Pythagoras. But that’s just a myth. The routes that Alexander’s army followed had been used by Persian traders and teachers long before Alexander was even born.

Then there’s the case of Pythagoras himself. His home was an island called Samos, just off the mainland from what’s now the Mediterranean coast of Turkey. It so happens



that the people of Samos were among the specialists of specialists in long-distance trade. They had a reputation that was almost mythical in its dimensions for traveling and trading. The great temple of Hera on Samos became a storehouse for objects imported from Syria and Babylonia, from the Caucasus, Central Asia, and India.

Of all the places that people from Samos did trade with, there's one in particular that they had close ties with. This was Egypt. They built their own depots and places of worship along the Nile, together with other Greeks. For them Egypt wasn't just some foreign or exotic land; it belonged to the world they knew and lived and worked in.

And that's only part of the story. According to an old tradition, Pythagoras's father was a gem engraver. What Pythagoras's father did, Pythagoras himself would have learned as a matter of course. But for a Greek gem engraver of the time, in the middle of the sixth century BCE, life would have meant learning skills introduced from Phoenicia and bringing in materials from the East. We happen to know about other famous gem engravers on Samos at the time when Pythagoras was alive. They trained in Egypt; worked for kings of Anatolia; produced some of the finest works of art right in the heart of

ancient Persia, for Samos was an island that, from century to century, had the closest of ties with Persia.

The realities of history are full of ironies and paradoxes at every turn. With Pythagoras the paradoxes start multiplying from the moment he decided, in around 530 BCE, to leave Samos and settle in Italy.

The island where he had grown up had contacts with Egypt; and one would suppose that in leaving Samos for the West he was leaving those contacts behind. But he didn't leave anything behind. Italy was saturated with influences from Egypt. The most extraordinary finds have been made, there and in Sicily, like Egyptian magical objects dating from the seventh century BCE that show the goddess Isis suckling her son Horus. Their similarities to the imagery of Persephone suckling her son Dionysus—imagery that depicts the crucial moment in Orphic mysteries of initiation when the initiate dies to be reborn as Persephone's child—are far too close to be a coincidence.

Orphic tradition blossomed in Italy. Early Pythagorean tradition absorbed its language and techniques, made them its own. And in origin they're plainly Egyptian.

This is particularly clear in the case of the famous Orphic gold plates that



Pythagorean School in Egypt

originally were buried together with initiates in southern Italian tombs. They're pieces of folded gold foil, inscribed with directions for finding one's way in the world of the dead and with promises for obtaining immortality. They describe the guardians

Traditions have their ebbs
and flows, just as cultures do.
People go, whether they
understand why or not,
exactly where they're needed.

in the underworld that challenge the soul, prevent it from finding the refreshment it needs. And they remind the soul how to state its real identity by claiming it belongs with the gods.

Empedocles

Here we come to the other man mentioned by Suhrawardi alongside Pythagoras: the great philosopher Empedocles, who lived in the fifth century BCE and played the major role of transmitting Pythagoras's teachings in Sicily. He used the language of the gold plates in the poetry he wrote, and through what he says, he shows that the process of dying to be reborn doesn't just refer to dying physically. Initiates had to die before they died—face the underworld before their physical death.

The similarities in detail between the magical sayings on the gold plates and Egyptian texts in the Book of the Dead are obvious. But what hasn't been realized is that this isn't just a case of parallels between texts from Italy and texts from Egypt; the missing links have also been discovered.

They're strange discoveries, like stepping stones carefully marking out a curve of influence that stretches from Egypt across to Italy. Strips of gold foil have been found in tombs at Carthage, on the coast of what is now Tunisia; and on the island of Sardinia.

They were placed there during the seventh, sixth, and fifth centuries BCE. The strips were made by Phoenicians—but they're engraved with Egyptian images. And they were rolled up, like amulets, inside tubes often sculpted with pictures of Egyptian gods.

Phoenician Influence

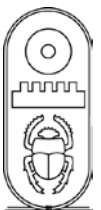
You won't find much mention of these strips of gold foil in Phoenician tombs. Most modern historians have little respect for Phoenicians, and disregard them as inferior to the Greeks. Evidence that Pythagoreans in Italy included Phoenicians among their number, or were taught by Phoenicians, is neglected. And no significance is seen in how one particular man—the man who most blatantly gives the lie to the modern fantasy that ancient Pythagoreans were impractical dreamers—is said to have learned mechanics and engineering from a Phoenician in Carthage.

The man's name was Archytas. He was Plato's greatest friend among the Pythagoreans; and he, along with his disciples, transmitted to Plato the wisdom preserved in the famous Platonic myths. But already in Plato's own circle the tendency to glorify the Greeks, especially the Athenians, at everyone else's expense quickly covered over the facts. It was Plato's secretary who wrote down the famous statement that "Whatever Greeks receive from barbarians they improve on, carry to perfection."

And it was precisely the people who were in a position to know best who went so far in creating our Western sense of superiority that now we find ourselves proudly clutching at straws.

Traditions have their ebbs and flows, just as cultures do. People go, whether they understand why or not, exactly where they're needed.

Egyptian ideas had for a long time been carried to Italy, but eventually the opposite movement started—from Italy back to Egypt.



It began in a big way when Alexander the Great had the city called Alexandria built at the mouth of the Nile during the late fourth century BCE. People in southern Italy and Sicily gave themselves all kinds of reasons for doing what they had to do: emigrating to Egypt.

Pythagoreanism itself had always been a flexible tradition. Its personal demands on anyone who wanted to become a Pythagorean were immense. But, paradoxically, to be a Pythagorean meant belonging to a system that encouraged initiative and creativity: that kept changing, consciously adapting to the needs of different people and places and times.

So when Pythagoreans started arriving in Egypt they didn't simply set up shop as Pythagoreans. They also started merging their teachings with a tradition that was eminently Egyptian. This was the tradition that belonged to the god Thoth—or, as he came to be called by Greeks in Egypt, *Hermes Trismegistus*.



D. Stolcius von Stolcenberg, *Hermes Trismegistus* from the *Viridarium Chymicum*. 1642

Hermetic Texts

The Hermetic texts, or “*Hermetica*,” that began being produced in Greek were initiatory writings. They served a very particular and practical purpose inside the circles of Hermetic mystics. And many of the methods they describe, as well as a great deal of the terminology they use, are specifically Pythagorean in origin.

But the *Hermetica* are far more than adaptations of Pythagorean themes. They are also the most obvious manifestation of Pythagoreanism returning to Egypt. Until not long ago, the occasional references to Egyptian gods and religion in the Hermetic writings were dismissed as superficial veneer—as touches of local color added to the Greek texts to give them the illusion that they contained the authentic wisdom of Egypt.

But the Hermetic literature is Egyptian to its core. Even the name *Poimandres* or *Pymander*, the title often given to the *Hermetica* as a whole, is Egyptian through and through. It's simply a Greek version of *P-eime me-re*, “the intelligence of Re.” And the god who was known in Egypt as the “intelligence” of the sun god, Re, was Thoth—the Egyptian Hermes.

Already in the early 1990s it was possible to start mapping out the details of how much the *Hermetica* owed to Egypt. The resulting picture was startling enough. But then something extraordinary happened.

In 1995 two historians quietly announced the existence of a *Book of Thoth*, written in Demotic Egyptian. Just like the Greek *Hermetica*, it's a dialogue between a teacher and disciple. The teacher is Thoth “the three times great”—the exact equivalent of *Hermes Trismegistus*. He talks, like in the Greek *Hermetica*, about the process of rebirth—about the need to become young when you're old, old instead of young.

The Book of Thoth is purely Egyptian, with not a trace or sign of any foreign influence.

But its general correspondences with the Greek Hermetic texts, and its parallels with them down to the most specific expressions and details, prove without any doubt that here we have a lost Egyptian prototype of the Hermetica only known to us before through their Greek translations and adaptations.

These were the Egyptian traditions that Pythagoreanism started merging with to become those Greek Hermetica. And you could say that in doing so, it was at last coming home.

The Greek Hermetic writings weren't the end of Pythagoreanism's return to Egypt, but just the beginning.

Already in the second century BCE, Greek-speaking Egyptians who lived on the Nile Delta had started receiving Pythagorean traditions on one hand and, on the other, shaping what was to become known as the art of alchemy. Northern Egypt was simply the starting point for a whole process of transmission from West back to East.

Over the centuries a combination of Pythagoreanism and alchemy was carried hundreds of miles along the Nile, down towards the Ethiopian frontier. And it was carried to one town in particular. The Greeks called it *Panopolis*; later it would become known as *Akhmim*. It has been said that outwardly this town in the middle of the desert "has no history." That is quite correct. Its history and significance belonged in another dimension.

Zosimus of Panopolis

The most famous of Greek alchemists, Zosimus, lived in the third century CE. He came from Panopolis. Already in his time there were small groups of alchemists either living in the town or staying in contact with the alchemists who lived there. These groups weren't just concerned with transforming physical objects. They were also preserving and perfecting techniques for the transformation of themselves.

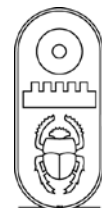
It was here, when the real meaning of early Greek philosophy had already become lost in the West, that the alchemists kept those philosophers' teachings alive—especially the teachings of Pythagoras and the Pythagoreans. And they would go on preserving the significance of their teachings intact, from generation to generation, for hundreds of years.

It's still possible to trace how the teachings of Empedocles in particular were transmitted from Sicily down to Egypt and into the Hermetica, into Egyptian magical traditions, and in alchemical circles all the way down to Akhmim. In 1998 the remains of a papyrus, discovered at Akhmim, which had contained huge amounts of Empedocles' poetry were published for the first time. This was much more than a chance discovery.

During the ninth century CE, seven hundred years after Empedocles' teachings had been copied onto this papyrus, an alchemist in Akhmim wrote a work that was to have the profoundest influence on virtually every aspect of medieval alchemy. His name was Uthman Ibn Suwaid, and he wrote the work in Arabic.

It became known in the Islamic world as *The Book of the Gathering*; translated into Latin it came to be called the *Turba philosophorum*, or *Gathering of the Philosophers*. The book described a series of meetings between ancient Greek philosophers at four "Pythagorean conferences," all of them dedicated to getting to the heart of the alchemical art. The meetings were presided over by Pythagoras himself. And in the text one of the speakers at the gathering, Empedocles, outlines genuine aspects of the historical Empedocles' teaching—about the fundamental importance of fire at the center of the earth—which until recently were either forgotten or completely distorted in the West.

The significance of these details is immense. What Empedocles wrote and





Ibn Tulun Mosque in Cairo, 9th century CE. Photo from the Rosicrucian Archives.

taught during the fifth century BCE played a crucial role in shaping Western philosophy, Western science, and the history of Western ideas. But the simple fact is that a true understanding of what Empedocles had taught didn't survive in the West. All that was left there of his teaching—about the mysteries of the world around us, about the nature of the soul—was empty theorizing and hollow ideas. The lived reality had moved elsewhere.

It's strange, now, to look at the surviving evidence in Arabic texts about the existence of groups of alchemists who called themselves "Empedocles circles," or "Pythagoras circles." You find "Empedocles circles" mentioned again in descriptions of Islamic esoteric groups who saw Empedocles as their guide—who "regard themselves as followers of his wisdom and hold him superior to all other authorities." Here were people who, in spite of their culture, religion, language, took as their inspiration and teacher a man who had lived one and a half thousand years before them.

The Sufi, Dhu 'l-Nun

Suhrawardi, "Sheikh of the East," says who it was who passed the essence of Pythagoras's and Empedocles' teachings to the Sufis: someone called Dhu 'l-Nun.

Dhu 'l-Nun came from Akhmim. He was fiercely attacked by Islamic theologians; put on trial. He narrowly escaped with his life. And this man, who aroused so much opposition through what he taught, became known as "the head of the Sufis" for the simple reason that practically every line of Sufis in existence looks back in one way or another to him.

He soon came to be considered the crucial figure in "a line of secret gnostic teaching" that he transmitted to the great Sufi, Sahl al-Tustari, and then—through Sahl—to Sahl's disciple al-Hallaj and into the early Sufi orders. But Dhu 'l-Nun was also famous for his involvement with alchemy, and for deriving his wisdom from the alchemical traditions preserved at Akhmim.

This connection between alchemy and the beginnings of Sufism has often been put aside as something of an embarrassment. And yet, as a few historians have realized, the evidence for the connection goes back too far into the past to be discounted so easily.

But even that isn't all, because there's one other piece of evidence that's strangely been missed.

This is the fact that the earliest witness to Dhu 'l-Nun's involvement with alchemy lived

hardly any later than Dhu 'l-Nun himself. He was Ibn Suwaid, the alchemist from Akhmim who wrote the Pythagorean *Book of the Gathering*—and who, alongside the other alchemical books he produced, wrote one specifically refuting the accusations leveled against Dhu 'l-Nun.

Apart from his connections with alchemy and Pythagoras, with Empedocles and Dhu 'l-Nun, Ibn Suwaid was linked with the beginnings of Sufism in more ways than one. He also wrote a work called *Book of the Red Sulphur*. That's highly significant. Red sulphur played a crucial role for alchemists because it represented the light in the depths of the underworld, the sun at midnight, the fire at the center of the earth. But it's significant, too, because *Book of the Red Sulphur* was soon to become a standard book title among Sufis themselves. For them, red sulphur was the name used to describe the essence of the esoteric "inheritance" that was the ultimate goal of being a Sufi.

The tendency nowadays is to assume that when Sufis took over this alchemical language they changed its meaning by spiritualizing it, giving it a higher significance which it hadn't had before. But that's as accurate as the belief that Carl Jung in the twentieth century was the first person who ever gave alchemy an inner or symbolic meaning, who explained it as relating to human transformation.

The simple fact is that the oldest alchemical texts in the West which survive in anything like their full and original state talk explicitly about alchemy as the art of inner transformation—as the process of bringing the divine into human existence and taking the human back to the divine.

These texts have never been properly translated into English. They were written down in Greek during the third century by Zosimus, the famous alchemist from the town of Panopolis or Akhmim.

It's no surprise that Suhrawardi was killed.

His writings show he was a deep Muslim, profoundly inspired by the Quran. But the

basic thrust of his teaching pointed in another direction. It was mainly through him that Empedocles and Pythagoras came to be seen, especially by certain Sufis in Persia, as among the greatest Sheikhs who had ever lived.



The oldest alchemical texts in the West which survive in anything like their full and original state talk explicitly about alchemy as the art of inner transformation.



Of course, this way of viewing ancient philosophers has no place at all in the standard pictures of Sufism—any more than the idea of Empedocles or Pythagoras as teachers, responsible for transmitting an esoteric tradition based on spiritual practice and realization, has any place in the standard pictures of ancient philosophy.

But that was bound to happen. For a long time in the West we've managed to forget the original meaning of the word *philosophy*, which is love of wisdom, not the love of endlessly talking and arguing about the love of wisdom. And what's even sadder is the way we've managed to persuade ourselves that we haven't forgotten anything.

As one of Suhrawardi's successors—his name was Shahrazuri—stated very simply: the realities that Suhrawardi wrote about and died for are so fundamental they aren't easy to understand. In the West it was a long time ago that "the traces of the paths of the ancient sages disappeared"; "that their teachings were either wiped out or corrupted and distorted."

But, as Suhrawardi and his followers knew, these realities are never lost for good.

© 1999 by Peter Kingsley.

