

DE GRUYTER

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ON PYTHAGOREANISM

STUDIA PRAESOCRATICA

DE
G

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When Pythagoras was still Living in Samos (Heraclitus, frg. 129)

1 Not necessarily in the light of Croton

Can we come to form an idea of what sort of person Pythagoras was when he was still living in Samos, i.e. before installing himself in Croton? And what precisely does Heraclitus fragment 129 tell us about the sort of person he was in the Samian period of his life? Many scholars from Burkert to Huffman (see esp. Huffman 2008) incline to deny that, when in Samos, Pythagoras may have been a remarkably different person from what he was (or became, and in any case was known to be) once installed in Croton. According to this line of thought, during the Samian period of his life, Pythagoras must have cultivated, basically, the same interests – in religion, rituals, and perhaps cosmogonies – that marked his circle in Croton, and “it is possible that ... a collection of brief maxims of Pythagoras promulgating ritual taboos had been recorded in writing and were circulating” (Huffman 2008, 42).

To assume that they ‘were circulating’ may not be enough, especially if “the *symbola* were used as passwords intelligible only to those initiated into the Pythagorean way of life” (Huffman 2008, 41f.). First of all, their circulation cannot be identified with the circulation of any other famous book (be it a poem or another sort of writing): it could have been in circulation only if one or more devotees brought it with them with the conscious aim of ‘exporting’ Pythagoras’ verbum, engaging in proselytism, and undertaking to decode the *symbola* in order to make them intelligible to a given audience. But is there any evidence of the existence of devotees in Ephesus (or at least in Samos, or generically in Ionia) at the time of Heraclitus?

But there is more. In frg. 129 Heraclitus does not speak of a collection of “maxims promulgating ritual taboos” and other obscure teachings prepared for the benefit of a foreign community (in Southern Italy, which – we may assume – was scarcely known in Ionia) and, in any case, ostensibly different from every other text familiar to him. He treats Pythagoras as a well known person who, in the past, distinguished himself by his extensive (or deep) enquiries, and who was (still) relatively well known precisely because of them, rather than because of a different and controversial writing of his. The frame of reference is quite different.

Different to begin with is the authorship of the work or works under scrutiny. The maxims that originated in Croton were ascribed to Pythagoras, though not necessarily made public by him, and could well have been assembled in *his name* by some followers, possibly at a later time (there is no certainty that they became a book when the ‘prophet’ was still alive). On the contrary Heraclitus (a) is speaking about a text that is clearly related to other texts, all being rather easily available and comparable, (b) therefore postulates an identified community of writers,¹ and (c) deals with an intellectual who was known to have undertaken a very promising investigation and then wrote a rather disappointing ‘book’². These specifications are not compatible with what may be presumed about the Pythagorean *symbola* (or *Akousmata*). There is a sharp difference, in particular, between a person treated as a revered prophet or saint and a writer accused of being a sort of epigone (a writer whose compilation has been judged clearly inferior to that of his sources). The Pythagorean community (or *hetairia*, or sect) was notoriously an elitist community, with strong “submission to the authority of a charismatic leader” and hostile to divulgation of its doctrine.³ Moreover, for the Pythagoreans, Pythagoras was a great initiator, and they had no idea of a period of formation, education or incubation that occurred to him in Samos or elsewhere, nor could they admit any criticism of him, or identify models that were well or badly exploited by him. His authority (religious, moral, political) was not conceived as suitable to be analyzed or compared (or evaluated). Therefore, the wisdom which formed the core of his public image, once he installed himself in Croton and then elsewhere in Southern Italy, was in no way suitable to be examined or judged.

All these features have little or nothing in common with the very distinguished person, and the tireless investigator Heraclitus seems to evoke. Just consider that Heraclitus comments upon a work which was suitable to be understood, compared, and evaluated rather freely by other independent learned people, thus something foreign to secrecy. He actually speaks as one who refers to something rather well known to him (and probably to the most learned of his contemporary hearers/readers), i. e. to a typical product of a polis, while nothing suggests that he alludes to the revered man now living in Southern Italy, or to his ‘Crotonian’ teachings.

1 A caution should be entered here. As will shown below (§ 3), an alternative interpretation of Heraclitus’ remarks about who may have written all these *sungraphai* is at least conceivable.

2 I provisionally write ‘book’ because of the perplexities raised by Gemelli Marciano and Huffman (below, § 2).

3 See Cornelli 2010, *passim* (while here I quote from Cornelli 2011, 232).

A passage by Diogenes Laertius is worth mentioning at this point. In VIII 6 he writes that according to some sources, Pythagoras left no book at all, and commented: *diapaizontes*, for Heraclitus has the contrary claim. The counter-evidence adduced by Diogenes Laertius against what is repeatedly stated by our sources (that Pythagoras wrote no *sungramma*) prompts the following question: if a 'book' by Pythagoras existed and was known at least to Heraclitus, why does it seem that nobody in Croton suspected its existence? As a matter of fact, the existence of a textual unit written by Pythagoras (or compiled in his name) is coherently denied by our sources, and for a long time the Pythagoreans practiced only the initiation of individuals expected to become members of the community. Therefore, it is simply inconceivable that a text originating in the Pythagorean community of Southern Italy could have reached Ionia just few decades after its birth. One should also consider that Pythagoras' emigration from Samos to Croton was an irreversible event; he never returned to Samos (even a for short visit).

The important consequence of the previous discussion is that Pythagorean *symbola* and *Akousmata* are of no help for a correct understanding of frg. 129, even assuming that they were compiled well before Heraclitus' death. Therefore, what Heraclitus refers to must be the output of Pythagoras *the Samian*, i.e. what was currently known about a distinguished (though rather controversial) *sophos* who was no longer living in Samos, whatever his subsequent life, teachings or writings may have been: a learned person who had been active in Samos few decades earlier, and nothing else.

What I therefore propose to reconsider is a marginal, but not very marginal, chapter of Pythagoras' life and work, a chapter upon which a great silence has fallen, especially after the seminal book of Walter Burkert. As a matter of fact, what Pythagoras learned and wrote when still in Samos may well be judged of modest import for his 'second life' in Croton, but in likewise manner his 'second life' has very little to say about what occurred during his 'first life'. The scanty information that survives about the Samian period of Pythagoras' life fails to reveal the least awareness, on the part of Heraclitus, of the sort of public image which came to be established in Croton and elsewhere, once Pythagoras was surrounded by a group of devotees.

2 A number of pieces of information concentrated in frg. 129. The *sungraphai*

If so, as to the Samian Pythagoras, we're left with just one substantial piece of information (Heraclitus' frg. 129) and little more (frg. 40, the context in Diogenes Laertius' quotation, another small detail in D.L. and a 'tale' attributed to Dikaiarchos⁴). Let us read this fragment:

Πυθαγόρας Μνησάρχου ιστορίην ἤσκησεν ἀνθρώπων μάλασι πάντων καὶ ἐκλεξάμενος ταύτας τὰς συγγραφὰς ἐποίησατο ἑαυτοῦ σοφίην, πολυμαθίην, κακοτεχνίην.

This is a declarative sentence, which does not offer just a negative evaluation of a certain 'book': it evokes other 'books' which could have served as models or sources, and has something to say about Pythagoras-the-researcher. What emerges is indeed a comprehensive framework in which a definite place is assigned to a number of elements:

- (a) an investigator,
- (b) a classification of his investigation (*historiē*),
- (c) a comparison with everyone else,
- (d) a number of related *sungraphai*, i.e. the written work of a whole group of 'colleagues' of Pythagoras,
- (e) the output due to Pythagoras himself, and the sort of use he may have made of the work of his 'colleagues' (*eklexamenos*),
- (f) an idea about how one could come to be (wrongly) considered a *sophos*,
- (g) a neologism indicating – we are often told – a multifarious competence (*polumathie*),
- (h) another neologism (*kakotechnie*) worth careful investigation,
- (i) (k) a potential contradiction between true and false excellence.

All that in explicit relation to Pythagoras the son of Mnesarchus.

Clearly, we have to do with a complex, well-structured and enlightening sentence where each element has been put into a definite relation with each of the others. Here a lot is said both about persons and abilities, and about the intellectual milieu within which the whole output (investigations and 'books') occurred. That a rather coherent frame of reference does emerge – a world where var-

⁴ Diogenes Laertius I 118 states that Pherecydes was buried in Delos by Pythagoras; according to Porphyrius (*V. Pyth.* 18) Dikaiarchos has something to say about the fame that accompanied Pythagoras' arrival at Croton and the admiration with which he was immediately surrounded (14.8 and 14.8a D.-K. respectively).