
A Pythagorean Element of the Subterranean Basilica at the Porta Maggiore

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A Pythagorean Element of the Subterranean Basilica at the Porta Maggiore ⁽¹⁾

Ever since its chance discovery in 1917 the basilica at the Porta Maggiore has been a focus of attention ⁽²⁾. The excellent state of preservation of the whole basilica including its stucco reliefs has increased the rewards for those who study it.

By 1918 F. Cumont had suggested that it was the meeting place of Neo-Pythagoreans, who had built the basilica underground to imitate the famous cave in Plato's *Republic* (VII, 514a) ⁽³⁾. F. Fornari then noted that within 200 meters of the basilica had been found the cemetery of the servants and freedmen of the *gens Statilia*, one of whose members, T. Statilius Taurus, consul in A.D. 44, killed himself when charged with practising *magicæ superstitiones* (Tacitus, *Ann.*, XII, 59) ⁽⁴⁾. J. Carcopino added support to this budding theory when he pointed out that Pythagorean sects were often accused of such superstitions ⁽⁵⁾.

Many features of the basilica including the fact that it was built underground to be a secret meeting place, the remains of a sacrifice under the apse performed at the dedication ceremonies, and above all the nature of the stucco decorations on the walls and ceiling, have made it very clear that it was a sacred building of some mystic sect. The stucco reliefs show what could be parts of mystic creeds with a division for the initiated and the uninitiated ⁽⁶⁾. Life, death, and escape (*sōma sēma*) are the themes. The idea of the soul escaping from the body-tomb runs through many of the reliefs and gives a strong Pythagorean flavor: Sappho and the Leucadian leap ⁽⁷⁾, and the rape of Ganymede ⁽⁸⁾. But dancing bacchants recall the rites in

(1) I am indebted to Prof. Paul MacKendrick for the helpful advice he gave me in the preparation of this paper.

(2) E. GATTI & F. FORNARI, *Brevi notizie relative alla scoperta un monumento sotterraneo presso Porta Maggiore* in *NSc* (1918), 30 ff.

(3) F. CUMONT, *La basilique souterraine de la Porte Majeure* in *RA* (1918), 52-73.

(4) FORNARI, *op. cit.*, 51-52.

(5) J. CARCOPINO, *Encore la basilique de la Porta Maggiore* in *RA* (1923), 1-23.

(6) J. CARCOPINO, *La Basilique Pythagoricienne de la Porte Majeure* (Paris, 1926).

(7) G. BENDINELLI, *Il monumenti sotterraneo di Porta Maggiore in Roma* in *MonAnt*, 31 (1927), Pl. 11.

(8) BENDINELLI, *op. cit.*, Pl. 21.

Dionysiac worship ⁽¹⁾; a woman reads a sacred book to a young girl holding a wheat-ear, the famous symbol from the Eleusinian mysteries ⁽²⁾; and Orphic elements are present in the relief of Orpheus leading Eurydice ⁽³⁾. Leopold has shown quite conclusively that there is in fact an advanced stage of religious syncretism displayed in the relief work of the basilica ⁽⁴⁾.

That a mystic sect built the basilica is apparent enough. But which sect of the at least four which have just been discussed? Carcopino thought he had specific and definite proof that of all sects the Pythagoreans held their rites in this basilica. By misreading Pliny, *HN*, 22.20 he found a significant link between Sappho, Phaon, and the Pythagoreans ⁽⁵⁾. This reading was noted and corrected by K. Latte: «Für die Darstellung der Sappho vergleicht er irrig Plin. n.h. 22,20. Dort geht circa hoc nicht auf Sappho, sondern auf die Wirkung des Zauberkrauts Eryngie ⁽⁶⁾». The strongest proof to my mind that the Pythagoreans were the sect which had built and then frequented the basilica, had hung on the interpretation of the Pliny passage. With this reference refuted it would seem best not to name any group as dominant in the basilica.

But of all the mystic sects it was specifically the Pythagoreans who were interested in number mysticism: $3^2 + 4^2 = 5^2$, the formula of a right triangle. With these proportions in mind I measured the basilica. As is well known the walls of the basilica are not quite straight. Using the dimensions of the building as found in Bendinelli's 1927 scale drawings ⁽⁷⁾, I measured from about the middle of the walls to the opposite wall for length and width ⁽⁸⁾; for the height I used a second drawing of the central nave ⁽⁹⁾. It measures 11,75 m. long, 7,3 m. high, and 9,2 m. wide. The length squared equals the height squared plus the width squared: $11,75^2 = 7,3^2 + 9,2^2$: $138,0625 = 137,93$. The squaring of these numbers leaves a discrepancy of only .1325 m., which is minimal error ⁽¹⁰⁾. The final squared numbers, though not exact,

(1) BENDINELLI, *op. cit.*, Pl. 22.

(2) M. ROSTOVITZEFF, *Mystic Italy* (New York, 1927), Pl. 30, 1.

(3) BENDINELLI, *op. cit.*, Pl. 23.

(4) H. LEUPOLD, *La basilique souterraine de la Porta Maggiore* in *MelRome* 39 (1921), 165-192. It is interesting to note that Herodotus (II, 81) has trouble telling Orphics, Bacchants, and Pythagoreans apart.

(5) CARCOPINO, *op. cit.*, 382.

(6) K. LATTE, *Römische Religionsgeschichte* (München, 1960), 341, n. 1.

(7) I also checked the scale drawings of GATTI and FORNARI, *op. cit.* (*supra*, p. 1071, n. 2), 31, and S. AURIGEMMA, *La basilica sotterranea neopitagorica di Porta Maggiore* (Roma, 1954) 4-5.

(8) BENDINELLI, *op. cit.*, Pl. 1.

(9) BENDINELLI, *op. cit.*, Pl. 14.

(10) If I measure the building and record the longest length I can find (12 m.) and set that off against the shortest width (8,9 m.) and height (7,25 m.) the discrepancy is larger to be sure: $12^2 = 8,9^2 + 7,25^2$: $144 = 131,725$. But that is hardly the correct way to proceed when one considers that the walls are not straight.

indicate how close the dimensions are to the proportion $3^2 + 4^2 = 5^2$. It seems highly probable that these dimensions would have been put into this building only on purpose by people to whom such proportions meant something. It was the wish of the builders to make a basilica having the sacred proportions set up by their spiritual leader.

I do not in any way mean to deny the influence of the followers of Orpheus, Dionysus, or the Eleusinian mysteries on the Pythagoreans who built the basilica. This Pythagorean number symbolism could easily have been taken up by the other sects, or the Pythagoreans could have been the main sect on which were grafted elements of the others. This latter view could easily account for the Pythagorean dimensions and the stucco reliefs of the other sects.

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