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PYTHAGORAS AND THE BEAN

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PYTHAGORAS AND THE BEAN

by Kate Garnons Williams

IF you ever wondered what Pythagoras, the Greek mathematician, had to do with *Vicia Fava*, the humble broad bean, the answer is, absolutely nothing — on principle. His apparent aversion to the harmless legume was not, however, simply a matter of personal preference — for all we know he may have been quite partial to the bean; it was a question, believe it or not, of profound philosophical conviction.

Pythagoras is chiefly remembered, with varying degrees of pleasure or pain, for his theorem concerning the right-angled triangle — 'with', as W. S. Gilbert put it, 'many cheerful facts about the square on the hypotenuse'. But in the sixth century B.C. he attracted more attention as an eccentric, even cranky, philosopher. Driven as a trouble-maker from his native island of Samos, he eventually found his way to Crotona, a Greek colony in southern Italy, but not before he stopped off for a brief stay in Egypt. And it was here, almost certainly, that he picked up many of those decidedly un-Greek ideas on which he based his philosophy and lifestyle.

The Egyptians were an endless source of fascination to the Greeks who felt something of an inferiority complex towards the older and more sophisticated civilisation on the Nile. Herodotus, that much-travelled Greek historian of the fifth century B.C., further stimulated interest in the country with his traveller's tales. And concerning the broad bean, he reveals an interesting snippet of information: the Egyptian priests of his day, he tells us, could not bear even to look at the vegetable, 'because', he deduces, 'they imagined it to be unclean'. Herodotus does not elaborate on his statement; nor does he offer any explanation for the fact that traces of broad beans are to be found in a number of Egyptian tombs dating from earlier times than his own. What, we may wonder, had the porbenighted bean done, to become all of a sudden taboo?

The answer is, of course, that it had done nothing. Herodotus had simply got it all wrong. Believing as they did in the transmigration of the soul after death from one species of life to another, animal or vegetable depending on the owner's spiritual state of health, the Egyptians considered the broad bean a more than likely candidate for temporary residence. And why the broad bean? Aristotle suggests the most plausible answer, when he points out the resemblance between the shape of *Vicia Fava* and the human testicles. What better accommodation could Nature afford the soul of man-in-transition, so to speak — offering him, as it did, an remembrance of times past! The reluctance, then, of the Egyptian priests to come in contact with the broad bean, which Herodotus observed, can be understood in terms rather of excessive respect than disdain: to paraphrase Malvolio in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, they believed, 'the soul of our grandam might haply inhabit' — not a 'bird', but a bean.

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a body of curious followers, but in the course of time many of them decided to live permanently under his guidance and in accordance with his rules. Although the community, or the Brotherhood as it was called, accepted women as well as men, the observance of silence and chastity, which was part of the rule, may well have acted as a deterrent to the more frivolous-minded.

Vegetarianism was another feature of the Brotherhood's way of life, though it seems to have been of a rather selective kind — only the heart and brains of an animal were absolutely forbidden. The reasoning behind this very specific prohibition looks to have been based more on ritualistic than philosophical grounds, it must be said.

Mathematical principles, as one might suspect, also figured strongly in Pythagoras's teachings. 'All is number', was his starting point, and on the basis of this he worked out some sensible schemes, like the numerical ratio between the notes of the musical scale, but also some less sensible, like the idea that the planets were arranged in a musical relationship to each other — the so-called 'harmony of the spheres'.

And where did the broad bean fit into his scheme of things? Since he had taken on board the Egyptian attitude to the vegetable, the unsurprising answer is — not at all. Indeed, so great a distance was Pythagoras prepared to keep between himself and the bean, that one literary source claims he actually met his death as a result. According to this source, he was being pursued by his enemies — one can imagine he made not a few — when, directly in his path, he saw a bean field; rather than cross the field and risk touching the beans, he chose death at the hands of his pursuers.

Philosophy apart, however, there may also have been practical reasons why Pythagoras warned his close-knit community off the beans — they are, after all, well-known promoters of stomach-rumblings and flatulence. There is an interesting piece of evidence supporting this line of thinking that comes from another closed society in the Greek world. Initiates into the Mysteries of the goddess Demeter, which were celebrated at Eleusis not far from Athens, were required to abstain from broad beans for some days before their initiation. As the ceremony is known to have taken place in an underground and crowded chamber, rumbling abdominal and gaseous emissions would hardly have been conducive to the salubrity of the atmosphere and the solemnity of the occasion. Though not normally squeamish about any bodily function, if the plays of Aristophanes are anything to go by, the Greeks were ever a practical people! Generally, it must be said, breaking wind was encouraged, in public as much as in private, as a healthful measure; otherwise, it was feared, the excess gases would rise to the brain where they would cause nightmares or, worse, disturb the reasoning powers altogether.

Another purely practical consideration that may have weighed with Pythagoras when he banned the bean from his community's diet concerned the widely-held belief among the Greeks that the broad bean was an aphrodisiac. Given that the Brotherhood embraced both men and women, every sensible precaution needed to be taken to preserve amity and order:

chastity and silence both made good sense; nothing should be allowed to discourage either.

For a more unexpected explanation of the prohibition, we must return to Aristotle, the fount of so much knowledge, philosophical as well as scientific. He explains it, somewhat surprisingly, in terms of politics. Pythagoras, he argues, in forbidding his followers to associate with the bean, was in fact forbidding them to participate in the democratic process of voting as it was practised in many Greek cities. Approval or disapproval of a candidate for public office was registered by the voter, depending on whether he placed a dark or a light coloured broad bean in a large urn. Pythagoras's rejection of the democratic process, if that is what it was, was all of a piece with the exclusivity he enjoined on the Brotherhood. Aristotle probably got it right.

One final, if less convincing, interpretation of Pythagoras's embargo on beans has to do with the Greek practice of consulting oracles for advice and guidance. Since 'paging the Oracle' at Delphi and the other shrines of Apollo, the god of prophecy, was an expensive and time-consuming business, people often preferred to use cheaper and more readily-available options. Among these latter were 'bean oracles', to use which you paid a fee to draw from a jar, lucky-dip fashion, a single bean on which was inscribed a sign. For a translation of the sign, you could refer to a ready-reckoner, usually on display in a public place, to discover there the sort of advice you can today pick up in any newspaper horoscope: basically, variants of 'Go ahead' or 'Wait and see'. It's just possible that Pythagoras was issuing a health warning against relying overmuch on the gods to make the important decisions, when he voted against the bean. But this interpretation is unlikely in view of his known reverence for the god Apollo.

Whatever the true explanation for Pythagoras's fixation about the broad bean, something of his attitude towards it persisted well into Roman times, long after his Brotherhood was dispersed and many other of his theories were discredited. The Romans even added refinements to the taboo: the black spot, so often visible on the bean's pale skin, became for them an omen of death, so the bean itself became associated with bad luck.

Sceptical though we too may remain about much of Pythagoras's philosophy, perhaps he was on to something when he banished *Vicia Fava* from his diet—whatever his motive might have been. He did, it must be remembered, live to the age of 80. Not bad going for an ancient Greek; though bad news, maybe, for modern consumers of the broad bean.
