Pythagorean Women (6th-4th c. BCE)

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ABSTRACT

By "Pythagorean women" is meant a group of women who were representatives of ancient Pythagoreanism. Pythagorean women may be divided into two groups: the Pythagorean women of the 6th-4th century BCE, who belonged to the first Pythagorean communities, mainly in Magna Graecia, and some of whom were members of Pythagoras' own family; and the Pythagorean women of the Hellenistic and Imperial Age, between the 2nd century BCE and the 2nd century CE, to whom a series of letters and treatises with philosophical content is attributed. This entry deals with the Pythagorean women of the 6th-4th century, with the aim of examining the sources that report information about them and establishing the forms of female participation in Pythagorean philosophy and way of life.

The sources on Pythagorean women of the 6th-4th century may be divided into two groups: the references to female disciples of Pythagoras in the biographies by Dicaearchus and Aristoxenus, and the testimonies on the women of Pythagoras' family. Dicaearchus and Aristoxenus write that Pythagoras was known for including women in his intellectual circles. The female disciples are mentioned only briefly and with reference to Pythagoras himself, who, as an excellent orator, was able to educate both women and men. Moreover, the fragments of Antisthenes and Dicaearchus imply that, despite being admitted to Pythagoras' lessons, female disciples were educated separately from men and on subjects considered suitable to the female gender. By contrast, more information has come down to us about the women of Pythagoras' own family, such as his wife Theano and his daughter Myia, who seem to have distinguished themselves as intellectual authorities.

The conclusion is that the Pythagoreans were the first philosophical community in Greece to admit and educate women. Admission into the community, in turn, opened the way to the possibility of interacting further with Pythagorean thought. The sources suggest that women were included in Pythagorean societies not only as mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters, but also as disciples and as practitioners of a way of life conforming to the teachings of Pythagoras.

KEYWORDS: Pythagoras, Pythagoreans, ancient Pythagoreanism, Theano, Myia, Timycha.

INTRODUCTION

By "Pythagorean women" is meant a group of women who were representatives of ancient Pythagoreanism. Pythagorean women may be divided into two groups: the Pythagorean women of the 6th-4th century BCE, who belonged to the first Pythagorean communities, mainly in Magna Graecia, and some of whom were members of Pythagoras' own family; and the Pythagorean women of the Hellenistic and Imperial age, between the 2nd century BCE and the 2nd century CE, to whom a series of letters and treatises with philosophical content is attributed. The following entry deals with the Pythagorean women of the 6th-4th century, with the aim of examining the sources in which they are named and establishing the forms of female participation

in Pythagorean philosophy and way of life. In particular, the figures of Theano, Myia, and Timycha will be discussed.

The sources on Pythagorean women of the 6th-4th century may be divided into two groups: the fragmentary references to female disciples of Pythagoras in the biographies by Dicaearchus and Aristoxenus, and the testimonies on the women of Pythagoras' family. The sources suggest that women were included in Pythagorean communities not only as mothers, wives, sisters, and daughters, but also as disciples and as practitioners of a way of life akin to the teachings of Pythagoras. For a detailed study of Pythagorean women, Demand (1982), Montepaone (2011), and Dutsch (2020) are recommended.

THE FEMALE DISCIPLES OF PYTHAGORAS

The first mention of the female disciples of Pythagoras comes from the philosopher and orator Antisthenes in the 5th century BCE (Fr. 51, *Scholia on the Odyssey*, 1.1). In the attempt to illustrate the meaning of the Greek adjective *polytropos* ('versatile'), Antisthenes compares Odysseus to Pythagoras by virtue of his capacity to interact with different interlocutors in different ways and, each time, appropriately. For example, Antisthenes writes, Pythagoras educates women in a "feminine" way, or in a way suitable to the female gender. The same ability is highlighted by Dicaearchus, the 4th-century biographer and pupil of Aristotle, when he describes the beginning of Pythagoras' philosophical career at Croton (Fr. 33/40, in Porphyry, *Life of Pythagoras*, 18-19). Dicaearchus writes that Pythagoras teaches "not only men, but also women", and that by virtue of his exceptional educational abilities "even a group of female pupils is established in his honour". One woman in particular, Theano, is identified by name. From these sources, we may draw two conclusions: first, Pythagoras was known for including women in his intellectual circles. However, the female disciples are mentioned only briefly and with reference to Pythagoras himself, as proof of his rhetorical ability. Moreover, the fragments of Antisthenes and Dicaearchus imply that, despite being admitted to Pythagoras' lessons, female disciples were educated separately from men and on subjects considered suitable to the female gender.

A further and important source for information relating to Pythagorean women is the *Catalogue of the Pythagoreans*, cited at the end of Iamblichus' *Vita Pythagorica* (267), and probably compiled by Aristoxenus in the 4th century BCE (Zhmud 2012, pp. 109-134). Iamblichus reports the names of the 235 followers of Pythagoras whose names are known and includes a list of 17 Pythagorean women: Timycha, wife of Myllias; Philtis; Occelo and Eccelo; Chilonis; Cratesicleia; Theano, wife of Brontinus; Myia, wife of Milo; Lastheneia; Abroteleia; Echecrateia; Tyrsenis; Peisirrode; Theadusa; Boeo; Babalica; and Cleaechma. The women are

introduced as the "most famous Pythagorean women" – a clarification that implies that there were others. The *Catalogue* confirms that the Pythagorean communities included women and men. Two problems remain open: no further testimonies and information have reached us regarding most of the names in the list, and it is not possible to establish what Pythagoras taught his female disciples. Iamblichus reports a version of the speech to the women of Croton, whose reliability and accuracy are doubtful (*Vita* 50-54). On the one hand, this supports the hypothesis that already in Iamblichus' time it was believed that Pythagoras had educated his female disciples apart and on specific subjects, mainly connected to family and domestic life. On the other hand, it is not possible to know whether these teachings included further philosophical doctrines.

The Family Of Pythagoras

Among the few Pythagorean women discussed in detail by the ancient sources are the women of Pythagoras' family. The most celebrated is Theano. Dicaearchus introduces Theano as a noted disciple of Pythagoras. In the *Catalogue*, however, Theano is recorded as the wife of Brontinus. In the 2nd-3rd century CE, the biographer Diogenes Laertius distinguishes two traditions (*Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, 8.42): according to some sources, Theano was the wife of Brontinus and a disciple of Pythagoras; according to others, Theano was the daughter of Brontinus and the wife of Pythagoras. Porphyry writes that Theano and Pythagoras had a son, Telauges, and at least two daughters, Myia and Arignote (*Life*, 4). Diogenes adds that in the ancient world writings and moral precepts were attributed to Theano, such as the prohibition, for men and women, against committing adultery (*Lives*, 8.43). The *Suda* lexicon mentions the titles of seven writings (83-4, s.v. Theano), and the Pythagorean texts of the Hellenistic period include eight letters, the treatise *On Piety*, and numerous precepts attributed to Theano (Thesleff 1965). We have also received information about Myia, the daughter of Pythagoras and wife of the Pythagorean Milo. According to the 3rd-century BCE historian Timaeus of Tauromenium, Myia was so admired by her fellow citizens of Croton that, at her death, her house was converted into a temple dedicated to Demeter and the Muses (Fr. 131, in Porphyry, *Life*, 4). To this list may be added Theoclea, who is said to be either Pythagoras' sister (*Suda* 3124, s.v. Pythagoras) or the prophetess of Apollo at Delphi and Pythagoras' teacher (Aristoxenus Fr. 15), the mother of Pythagoras, Pythais (Diogenes, *Lives*, 8.42; Porphyry, *Life*, 2; Iamblichus, *Vita*, 2-8), the daughters Damo and Sara (Photius, *Library*, 438b), and the granddaughter Bytale, to whom Pythagoras entrusted his memoirs (Diogenes, *Lives*, 8.42; Iamblichus, *Vita*, 146). The sources, therefore, suggest that within the first Pythagorean communities some women distinguished themselves as intellectual

authorities, even if probably by virtue of their bond with and closeness to the founder of the school.

Timycha The Spartan And Conclusions

One last figure seems to constitute an exception: Timycha the Spartan. According to a fragment of the 3rd-century BCE historian Neanthes of Cyzicus (Fr. 31a-b, in Iamblichus, Life, 189-194, 214), the tyrant of Syracuse Dionysius captured and tortured Timycha together with her husband Myllias with the intention of obtaining information about the teachings of Pythagoras and, in particular, the meaning of the prohibition against eating beans. In order to keep the vow of silence and not reveal the secrets of the community, Timycha bit off her tongue and spat it at the tyrant. Although anecdotal, the story of Timycha seems to be based on the assumption that at least some women were acquainted with the doctrines of Pythagoras. In particular, Timycha followed two key rules for the Pythagoreans: the aversion to beans, which was probably connected to the doctrine of the transmigration of souls (Diogenes, *Lives*, 8.24; Porphyry, *Life*, 44; Iamblichus, *Vita*, 106) and the vow of silence (Diogenes, *Lives*, 8.15, 85; Porphyry, *Life*, 57; Iamblichus, *Vita*, 199, 226-227).

From the sources we may draw the following conclusions. The Pythagoreans seem to be the first philosophical community in Greece to admit and educate women. However, most of the testimonies suggest that the role of women in Pythagorean societies was initially traditional and relegated to the domestic sphere. In the *Republic*, Plato writes that Pythagoras was the founder of a severe way of life (600a-b). With his teachings, Pythagoras regulated various aspects of the daily life of his disciples, from political engagement to religion, and even dietary habits, including aspects traditionally associated with the female gender, such as married life and the education of children. Pythagorean life conditions and guides, for men, public life and, for women, their domestic role – as mothers, wives, and daughters of Pythagoreans. Nonetheless, admission into the community and adoption of the way of life opened the way to the possibility of interacting further with Pythagorean thought. The second aspect to highlight is that the role of some Pythagorean women seems to go beyond domestic and family life. The anecdotes about Theano engaged in educating her fellow citizens suggest that women were instructed and that some of them in turn became instructors. Finally, there is the possibility that some precepts – for example, the dietary prohibitions and the vow of silence in the anecdote about Timycha – were addressed both to male and female Pythagoreans.

Pythagoras was among the first ancient thinkers to consider both sexes worthy of philosophical treatment, and his teachings were addressed not only to men, but also to women.

This explains why the Pythagorean women of the 6th-4th century BCE were considered, by contemporaries and posterity, noted intellectual authorities. The very fact that in the Hellenistic and Imperial age treatises circulated under the name of Pythagorean women further demonstrates how female participation was considered a characteristic feature of ancient Pythagoreanism.

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