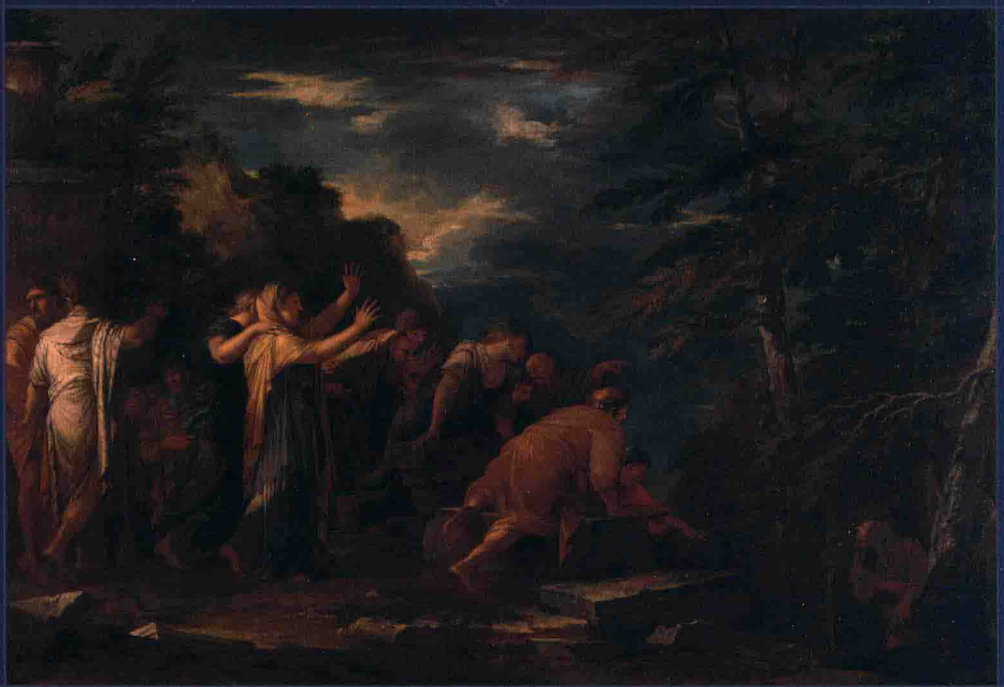
Pythagorean Women

THEIR HISTORY AND WRITINGS



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Pythagorean Women

To Jørgen Mejer
and
To Nathaniel Isaac Pomeroy

Pythagorean Women covers a wide range of subjects, including literature, archaeology, and political, social, and intellectual history. I am pleased to acknowledge the assistance of those who helped me in various ways to piece together this vast mosaic. First, I wish to thank my husband, Lee Harris Pomeroy, for photographing the landscape and artifacts in Magna Graecia. I am grateful to Joseph Coleman Carter for arranging my visit to Metaponto and for commenting on the Introduction and first two chapters. Warm thanks to Francesca Silvestri for organizing my tour of the site and museum at Metaponto and for supplying the *dépliant* of the exhibit *Ornamenti Femminili in Basilicata dall'eta del ferro al tardo antico: La documentazione archeologica*, Museo Archeologico Nazionale di Metaponto, Jan. 14–June 30, 1991. Thanks are also due to the American Academy in Rome for awarding me a Residency in the spring of 2010 and to Marilyn Skinner for advice offered in our long conversations at the Academy. I also wish to thank the Center for Hellenic Studies for hospitality in the winter and spring of 2011, and Marcia Mitrowski, of the Hampton Library, for obtaining interlibrary loans.

Once again I am grateful to my family history reading group for their insightful comments on two drafts of my manuscript and to Maggie Scarf for her professional insights into adultery and etiquette. I wish to thank Barbara McManus for her keen remarks on the manuscript and for supplying the photo of the scarab of Hera Lacinia. And once again I am pleased to thank Laurie Schneider Adams and John Adams, who commented on the proofs of the text and the photos. Thanks to Emily Fairey for research assistance, to Bernard Kho and Philosophy Walker for help with computer-related challenges, and to my son, Jeremy Pomeroy, for legal counsel concerning intellectual property.

I also owe a special debt of gratitude to my friend, the late and much lamented Jørgen Mejer, for supplying the idea for this book (as he also did for my previous

book, *The Murder of Regilla: A Case of Domestic Violence in Antiquity*). Professor Mejer was to have written a chapter on the philosophical and historical development of Pythagoreanism. I am therefore particularly grateful to Professor Vicki Harper, who generously agreed to contribute a chapter written from a philosopher's perspective after Professor Mejer's death.

With a few obvious exceptions, journal titles are abbreviated according to the forms in *L'année philologique* and the list published online by the *American Journal of Archaeology.* Accepted abbreviations are used for standard works. Lists of standard abbreviations may be found in reference books such as the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* and in the major Greek and Latin dictionaries. The following short titles have been used throughout the book.

Burkert, *Lore and Science*: W. Burkert, *Lore and Science in Ancient Pythagoreanism*, trans., with revisions, E. Minar Jr. (Cambridge, MA, 1972). Originally published as *Weisheit und Wissenschaft: Studien zu Pythagoras, Philolaos und Platon* (Nürnberg, 1962).

LGPN IIIA: Peter M. Fraser and Elaine Matthews, eds., *A Lexicon of Greek Personal Names,* vol. 3A, *The Peloponnese, Western Greece, and Magna Graecia* (Oxford, 1997).

P. Haun.: *Papyri Graecae Haunienses*, II, 13 (3 c. AD), ed. and trans. Adam Bülow-Jacobsen (Bonn, 1981).

Riedweg, *Pythagoras*: Christoph Riedweg, *Pythagoras: His Life, Teaching, and Influence*, trans. Steven Rendall, in collaboration with Christoph Riedweg and Andreas Schatzmann (Ithaca, 2005). Originally published as *Pythagoras: Leben, Lehre, Nachwirkung eine Einführung* (Munich, 2002).

Thesleff, *Intro.*: *An Introduction to the Pythagorean Writings of the Hellenistic Period, Acta Academiae Aboensis. Humaniora* 24.3 (Åbo, 1961).

Thesleff, *Texts*: Holger Thesleff, *The Pythagorean Texts of the Hellenistic Period, Acta Academiae Aboensis. Humaniora,* 30.1 (Åbo, 1965).

Waithe, *Women Philosophers*: Mary Ellen Waithe, ed., *A History of Women Philosophers*, vol. 1, *600 BC–500 AD* (Dordrecht, 1987).

Most of the dates are approximate.

ARCHAIC

Pythaïs (mother of Pythagoras)
570–490 BC. Pythagoras*
530 BC. Pythagoras emigrated to Croton
Theano (wife of Pythagoras)
Cheilonis
Tyrsenis

CLASSICAL

Myia (daughter of Theano and Pythagoras)
Damo
450 BC. Pythagoras dead
440–400 BC. Pythagoreans dispersed
Timycha
Bitale
Aspasia
345–320 BC. Alexis, *Pythagorean Woman, The Tarentines*
Perictione I

HELLENISTIC

Fourth to third century BC
Theano II
Bilistiche

*Riedweg, *Pythagoras*, 43.

Third century BC
- Aesara
- Melissa
- Phintys
- Ptolemäis

Third to second century BC
- Perictione II
- Myia

INDETERMINABLE
Arignote
Theano I (author)

ROMAN EMPIRE
AD 40 to 45–117. Plutarch
AD 245–325. Iamblichus

> They looked upon Pythagoras as divine, with the result that they turned over their wives to him in order that they would learn some of his doctrines. And so they were called "Pythagorean Women."
>
> —DIOGENES LAERTIUS, *Life of Pythagoras*, 41

Pythagoras was the first Greek philosopher to include women among his disciples. He was also the earliest to listen sympathetically to the pleas of married women and to impose sexual monogyny on their husbands. Some two hundred years after the death of Pythagoras, Neopythagorean women became the first women in the Greek world to write prose texts that are extant. Like Pythagoras himself, these later authors were sympathetic to the women's point of view.

Who were the Pythagorean women? Though these issues will be discussed in detail in the book (see chaps. 1 and 3), it is important to understand at the start that the Pythagorean women must be considered as two groups. First are the women who were contemporaries of Pythagoras, some of whom are named in various accounts of the life of Pythagoras by Iamblichus (ca. 245–325 AD) and by others. In the second large group are the intellectual descendants of the first: Neopythagorean women, including the authors of letters and other prose texts, some complete, some now fragmentary. The first group lived in the late Archaic and Classical periods; the second group (with one exception) is Hellenistic. The first group was composed of Dorian Greeks and at least two indigenous women.[1] The identity of the later women is less certain, but they did write in both the Doric and Ionic dialects; some are thought to have lived in Rome and Southern Italy, others in Athens and Alexandria. Literature circulated between the settlements in the east and west, for letters of Melissa and Theano were found in Egypt paraphrased in the Attic *koine* (the common language) from the Doric version in a third-century AD papyrus.[2]

The subject of this book is the social history of women who were Pythagoreans; there are, however, no previous publications on women in general in the western Greek colonies of Southern Italy.[3] Therefore, in the first two chapters I have had to paint a background picture to describe the social, cultural, and ecological context in which the Pythagoreans lived.

Chapters 3–7 treat the Neopythagoreans, some of whom wrote letters and other prose works. These texts have been edited by Holger Thesleff and published in *The Pythagorean Texts of the Hellenistic Period*.[4] The time period covered in that book is long: from the sixth century BC to at least the first century BC and possibly longer (depending on the controversial dating of Neopythagorean documents). Chapter 4 includes general observations on Neopythagorean texts by women and explores issues that arise often or are discussed at length. In the next two chapters all the writings of the Neopythagorean women appear in translation, with an introduction preceding each text and a commentary following, explaining some features specific to that document. My commentary emphasizes women's issues and social history. In chapter 7, Professor Vicki Lynn Harper discusses philosophical aspects of Pythagoreanism, especially as it pertains to women and as it appears in the Neopythagorean texts.

When I thought about writing this book, I was amazed to discover that no one had preceded me in writing a comprehensive study, even though more Pythagorean women are known by name than are women in any other Greek philosophical school. They were not "muted" like their respectable Athenian contemporaries in old Greece. These women made an impression; some of their witty and prudent remarks were quoted by later authors. Thus this book is a contribution to the historical literature concerning the Greek world beyond Athens.

Athenocentricity has warped our view of women's history, obscuring, for example, the literate women who are to be found in all periods of Greek history and at various places in the Greek world—though not often in Athens.[5] Spartan women, unlike Athenians, were neither silenced nor secluded; instead they exercised out of doors, were well nourished, were educated by the state, and exerted influence in the public sphere.[6] The connection between the women of Sparta and the women of the Spartan colony of Taranto (the home of many Pythagoreans and Neopythagoreans) is readily apparent, and cultural influences may be detected. Pythagoreans also lived in Croton and Metaponto. These cities, however, were Achaean colonies, and the women of their mother cities in old Greece have not been studied, though links between old cults of Hera and those in Magna Graecia have been traced (see chap. 2).

Although Dorian women played a larger role in public than did Athenian

women, it is still true that women's history in general is more obscure than men's. For example, Theano I was the most celebrated of Pythagorean women, much quoted, influential, and adopted as a model by Neopythagoreans. Nevertheless, ancient sources differ about whether she was the wife or disciple of Pythagoras, or the daughter or wife of Brontinus. No wife other than Theano is recorded for Pythagoras, and it was generally agreed that he had children. Therefore, I will refer to Theano in this book as Pythagoras's wife (see chap. 1).

Material evidence has contributed significantly to constructing the history of Pythagorean women in Magna Graecia. The modern city of Crotone stands in the way of any extensive exploration of Pythagoras's Croton. Therefore particularly valuable are Joseph Coleman Carter's publications of the ongoing excavation he has been directing at Metaponto. *The Chora of Metaponto: The Necropoleis* is a diachronic study of the archaeology, history, and ecology of Metaponto, with particular attention to burials and grave goods.[7] His *Discovering the Greek Countryside at Metaponto* is both a detailed scholarly work and a synthesis offering one of the most complete pictures of life in a small ancient city to have been published.[8] There is no comparable study of the ecological context of the places where the Neopythagoreans lived.

Metaponto was an Achaean colony on the gulf of Taranto founded around 600 BC, just before the time of Pythagoras. Coming rather late in the history of Greek colonization, the settlers laid claim to an area with a good location on the water but already under cultivation by indigenous people. In the river valleys they found a marshy, malaria-infested site, which they proceeded to drain and convert to farmland.[9] Many Metapontines chose to live on high ground. The major drainage project took place around 500 BC, after the colonists had lived there for about one hundred years. It was no coincidence that this enormous engineering project was undertaken when Pythagoras and his disciples were politically influential. Excavations have revealed a port and a well-planned city laid out on a grid pattern.[10] Drainage ditches and sewers suggest strong, orderly government and testify to the prosperity of the city. The museum at Metaponto not only displays the findings from the site and the tombs but also reflects the breadth of Carter's vision; it contains cases devoted to artistic images of women on vases and to artifacts and utensils used by them, especially those in durable materials, including jewelry, fibulas, mirrors, ceramics, spools, loom weights, and spindle whorls. A chart of their many coiffures is displayed.[11]

Without detailed extant descriptions by a Herodotus or a Thucydides or an Aristophanes, the archaeological evidence plays an even more significant role in reconstructing the societies in which the Pythagoreans lived—though, to be

sure, authors who lived much later than Pythagoras, including Livy and Strabo, conjure up the past. Grave goods supply information about the dead person and the surviving donor. For example, since Pythagoras had forbidden respectable women to wear gold, we may assume that any woman buried with gold jewelry was not a Pythagorean (or at least her survivors who buried her were not).[12] Bones have been analyzed to yield information about the gender of the corpses, their state of health, blood group, and age at death. Pollen analyses give clues to women's diet. Child burials yield dolls and miniature objects such as carts and small vases. Depictions of women in the visual arts provide information about their appearance, clothing, and habitat. Furthermore, the archaeological record at a well-excavated site like Metaponto reveals both Greek and native Italic customs and artifacts. (In contrast, the written record describing Pythagoras's interactions with women and his views about them is in Greek and limited largely, although not exclusively, to Greek women.) Architectural and engineering artifacts, including temples and canals for drainage and irrigation, suggest the material context in which these women lived, and inscriptions record contemporary public information.

The usual paraphernalia of daily and civic life in a small Greek city is important in reconstructing women's lives. We assume that women who had time to listen to Pythagoras, who owned luxurious clothing and jewelry and could make costly dedications, and who had the leisure and education to write prose that could be circulated did not personally use the pots and pans and other cooking equipment that have been excavated.[13] At most they supervised while their slaves cooked the food, though they occasionally prepared sacrificial offerings with their own hands. Since most domestic slaves were female, however, the pottery broadens the range of social classes available for our general study of women.[14] Though we cannot assume that the women buried in the graves that have been studied were Pythagoreans, some may have been. In any case, the Pythagoreans lived among or near them, subject to the same illnesses and weather, and choosing from the same food supply. At least we can be certain that Pythagoreans were members of the elite, and it is generally the graves of the prosperous that have survived to be excavated and to yield an array of grave goods.

It has been less daunting to write about the Neopythagoreans than about the Pythagoreans inasmuch as scholars, including myself, have discussed the writings of the former group. Furthermore, the Neopythagoreans lived in cosmopolitan Hellenistic cities and in Southern Italy along with other women whose lives have been studied.[15] As I mentioned, Pythagoras was the first philosopher to include women in his community. By the fourth century BC and the Hellenistic

period a few women were active at Plato's Academy, as well as among the Cynics and the Epicureans. The Neopythagorean women, however, were more numerous than those associated with any other philosophical school.

Though the two groups are distinct chronologically, the Neopythagoreans preserved the traditions of the original Pythagoreans and shared the same philosophical and ethical views, and sometimes the same names. In addition, some of their writings show the influence of other philosophers, especially Plato. In this book, the two groups of women will occasionally be treated as a unified whole, but more often as distinct.

Much of the biography of Pythagoras and the history of early Pythagoreanism is unclear and controversial. Some classical scholars and social historians of antiquity tend to accept many of the early traditions, but others argue that certain evidence pertaining to the history of Pythagoras and of female Pythagoreans and Neopythagoreans was pseudonymous or untrustworthy. My intention here is not to join in the scholarly debate about these issues per se—except when they directly affect my narrative about women—but instead to use the evidence judiciously in reconstructing women's lives. In any case, considering that much of the scholarship concerning the history of Pythagoreanism has simply ignored the women who were Pythagoreans, by contributing a missing piece to the puzzle of Pythagoreanism this book may not merely expand the current picture of Pythagoras and other male Pythagoreans but alter it (see chap. 3). Meanwhile, I offer here a brief sketch that will provide guidance to the reader who is not a specialist in ancient history. This sketch will serve as a simple framework for the subject of this book: Pythagorean and Neopythagorean women. Although the intellectual experiences of these women were unique because they were Pythagoreans, what we can glean about their daily lives enhances our general knowledge of the history of Greek women.

Pythagoras was born in the middle of the sixth century BC on Samos, in the eastern Mediterranean. Like most of his disciples he traveled from the world of old Greece to settle in Magna Graecia in Southern Italy. Around 530 BC he began lecturing to the citizens of the Achaean colony of Croton and later moved to Metaponto. In addition to the contemplation of the cosmos, the nature of the soul, and subjects that were also discussed by other pre-Socratic philosophers, Pythagorean philosophy included a very elaborate ethical program, with advice to both women and men for personal conduct in everyday life.[16]

Later biographers (using the works of earlier authors) wrote about the women who actually knew Pythagoras. For example, Philochorus, who died in the 260s BC and may have known some Neopythagorean women, wrote a volume on Py-

thagorean women that he titled *The Collection of Pythagorean Women Heroines* (or "Founders": *Sunagoge heroidon hetoi Pythagoreion gunaikon*).[17] Philochorus may have produced his book because he noted that previous works ignored women.[18] Iamblichus named 17 women among the 235 disciples of Pythagoras whom he lists.[19] Since this catalog probably originated with Aristoxenus in the fourth century BC, when several treatises on the Pythagoreans had been written, it is likely to be accurate, but since some of the Pythagoreans named postdate Aristoxenus, Iamblichus or other biographers must have added to it.[20]

Works about the life of Pythagoras are the principal written sources for information about Pythagorean women. The most important authors are Diogenes Laertius of Cilicia (3rd c. AD), Porphyry of Tyre (232/233–ca. 305 AD), and Iamblichus of Chalcis (ca. 245–325 AD), a Neoplatonist who studied under Porphyry. Though they differ in details, there is considerable overlap among the biographies. For example, Iamblichus identifies Theano as the wife of Brontinus, while, as we have mentioned, other sources vary as to whether she was Pythagoras's wife, daughter, or disciple. Brontinus of Metaponto or Croton is sometimes identified as Theano's husband, sometimes as Deino's, and sometimes as Theano's father. There is a similar confusion about the names of Pythagoras's children. Furthermore, some sources ascribe particular quotations to Deino, others to Theano. Some of the biographers were apparently inspired by women philosophers who were their contemporaries or patrons. Thus Diogenes Laertius dedicated his work to a female Platonist.[21] In his *Life of Plotinus* (9), Porphyry mentions female students of Plotinus who were seriously committed to philosophy. Though the authors of the extant biographies wrote centuries after the original Pythagoreans lived, the biographical tradition was under way in the generation after Pythagoras's death. Pythagoras is mentioned as early as Herodotus (4.95). This early testimony thus was not totally contaminated by later influences like Platonism but rather offers some reflection of original Pythagoreanism.[22] The authors of the works that are now extant consulted these earlier biographies and incorporated them, sometimes verbatim, and often without attribution. Modern scholarship has managed to sift through much of the writing about the Pythagoreans in general and to assign authorship and dates to various traditions; these will be discussed in this book where relevant. One of the specific problems, however, encountered in studying Pythagorean and Neopythagorean women is that our ancient sources do not distinguish clearly between them, for example, conflating the Theano who was the wife and disciple of Pythagoras with the woman, or women, of the same name who wrote letters and treatises in the Hellenistic period.

In the many traditions concerning the life and doctrines of Pythagoras there is little of the misogyny that mars the teaching of other Greek philosophers and thinkers. Women do not appear as alien and inferior to men. Rather, they are the same as or equal to men, to be given the same education, to follow the same rules of conduct, and deserving of the same respect (see chap. 2). Pythagoras devoted some thought to women's habits. For example, he observed that bonds between women were strong. They would make loans of clothing and ornaments to other women who needed certain things, and they would do so without the surety of witnesses. It would not be natural for men to be so trusting. He illustrates his point with the example of the mythical Three Graiae, aged sisters who trusted one another so completely that they shared one eye among them (Iambl. *VP* 55).

The biographers agree that among the original Pythagoreans, women played an important role and participated actively in the philosophical life.[23] This phenomenon was unique in the Greek world of the sixth and fifth centuries BC. That the philosopher himself was responsible for this innovation or at least thoroughly approved it is indicated by the inclusion of his wife and daughters among the exemplary women mentioned by name.[24] According to Diogenes Laertius, Theano wrote a few things (8.43: *suggramma . . . tina*). Because he also reports that Philolaus (ca. 470 BC) was the first to publish (*ekdounai*) Pythagorean treatises, we deduce that Theano's texts were not published.[25] This deduction is consistent with an axiom of women's history: women, in general, wrote shorter and fewer works and often kept them in private or published them only under a pseudonym. Thus the tradition about Theano need not be rejected, though some influential scholars have argued that neither Pythagorean women nor Neopythagoreans could have participated in the philosophical school, nor could they have written some Pythagorean texts. For example, Richard Bentley did not believe this report about women's participation. In a discussion of the authenticity of a Neopythagorean treatise ascribed to Perictione, he wrote that the forgers of treatises simply "thought it a point of decorum to make even the female kindred of philosophers copy after the men."[26] B. L. van der Waerden continued the tradition of studying only male Pythagoreans in his *Die Pythagoreer: Religiöse Bruderschaft und Schule der Wissenschaft*.[27] In contrast, W. Burkert,[28] C. J. de Vogel,[29] and Peter Kingsley[30] remarked on the equality of women and men in Pythagoreanism.

The *Speeches of Pythagoras*, which have been dated to the late fifth or early fourth century, are an early source for the tradition about women's participation in Pythagorean society.[31] The speeches are addressed to both women and men and include discussion of appropriate behavior for women. Dicaearchus (*ap.* Porph. *Plot.* 18–19) reports that Pythagoras addressed a gathering of women and