

PYTHAGORAS THE TEACHER: FROM SAMOS TO METAPONTUM

*Giulia Minicuci,
adapted by Mary Jones, S.R.C.*

The philosophers of ancient Greece were the first documented enquirers in classical Europe into the workings of the world and how things worked. They were skeptical about religious explanations for natural phenomena and sought explanations through personal experience and deep reflection. Of course, after some 2500 years, it can be difficult to understand the terminology they used in its original meaning. For that, one needs to place oneself in the minds of those distant philosophers and also understand the times in which they lived. This fascinating, though academic, approach is beyond the scope of this article about Pythagoras, who was one of the most renowned philosophers of the ancient world. More famous nowadays for his mathematical theorem, this article gives readers an insight into a philosophy that shaped the world as we know it today. Pythagoras was one of the shining lights of ancient Greek thought, whose teachings became the foundation of modern philosophical thought and who has influenced Rosicrucian teachings to this day.

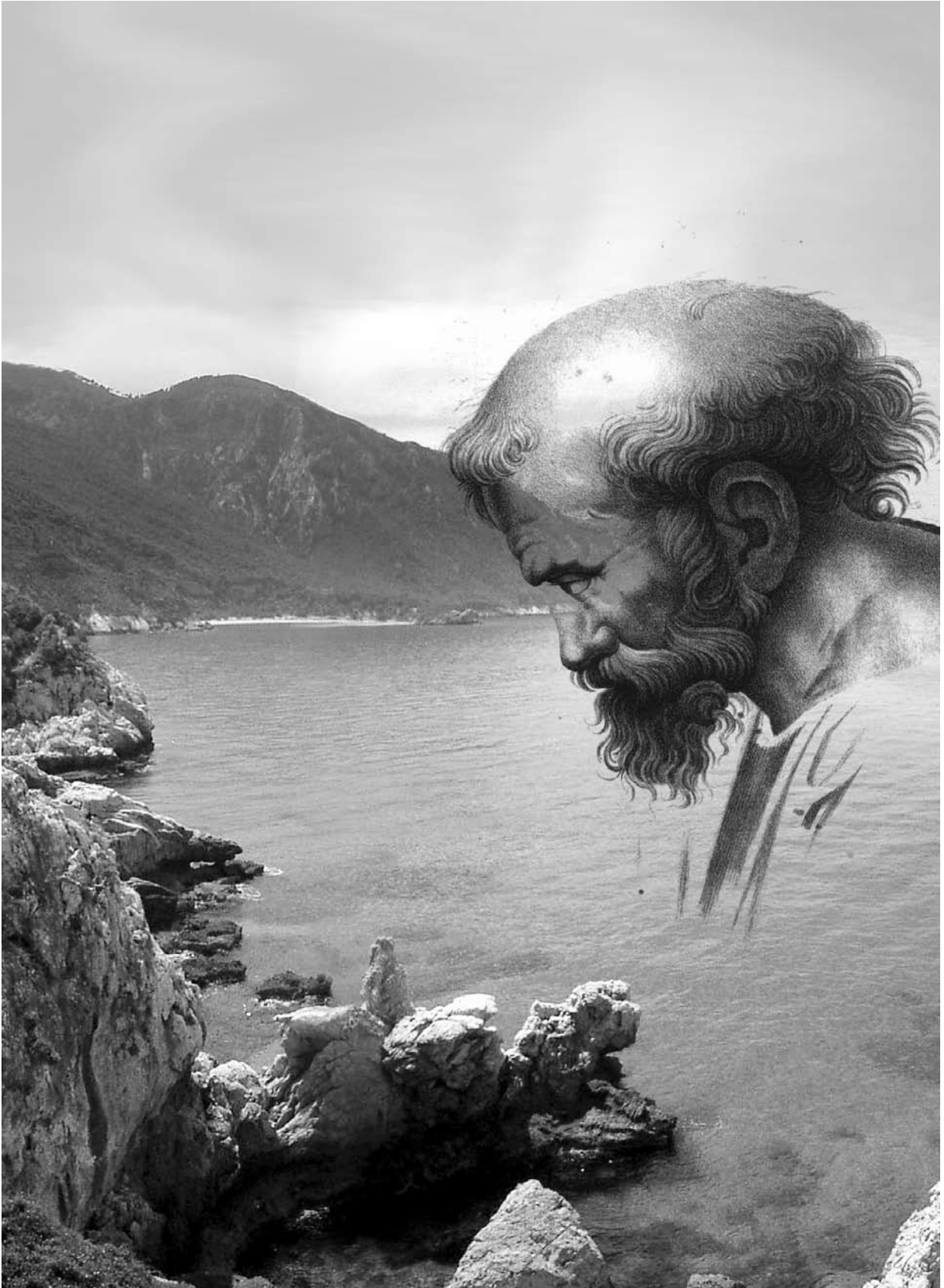
In the Aegean Sea, a short distance from the Ionian coast of Asia Minor, what is today Anatolia or Asiatic Turkey, there is a remarkably fertile island called Samos. In classical antiquity the island was a center of Ionian culture and luxury, renowned for its Samian wines and red pottery, called “Samian ware” by the Romans. At the time of the great Hellenic migrations, it received an Ionian population which traced its origin to Epidauros in the Argolis, not far from ancient Mycenae, the capital of the Mycenaean civilization and home to Agamemnon of Homer’s *Iliad*. Samos became one of the twelve members of the Ionian League.

By the seventh century BCE Samos had become one of the leading commercial centers of the Greek world. The early prosperity of the Samians seems largely due to the island’s position near trade routes which facilitated the importation of textiles from the interior of Asia Minor and the north-south shipping routes. It boasted a flourishing economy based on wool and metalworking. But the Samians also developed an extensive overseas commerce. They helped to open up trade with the Black Sea cities and with Pharaonic Egypt, and were credited with having been the first Greeks to reach the Straits of Gibraltar.

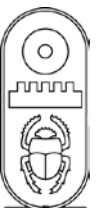
About 535 BCE, when the existing oligarchy was overturned by the tyrant Polykrates, Samos reached the height of its prosperity. Its navy not only protected it from invasion, but ruled supreme in Aegean waters. The city was beautified with public works, and its schools of sculptors, metalworkers, and engineers achieved high repute. It had a famous sanctuary of Hera called the *Heraion*, which today is a UNESCO World Heritage Site.

Early Life

Pythagoras was born in 580 or 572 BCE into a wealthy family. His father was Mnesarchos, a gem engraver and merchant of precious goods from Tyre, and his mother was Pythais of a high born Samian family. The story is told how Mnesarchos, on a business trip to Delphi, with his wife who was pregnant but didn’t know it, consulted the Pythian oracle about his forthcoming voyage to Syria. The oracle replied that his voyage would be profitable and that his wife was already pregnant and would give birth



Pythagoras and the Mediterranean. From the Rosicrucian Archives.



to a child who would “surpass all others in beauty and wisdom.” This child would be of the greatest benefit to the human race in all aspects of life. When the child was born, they named him Pythagoras, meaning “Speaking like the Pythia.”

Pythagoras came to maturity just as the earliest Greek science or natural philosophy was developing in the nearby city of Miletus, and so naturally he was influenced by Milesian cosmology. During his lifetime, education was considered to be a form of spiritual initiation and therefore, from the age of five, he was introduced to all the fields of knowledge. Coming from a wealthy family, he was sent to study under some great Masters such as: the poet and musician Hermodamas of Samos; the philosophers Anaximander of Miletus and Bias of Priene; Pherekydes of Syros, one of the Seven Sages of Greece who taught the immortality of the soul; and Thales of Miletus, that great depository of ancient wisdom who recommended that Pythagoras travel to Egypt, the cradle of secret knowledge. At that time Egypt was ruled by Pharaoh Amasis of the Saite Period, or Twenty-sixth Dynasty, the last great ruler of Egypt before the Persian conquest. Amasis encouraged many Greeks to come to his land and be instructed in its ancient wisdom.

World Traveler

Taking Thales’ advice, Pythagoras traveled to Egypt, learning ancient Egyptian



Pythagoras’s travels took him from central Asia to Egypt and back to Greece. From the Rosicrucian Archives



and spending twenty-two years as a neophyte and initiate in the great temples at Heliopolis, Memphis, and Thebes, the main centers of learning, where he was initiated into the secrets of mathematics, geometry, astronomy, and astrology. He was also initiated into the knowledge of correspondences and symbolism, as well as the rituals of those institutions, which were designed to expand the consciousness.

In Egypt Pythagoras was captured and taken to Babylon by the soldiers of Cambyses II, the King of Persia. Once in Babylon, he was mysteriously freed and this gave him the opportunity to learn the secrets of the Magi, which in turn opened the gates of Chaldean science to him. From there, he traveled to Asia Minor where the mysteries of various temples were revealed to him. It is said that he traveled to Sidon in Phoenicia, as well as Mesopotamia and even as far as India, where he learned the secret Vedic teachings and about the doctrine of reincarnation, in which he came to believe firmly. In this way he learned that there are many paths, but only one leads to the Truth. Finally, he possessed the key to knowledge.

After half a lifetime of travels to sacred sites, he then decided to return to Samos, intending to continue what he now considered as his mission. Samos however was ruled by the autocrat Polykrates (530-538 BCE), an ally of the Persians who had

brutally suppressed the people's rights. Pythagoras, not able to stomach the tyranny, and unable to find students to instruct, went to consult the Pythian oracle of Delphi. He left under the protection of Apollo, and in accordance with the response of the Pythia, about 530 BCE he landed in Crotona (Κρότων) in Magna Graecia.

Magna Graecia

Magna Graecia (or Greater Greece in Latin) was the name the Romans gave to the Greek settlements along the coast of southern Italy and Sicily because of the large numbers of Greeks living there. These cities left a lasting imprint of Greek culture that influenced the Etruscan and later the Roman civilizations.

According to Strabo, Heraclides Ponticus, Antiochus of Syracuse, the sophist Zenobius, and Diodorus Siculus, the Greek colony of Crotona was six miles from the Lakinian promontory (the current Capo Colonna). Like Samos it had a temple of Hera. It lies in the modern Italian province of Crotona in the region of Calabria. This was the ancient territory of the Iapyges, an Illyrian-speaking tribe whose language is tentatively distantly related to Albanian.

Crotona was a large city founded in 708 BCE after the Delphic Oracle instructed some Achaean colonists led by Myskellos to settle there. The story was told that the founders of Crotona and Sybaris both consulted the Oracle at Delphi at the same time and were given the choice of wealth or health; Archias the founder of Sybaris chose wealth, while Myskellos chose health.

Crotona had a small harbor, but it was only a port of call and not a center of commerce. Behind the city were the Sila Mountains, cutting it off from the interior. The slopes and foothills were extensive and fertile. The city was famous for its doctors and athletes. The school of philosophy that Pythagoras founded there played an important

role in the political affairs of southern Italy for the next two or three generations.

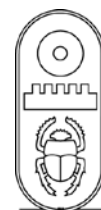
About the time Pythagoras arrived, Crotona was defeated by the city of Locri at the River Sagras. But its fortunes changed and in 510 BCE Crotona defeated and destroyed its rich and luxurious neighbor to the north, Sybaris. From then until about 450 BCE Crotona seems to have been the dominant city in the region, and historians credited Pythagoras and his moral training for the military revival of Crotona.

Pythagorean Community

After his arrival, Pythagoras introduced himself to the people of the city by delivering several discourses containing some basic concepts of his philosophy. His presence was that of a free man; tall and graceful in speech and gesture. He made a great impression on the Crotonians and showed himself to be not merely a moral reformer but a mystical philosopher whose insights into



Map of Magna Graecia including Crotona (Croton)
© 2006 by Carlos Satrapa/Wikimedia Commons.



human relations could bring about a society harmonious in itself and with the gods.

With Pythagoras and his community directing affairs, Crotona became the most important power in southern Italy. It enjoyed brilliant athletic successes at the Olympic Games and boasted a flourishing medical school. At this period, the Greek cities of southern Italy were renowned as leaders of Greek thought and culture. In material culture they rivaled other Greek cities such as Athens and Corinth. This was no provincial backwater, but a fully developed part of the ancient Greek world.

Pythagoras especially stressed how the gods were to be propitiated with sacred ritual. Among other things, he emphasized that one should wear white in a temple, that one should use wood and sea water rather than animals in sacrifice, and that one should pour libations to Zeus before eating. In order to create a harmonious society the philosopher also defined what should be considered proper or ethical behavior between the sexes, and between children and their elders.

He stated that the young should respect their parents and have a love of knowledge. He believed that the Universe as a whole was a living creature, being a single, living, eternal, and divine entity. He taught that human beings were mortal, but that the soul was not; it was a fragment or spark of the divine soul, cut off and imprisoned in a mortal body. A person's aim in life, he said, was to become pure spirit, and thus rejoin the universal spirit to which he or she essentially belonged. Until the soul could purify itself completely, it must undergo a series of transmigrations, exchanging one body for another. Interestingly, these were also the views of the Cathars of southern France some 1500 years later.

His religion was a kind of pantheism. He was also the first to coin the term *Kosmos*, a word that combines the notions of order, fitness, and beauty, an ordered whole. Each one of us is a *Kosmos* in miniature. The

philosopher who studies the *Kosmos* becomes *kosmios*, orderly, in his or her own soul.

The Pythagorean Tradition

The people of Crotona were inspired by Pythagoras's lofty, beautiful sentiments, and impressed by his noble bearing, helped him to build a school on the outskirts of town. Pythagoras was the first to use the term "philosopher" (lover of wisdom) and gained many followers. But his school was more than just a place of learning; it was a community, a fraternity, a way of life, and a sort of scientific research establishment. It was open to both men and women at a time when women were very much regarded as second class citizens. He also taught the doctrine of rebirth or transmigration.

One group of students, approximately six hundred in number, lived in a communal fashion in the school. This inner circle of followers or initiates was called *Mathematikoi* (Students). They lived in the community, had no possessions, and were vegetarians. A second group of two thousand, the *Akoumatikoi* (Hearers), were family members who lived in their own homes, and came to the school during the day. Both groups took lessons in the *Homakoeion*, a large common auditorium, where Pythagoras conducted his teaching while seated behind a curtain.

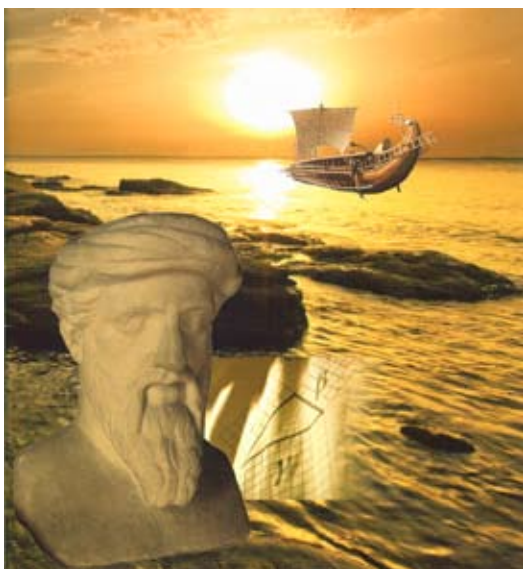
The Hearers were not allowed to see Pythagoras. It was thought that the sight of the master would distract too much from his words. The Students however, sat on the same side of the curtain as Pythagoras, and were initiated further into the mysteries that their master had learned from the priests of the East. The Students were not given these truths freely and had to prove to Pythagoras that they had an uprightness and beauty of character, and that they could keep secret the truths revealed to them. Thus they were obliged to take vows of silence, usually lasting five years, before they would even be considered for further entry into the mysteries. As his teachings spread, Pythagorean *Synedria*,

or meeting places, were built in most cities of Magna Graecia.

The Later Years

Pythagoras's community at Crotona was not unaffected by political events, despite his desire to stay out of politics. Pythagoras went to Delos, also sacred to Apollo, in 513 BCE to nurse his old teacher Pherekydes, who was dying. He remained there for a few months until the death of his friend and teacher, and then returned to Crotona which, in 510 BCE, attacked and defeated its neighbor, the elegant and sophisticated Sybaris—and there are suggestions that the Pythagoreans became involved in the dispute.

Then around 508 BCE the Pythagorean community at Crotona was attacked by Kylon, a noble from Crotona itself, who seems to have been the Crotoniate governor of Sybaris and who had applied to join the Pythagoreans, but had been refused admittance because of his character defects. He gathered around himself some disaffected democrats and others who resented the power and influence of the Pythagorean community.



Pythagoras: A Journey into Light. From the Rosicrucian Archives

The members of the Pythagorean community were temporarily expelled and Pythagoras, along with his wife and children, escaped to the city of Metapontum, where most authors say he died, some claiming that, in sorrow, he committed suicide by starvation because of the attack on his community. Some years after his death the Pythagoreans were allowed to return to Crotona and rebuild their school.¹

*Amongst these was one in things
sublimest skilled,
His mind with all the wealth of
learning filled.
Whatever sages did invent, he sought;
And whilst his thoughts were on this
work intent,
All things existent, easily he viewed,
Through ten or twenty ages
making search.
—Empedocles*

ENDNOTE

¹Original article published in *Rosa+Croce* No. 30 (Winter 2007), 2-6; First English edition *Rosicrucian Beacon* Vol. 17 No. 3 (June 2008), 36-40.

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