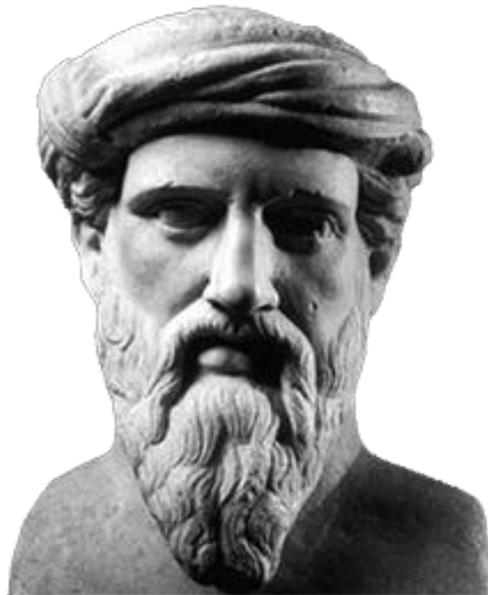




## 12. Pythagoras

Pythagoras was born in 570 a. C. in Samo, the easternmost among the Greek Islands, important site of commercial and cultural exchanges. His works have been lost. The information about his life and his teachings comes from later authors who handed down what they knew about him mostly by oral traditions and by some written texts lost over the time.



### Pythagoras

Pythagoras traveled for a long time and contacted several initiatic environments, in Egypt, where he stayed for twenty-two years and in Babylon of Chaldea<sup>1</sup>. He was also initiated to the Eleusinian and the Orphic Mysteries.

From his earliest youth he was so much celebrated for his extraordinary beauty and wisdom that he was called son of the God Apollo Hyperborean or Apollo himself, who came among men to teach Knowledge.

At the age of forty he moved to Magna Greece<sup>2</sup>, in Crotone<sup>3</sup>, where he became famous and admired, surrounded by many disciples<sup>4</sup>, even women, to whom he imposed silence and

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<sup>1</sup> Southern Region of ancient Mesopotamia.

<sup>2</sup> The Greeks called Southern Italy "Magna (i.e. Great) Greece".

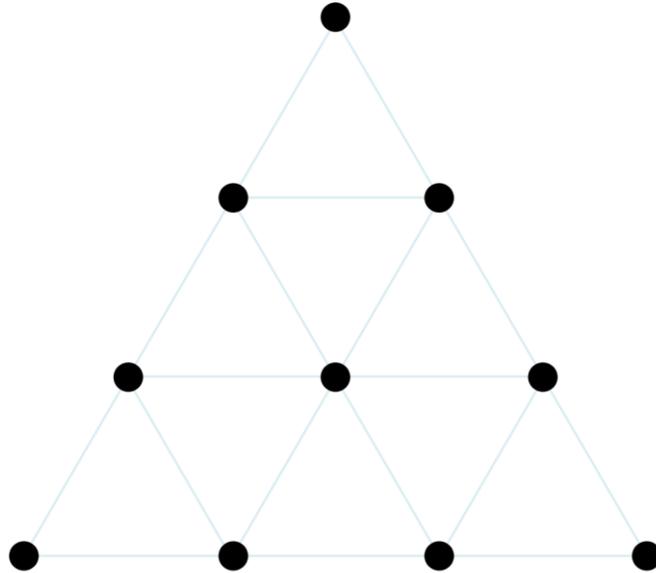
<sup>3</sup> City of Calabria in southern Italy

<sup>4</sup> It is said that they were six hundred.



secrecy on the received teachings. He was an Apollo worshiper and the worship of this Deity in Magna Greece coincided with the settle of such a wise man in that land, where numerous temples had been dedicated to that God. There he founded his initiatic school (*sampradāya*).

We know that his method (*sādhana*) was based on arithmetic and geometry: the number is the beginning and the basis of Reality. One is the Whole. Apollo, in fact, means "the only one" without anything else, without multiplicity<sup>5</sup>. Important for Pythagoras was the *tetraktys* (τετρακτύς, read *tetraktús*), the numerical series composed by  $1 + 2 + 3 + 4 = 10$ , which could be graphically symbolized as an equilateral triangle. The number 1 corresponds to the point, beyond the space. The 2 is the causal duality (*kāraṇa śarīra*) that produces all multiplicity, remaining without extension, as the geometric line. Three is the subtle (*sūkṣma śarīra*), the two-dimensional geometric surface. Four is the gross manifestation (*sthūla śarīra*), represented by the three-dimensional solid. The whole Reality is represented by the number 10<sup>6</sup>.



## The Pythagorean Tetraktys

*Tetraktys* was the name of the school (*sampradāya*) and the disciples swore on this symbol. The numbers 7 and 10 were hold in high regard. But every number, in reality, had a symbolic

<sup>5</sup> The Pythagoreans prayed facing East, from where the sun, aster identified with Apollo, rises.

<sup>6</sup> This perfectly coincides with the numbers characterizing a complete cycle in the *hindū* Tradition. In fact, *kṛta yuga* is equivalent to 4, the *treta* to 3, the *dvāpara* to 2, the *kali* to 1, and the whole cycle applies 10.



meaning and was a support to meditation because all things exist in analogy to it. In particular, the 7 was the number of Apollo<sup>7</sup> and Pythagoras was born on the seventh day of the seventh month, emphasizing in this way his close bond with the God. The wording of the famous theorem concerning the rectangle triangle bears his name. It is important to point out that in his doctrine the geometric figures and numbers never had only a quantitative value, but always a qualitative and symbolic meaning.

The main quality of these principles of Reality represented by the numbers is the harmony as the balance of opposites and reflection of divine intelligence. The geometric relationships are harmonic as well as the musical proportions. All the cosmos is governed by numerical relationships: music, which springs from the rotation of planets and Earth, unifies the macrocosm and microcosm in an orderly and harmonious whole.

As Orpheus enchanted animals, so the music of Pythagoras, imitating the harmony of the universe, was able to cure and appease souls. The use of the seven-string lyre was attributed to Pythagoras. Nicomachus<sup>8</sup> claimed that the musical scale, used by Pythagoras, included seven notes whose names were associated with the planets based on their distance from Earth<sup>9</sup>. The teachings were given in riddles because they had not to be spread among the uninitiated.

Iamblichus<sup>10</sup> reports a distinction between those who were simple followers of Pythagoras, called philosophers or “acusmatics” (ἀκουσματικοὶ, read *akusmatikòì*), i.e. the listeners, and those who were fully engaged in the Pythagorean community and obeyed to the strict rules of conduct, these were called contemplatives or “esoterics”, (ἐσωτερικοὶ, read *esoterikòì*), the true initiates. Those who aspired to the secret teachings had to wait three years for admission; after that they had to maintain full silence for five years, to experience self-control. Only at the end of those eight years they received the initiation. Their lifestyle had to be simple, frugal; food was strictly vegetarian. They wore white clothes as symbol of purity as synthesis of all colors. Everyone renounced to the possession of personal belongings (*mamakāra*). They were not allowed to kill any living being because they supported the doctrine of the soul transmigration.

Iamblichus relates that the *dīkṣita* proceeded step by step on the spiritual path: this means that the Pythagorean Mysteries belonged to the non-Supreme Brahman knowledge (*aparavidyā*).

They considered Pythagoras as Hyperborean Apollo himself<sup>11</sup>. In this regard it is said that once he showed his gold thigh to his guest, the Hyperborean Abaris. This priest had given a sacred arrow to Pythagoras by which he had flown from Hyperborea to Magna Greece. Abaris had

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<sup>7</sup> According to ancient Greek astrology, the sun, representing Apollo, is the noblest of the seven planets.

<sup>8</sup> Famous Greek mathematician of the *Tetraktys* school.

<sup>9</sup> For instance Kronos (Saturn), the most distant and slow of the planets, coincides with the lowest note of the musical scale.

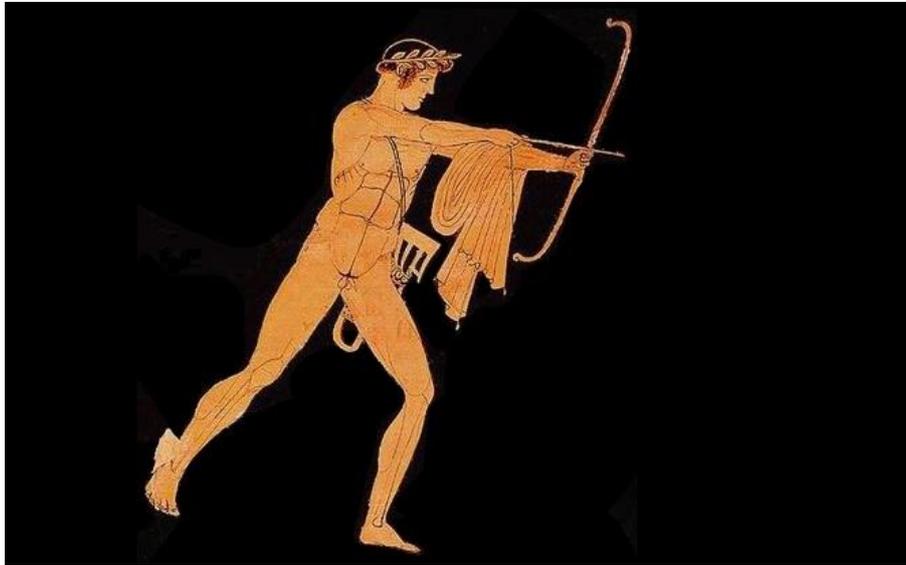
<sup>10</sup> Neoplatonic philosopher, born in Syria (~ 250-330 B.C.).

<sup>11</sup> The name of Pythagoras means "the one speaking through the Pythia", that is, Apollo himself.





given the arrow to Pythagoras because he had identified him with his Hyperborean Lord Apollo<sup>12</sup>.



### Apollo, the Divine bowman

After a period of general enthusiasm, his teachings, his incitement to a simple life style and to a behavior according to the divine laws (*dharma*), addressed towards him the antipathy and the envy of politicians. These people prompted the Crotonians to a revolt against the Pythagoreans: the crazed crowd burned the building where the Pythagoreans were gathering. Many of them died. Pythagoras managed to save himself, but, stroke by sorrow, he died in Metapontum, a city of Magna Greece, in 495 B. C.

The Pythagoreans were persecuted also later. For this reason Plato<sup>13</sup>, who admired Pythagoras and who revealed the Pythagorean wisdom in his works (especially in the *Timaeus*), conveyed many teachings of the Master without ever openly declaring to be one of his followers. In this way, all was not lost. Pythagoras, as Apollo's *avatāra*, adapted the Greek Tradition to its own time. He established an initiatic path and its *papamparā* is well known through a long series of *guru*'s names<sup>14</sup>.

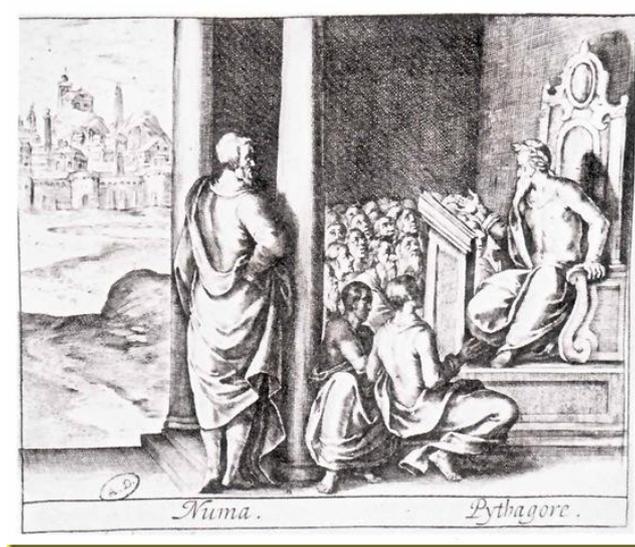
<sup>12</sup> Apollo was represented with the quiver with the arrows and the bow symbolizing the the striking rays of the sun.

<sup>13</sup> Photius of Costantinople informs us that Plato was the ninth master of *papamparā* after Pythagoras.

<sup>14</sup> Among them we mention Empedocles, who has been considered as a God, Heraclitos and Parmenides. In a fragment the Pythagorean Parmenides states that the Goddess had revealed to him that he had to make the intuitive experience of the Being, (τό Ἔόν, read τὸ Ἐόν) who does not know either the time or the becoming: "Unborn and indestructible [...], whole and perfect, never was or will be because He is now, all together, one and continuous [...], indivisible [...], all equal to himself [...], full of being [...] without beginning or end." The resemblance with *Vedānta* is really amazing!



The diffusion of his thoughts and teachings has been incredibly wide: Diodorus Siculus, speaking of the Druids<sup>15</sup>, states that all they followed the Pythagorean doctrines.



### **Numa, King of Rome, disciple of Pythagoras**

The extraordinary reputation of Pythagoras has crossed the centuries and his doctrine, which remained alive in ancient Greece, and even more in Rome throughout its twelve centuries of monarchic<sup>16</sup>, republican and imperial history<sup>17</sup>; in a Christianized form it continued alive until the Middle Ages. Dante (1265-1321 A.D.), the greatest Italian poet, has been the last important master of this *paramparā*.

*Durgādevī*

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<sup>15</sup> Members of the priestly caste of the Celts, a population who settled in Western and Northern Europe, and in the British Isles.

<sup>16</sup> Numa Pompilius, the second king of Rome, was immediate disciple of Pythagoras; he reorganized the ancient Latin religion according to the Pythagoreanism. Hence, the Pythagorean Mysteries were the original form of Roman initiation.

<sup>17</sup> Here we have to mention the most important Latin Pythagorean master, the great poet Virgil (70-19 B.C.) who lived at the beginning of the Roman imperial period.