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This article was first published in the NCGR Geocosmic Magazine, Winter 2000



Pythagoras

The Father of Numbers

by Jackie Slevin

Beginning in the early 1960s, sweeping changes have taken root in many pockets of civilization. Free-thinking individuals have made a point to make fundamental changes in their lives, switching to a vegetarian diet, practicing meditation, and implementing behavior modification to accelerate the benefits of cause and effect. You may be one of these individuals yourself. In coping with crises, you may seek alternate therapeutic methods such as music therapy, consulting a stargazer, or consider the concept of reincarnation to fathom your earthly experience. You may make it a point to treat people from every walk of life with decency and respect and brook no tolerance of bias or prejudice. Perhaps you embrace a holistic philosophy to the point of joining a spiritual community, eschewing crass consumerism in pursuit of a life of inner reflection coupled with active participation. The mystical connection of all life forms intrigues you and you want to be a part of this universal current of electricity. Some standard definitions of such people are free-thinkers, bohemians, counter-culture or radicals. You may call yourself a New Age practitioner, but, ironically, there is absolutely nothing new about you. The seeds of your philosophy were planted over 2500 years ago on an island in the Mediterranean. You are, quite simply, a Pythagorean. Welcome back, my friend.

Life & work of:

- ▶ Adams
- ▶ Al Biruni
- ▶ Bonatti
- ▶ Brahe
- ▶ Copernicus
- ▶ Culpeper
- ▶ Dee
- ▶ Ezra
- ▶ Ficino
- ▶ Firmicus
- ▶ Gadbury
- ▶ Galileo
- ▶ Hypatia
- ▶ Kepler
- ▶ Leo
- ▶ Lilly
- ▶ Magnus
- ▶ Morin
- ▶ Newton
- ▶ Placidus
- ▶ Ptolemy
- ▶ Pythagoras
- ▶ Raphael
- ▶ Sepharial
- ▶ de Wohl

The birth of this avatar, in approximately 570 B.C.E., was prophesied by none other than the Oracle of Delphi itself. Legend has it that the Pythia, or temple priestess who served as the mouthpiece for the god Apollo, was visited by a gem-engraver by the name Mnesarchus, who had traveled to Delphi for business. Mnesarchus was petitioning the oracle about the success of his business and to inquire whether the gods would grant him the

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The birth of this avatar, in approximately 570 B.C.E., was prophesied by none other than the Oracle of Delphi itself. Legend has it that the Pythia, or temple priestess who served as the mouthpiece for the god Apollo, was visited by a gem-engraver by the name Mnesarchus, who had traveled to Delphi for business. Mnesarchus was petitioning the oracle about the success of his business and to inquire whether the gods would grant him the

right winds to ensure a safe return sea voyage to Samos. To his shock and dismay, he was informed that the winds would blow him safely home to the arms of a pregnant wife, who would bear him a son who would surpass all others who ever lived in beauty and wisdom. This child would set a new standard in human achievement, be of the highest benefit to humanity and leave a legacy that would last throughout the ages. It is an ode of an itinerant Samian poet that Pythagoras was the son of Apollo:

Pythais, the fairest of the Samian race From the embraces
of the God Apollo Bore Pythagoras, the friend of Zeus.¹

Greek writers Epimenides, Eudoxus and Xenocrates all claim that Apollo had already coupled with Mnesarchus' wife Parthenis, and, after experiencing the influence of the child of their union, allegedly left no doubt that Pythagoras himself was a child of divinity.

Upon his safe return to Samos, Mnesarchus was greeted by his smiling and pregnant wife. Mnesarchus promptly changed his wife's name from Parthenis to Pythais, in honor of the Delphic Sybil who foretold of his illustrious son's upcoming birth and then erected a temple to Apollo to ensure the accuracy of the prophecy. As prophesied, a son was born to Pythais and Mnesarchus, and his superior abilities soon became obvious. Mnesarchus then set about to procure his son the finest education possible, having him study with Creophilus and Pherecydes the Syrian. Word spread of young Pythagoras' brilliance and scholarship and many tutors flocked to converse with this child of Apollo. "An intimate quiet and serenity marked all of his words and, soaring above all laughter, emulation, contention, or any other irregularity or eccentricity; his influence, at Samos, was that of some beneficent divinity".² His reputation for erudition, wisdom and divine inspiration steadily increased, and he became known as the "long haired Samian".³

When Pythagoras was approximately eighteen Samos came under the jurisdiction of the tyrant and anti-intellectual Polycrates, whose autocratic rule would impede the advancement of Pythagoras' studies. A friend Hermodamas, who was allegedly the grandson of a colleague of the poet Homer, facilitated Pythagoras' nocturnal emigration to Pherecydes in Syria, where he continued his studies with the naturalist Anaximander and ultimately with the philosopher Thales of Miletus, one of the Seven Wise Men of Greece and the first recorded Western philosopher. Thales personally mentored this exceptional pupil, teaching him everything he knew about philosophy, astronomy and above all, geometry. After imparting to him all he could, emphasizing his own age and infirmities, he finally advised Pythagoras to travel to Egypt and study under the priests of Memphis, where, it was confessed he himself had acquired his higher education. According to Thales, if Pythagoras could master the rigors of Egyptian initiation, he would indeed be the wisest of all men.

Thus Pythagoras set out for Egypt, having been befriended by Egyptian sailors who secretly conspired to profit from their exotic traveler by selling him as a slave upon their arrival in Egypt. Predicting an arduous voyage, the sailors noticed inexplicable conditions taking place soon after their departure. Rough seas and stormy weather quickly abated and clear sailing resulted, with perfect winds and weather that continued uninterrupted for two nights and three days. The superstitious sailors suspected

intervention from the gods; surely such eerie good fortune must result from supernatural causes. It was then observed that their unusual passenger had not moved from his position from the moment he settled on board, meditating in a seated position, taking no food, drink or sleep, a position in which he remained throughout the entire journey. The sailors concluded that Pythagoras himself must surely be a deity and should therefore be venerated as a god, not ignored as profitable cargo to be sold as a common slave. Upon arrival in Egypt, the sailors built him a makeshift altar and laid upon it the fruits from nearby trees, demonstrating their respect and bidding their nautical deity a culinary farewell. Thus unknowingly departing Syria a slave, Pythagoras arrived in Egypt a god.

The wandering student wasted no time in visiting every temple in Egypt, studying under every priest he met. He finally settled in Memphis at the temple of Ptah, undergoing initiation rites and learning the sacred mysteries. He spent a total of 22 years in Egypt, leaving Memphis under capture when the city was sacked by the Persian king Cambyses II in 525 BCE. Cambyses brought Pythagoras to Babylon, where he studied with the Chaldean magi for twelve years. Here he perfected the knowledge of the heavens he originally acquired in Egypt and, coupled with the Chaldean mastery of geometry, began pondering the common thread of universal order. Arriving at a number of conclusions, he returned to Samos at age 56 to spread the word.

At his second Saturn return, Pythagoras set up a school to share his eclectic education with his fellow Samians. Crowds gathered to hear him speak but, to Pythagoras' great dismay, the citizens of Samos were more interested in what Pythagoras could do in the political arena and promptly employed him as their ambassador. A conflict of interests resulted; Pythagoras had returned to Samos to teach, not to administrate. With several dedicated students in his wake, he traveled to Crotona in southern Italy to continue his role as educator. Within days he had approximately six hundred students, who were not only eager to learn, but also willing to share all their worldly goods. Thus a commune began, and his followers called themselves cenobites, a Greek term for "common living".⁴

According to Nichomarchus, Pythagoras captivated over two thousand followers in one day following a single oration. With their wives and children, these followers joined the cenobites, whose numbers and dwellings now established a town called Magna Graecia. It was here that Pythagoras formulated his divine Theory of Number.

Prior to this time, (c. 514 BEC), the system of numbers was used solely for the mundane purposes of bookkeeping. Due to the widespread trading for the seafaring Phoenicians, most cultures in and surrounding the Mediterranean Sea utilized some method of numbers to record profit. Pythagoras was familiar with the Phoenician method, having tarried in Phoenicia during his travels, but decided to take the system of numbers one step further and develop a system whereby numbers could measure the divine, or, as he was the first to use the word, the kosmos, or "world order." According to Aristotle, Pythagoras defined everything as a creation of numbers but the actual deciphering was more subtle. Numbers were not an investigation of things; numbers were a series of investigations of principles, measurements and proportions. They were universal in order but divine in principle. The scientific and religious/spiritual dimensions of numbers were

united in one theory, not divided into two separate entities. Thus for the first time in the Mediterranean, the study of mathematics was elevated to a higher status than numbers for strictly utilitarian purposes. Numbers as symbols of profit were strictly for merchants and traders. Numbers as the theory of the kosmos were grist for the mill for the son of Apollo and the cenobites of Magna Graecia.

Pythagoras developed the origin of the harmonics of divine ratios while observing a blacksmith. The sound of the hammers beating iron on the anvil produced a series of sounds that harmonized, except one. He could hear the octave, the fifth and the fourth and concluded that the sound between the fourth and the fifth was dissonant when taken alone, but it completed the entire sound. With his interest was piqued, he approached the smith to observe how these different sounds were achieved. He discovered that it was not from the shape of the iron, its position on the anvil or the shape of the hammer or the force of its strokes that produced the variations in the range of pitch. Different sounds were consistently achieved by changing the size of the hammers. After carefully measure the size, weight and swing of the various hammers, he returned home to experiment. His conclusion became the standard of harmony, musical and universal, for "music is the source of the laws promulgated".⁵

Turning his attention to the eternal, Pythagoras next devised his theory about the "music of the spheres," speculating that as the distance from the Sun to the earth was twice that of the Moon, and that of Venus as three times as great, and that of Mercury four times, with the other planets in proportion, then it followed that this universal harmony produced a 'fuller and more intense melody that anything affected by mortal sounds'.⁶

Pythagoras postulated that Number "is the principle, the source and the root of all things".⁷ Thus he did not view the number one as a number at all, but as the definitive foundation and that the numbers one through ten were manifestations of a continuum:

Unity is the principle of all things and the most dominant of all that is: all things emanate from it and it emanates from nothing. It is indivisible and it is everything in power. It is immutable and never departs from its own nature through multiplication ($1 \times 1 = 1$). Everything that is intelligible and not yet created exists in it, the nature of ideas, God himself, the soul, the beautiful and the good, and every intelligible essence, such as beauty itself, justice itself, equality itself, for we conceive each of these things as being one and as existing itself.⁸

Pythagoras thus used the numbers from one through ten as building blocks upon which to erect an architectural dome of universal splendor and cosmic perfection. Each number was an entity unto itself and possessed its own personality: "Such was the Greek style of 'theological arithmetic.' This form of number symbolism became quite popular in late antiquity and Christian writers transmitted much of it in medieval times. The symbolism finds its basis in the Pythagorean observation that the primary numbers represent far more than quantitative signs: each one of the primary numbers is a qualitative, archetypal essence, possessing a distinct, living personality. This personality can be directly intuited by studying the archetypal manifestations of these principles in the realms arithmetic (number in itself,

geometric, (number in space) and harmonics (number in time)".⁹

Thus were the building blocks of the long-haired Samian, whose idyllic community of Magna Graecia flourished for 39 years. In addition to his theory of Number, or sacred mathematics, Pythagoras was the first person to coin the term "philosophy".¹⁰ His research into harmonic ratios led him to be the first practitioner of music therapy, for Pythagoras taught that the soul was nothing more than a harmony, and, when the soul or harmony was out of balance, certain musical tones and correct the misalignment, for "music is the art in which the Numbers penetrate directly to the heart".¹¹

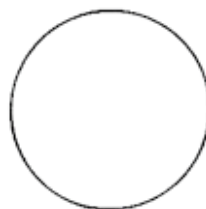
The cenobites practiced meditation twice daily, along with choral singing and exemplary manners, "behaving shamelessly to no one".¹² Strict dietary habits were enforced. Beans were forbidden for three reasons: they were used as units of measure in voting and therefore carried political overtones. They caused excessive upset in the stomach, thus disturbing the mind, or soul/harmony. Thirdly, Pythagoras learned from Egyptian priests that beans were unholy food as beans contained the souls of the dead. Stimulants, often including wine, were avoided because they disturbed clear reasoning. Flesh and eggs were also taboo. Curiously enough, several sources assert that the theory of metempsychosis, or reincarnation, was formulated by Pythagoras himself and was subsequently taught in Magna Graecia and its satellite communities throughout southern Italy.

Strengthened from his strict diet and rigorous principles, Pythagoras, at age 62, married one of his followers named Theano and fathered seven children. Although the total of his cenobites numbered in the hundreds, not all applicants were automatically accepted into his community or into his tutelage. It was a spurned applicant, a wealthy and powerful native of Croton named Cylon, who led to Pythagoras' demise. Cylon's tyrannical personality and brute manners fundamentally clashed with the cenobites and after continuous rejection from Magna Graecia, complete with attendant bribes of ready money, he sought revenge. Pythagoras, now aged 95, gathered the majority of his male followers to the home of the cenobite Milo for discussion of how to rid the community of Cylon once and for all. With friends in all corners, Cylon heard of this meeting and led a band of brigands to Milo's home, setting it ablaze and subsequently burning to death all but two inhabitants, including Pythagoras himself. The two survivors, named Archippus and Lysis, returned to their original homes, but not without a rebellion of non-violence. Since no public notice or action was taken whatsoever regarding the arson, the survivors spread the word throughout Magna Graecia and its satellites to boycott all forms of government, since it refused them recognition or protection. This boycott, while effective, did not increase their popularity and eventually the remaining cenobites established another community in Rhegium. Since most of the older and more experienced cenobites perished in the fire, a lack of focus and organization resulted. Over a period of years, the followers of Pythagoras dispersed themselves among the populations of the Mediterranean basin. The most unfortunate result of this fallout was the lack of written records of the philosophy and practices of Magna Graecia; as in the Druidic custom of the Celtic culture, the Pythagorean tradition was oral. "It is the mind that sees all things, and hears them all; all else is deaf and blind".¹³

After the folding of the Rhegium colony, certain cenobites wrote of the Pythagorean traditions. Upon their deathbeds, the cenobites instructed their children that under no circumstances were they to show these writings to anyone outside the family. For this reason the written records of Magna Graecia were scant and secret for over one hundred years. It was the emergence of the philosopher Plato, approximately one hundred and fifty years after the catastrophic fire, who saved the traditions from total obscurity. Plato's writings, largely based on the Pythagorean tradition, survived the sack of Rome and became the basis of the medieval quadrivium of arithmetic, geometry, astronomy and music. Thus the Pythagorean Theorem, a tenet of the once-secret science of the God's arithmetic, survived through the ages to the present day where it appears on a daily basis all over the world in the text books of high school geometry class.

The tradition lives on.

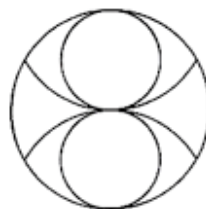
**The Number One: The Monad.
A Complete Circle.**



Instrument of Truth
Obscure
No-Many
A Chariot
Immutable Truth and Invulnerable
Destiny
A Seed
Fabricator
True Happiness
Zeus
Life
God
The Equality in Increase and
Decrease
Memory
A Ship

Essence
The Innkeeper, "that which takes
in all"
The Pattern or Model
The Moulder
Prometheus
The First
Darkness
Blending
Commixture
Harmony
Order
Materia
A Friend
Infinite Expanse
Space-Producer

**The Number Two: The Dyad
(A circle split horizontally with
one circle in each half).**



Inequality
Indefinite
The Unlimited
Without form or figure
Growth
Birth Judgment
Appearance
Anguish
The Each of Two
Falling Short, Defect
Erato
Equal
Isis
Movement
The Ration in Proportion

Distance
Impulse
Excess
The Thing With Another
Rhea
Selene
Combination
That Which is To Be Endured;
Misery, Distress
Boldness, Audacity
Matter
Obstinacy
Nature

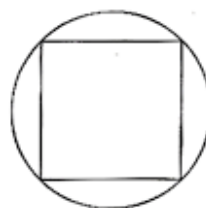
**The Number Three: Triad
(A triangle within a Circle with
Three Circles Superimposed)**



Proportion
Harmonia
Marriage
Knowledge
Peace
Every Thing
Hecate
Good Counsel

Piety
The Mean Between Two
Extremes
Oneness of Mind
The All
Perfection
Friendship
Purpose

**The Number Four: The Tetrad
(A square within a Circle)**



The Nature of Change
Righteousness

Hercules
Holding the Key of Nature

**The Number Five: The Pentad
(The Pentangle)**



Alteration
Immortal
Androgyny
Lack of Strife
Aphrodite
Boubastia
Wedding
Marriage
Double

Manifesting Justice
Justice
Demigod
Nemesis
Pallas
Five-Fold
Forethought
Light

**The Number Six : The Hexad
The Six Pointed Star (The Star
of David)**



Resembling Justice
The Thunder-Stone
Amphitrite (Poseidon's Wife)
Male-Female
Marriage
Finest of All
In Two Measures
Form of Forms
Peace

Far-Shooting
Thaleia
Kosmos
Possessing Wholeness
Cure-All
Perfection
Three-Ford
Health
Reconciling

**The Number Seven: The Heptad
(A seven pointed star within a circle)**



The Forages Athena Citadel Reaper
Hard to Subdue Defense Due
Measure

Virgin Revered Seven Bringing to
Completion Fortune, Fate
Preserving

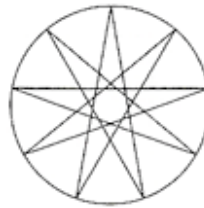
**The Number Eight : The Octad
(Eight pointed Star within a circle)**



Untimely Born Steadfast Seat or
Abode Euterpe

Cadmia Mother All Harmonious

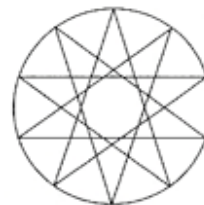
**The Number Nine: The Ennead
(Nine pointed star within a circle)**



Brother and Consort of Zeus Helios
Absence of Strife Far-Working Hera
Hephaestus Maiden Of the Kouretes
Assimilation Oneness of Mind

Horizon Crossing or Passage
Prometheus Consort and Brother
Perfection Bringing to Perfection
Terpsichore Hyperion Oceanus

**The Number Ten: The Decad
(Ten pointed star within a circle)**



Eternity Untiring Necessity Atlas
Fate Helios God Key-Holding
Kosmos

Strength Memory Ourania
Heaven All All-Perfect Faith
Phanes

Source: Kenneth Sylvan Guthrie and David Fideler: *The Pythagorean Sourcebook and Library*, pp. 321-324.

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Notes & References:

- 1] Kenneth Sylvan Guthrie and David Fideler, *The Pythagorean Sourcebook*, Phanes Press, 1987, p.58.

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- 2] Ibid., p.59.

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- 3] Ibid., p.64.
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- 4] Ibid., p.64.
[Back to text](#)
- 5] Henry David Thoreau, *The Writing of Henry David Thoreau*, Vol.1 p.184.
[Back to text](#)
- 6] Elizabeth Pepper and John Wilcock, *Magical and Mystical Sites*. p.17.
[Back to text](#)
- 7] Kenneth Sylvan Guthrie and David Fideler, *The Pythagorean Sourcebook*, p.21.
[Back to text](#)
- 8] Ibid.
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- 9] Ibid., p.321.
[Back to text](#)
- 10] Ibid. p.19.
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- 11] Ibid. p.12
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- 12] Ibid. p.142.
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- 13] Ibid.
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Jackie Slevin began her studies of astrology at age nine after finding her mother's astrology texts from the Faculty of Astrological Studies in London on the living room coffee table. An active member of the Northern New Jersey NCGR Chapter, Jackie has lectured extensively on the east coast and at the United Astrology Congress (UAC) 1995 and 2002. Her articles have appeared in Dell publications, Horoscope guide, American Astrology, NCGR Journal, Llewellyn Sun Sign and Moon Sign books, the Astrology and Medicine Newsletter, Realta, the Journal of the Federation of Australian Astrologers and the Journal of the Astrological Association of Great Britain. She is the founder and Dean of The University Of Geocosmic Studies.

For more information about Jackie and her work, visit her

personal website at www.geocosmicstudies.com.

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