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THE NEOPYTHAGOREANS AT THE PORTA MAGGIORE IN ROME

Lisa Spencer, M.A.O.M., S.R.C.

In the early twentieth century Roman crews were excavating for a new railway station when they came across a small vaulted basilica, about fifty feet underground. Notwithstanding its diminutive size (thirty by thirty-six feet), the find was extraordinary. Built sometime between the first century BCE and the first century CE, its walls are adorned with stucco bas-reliefs depicting mythological and mystery school themes, including those connected with the Neopythagoreans. It appears to have been a meeting place and perhaps an initiatory chamber for these Mysteries.¹ The following article introduces readers to the significance of this archaeological record of the Pythagorean Tradition.

Discovery of the Basilica

In 1915, a discovery was made outside the gates of the Porta Maggiore on the Via Praenestina in Rome while a railroad line was being built to Naples. Approximately fifty feet below this new railroad was a white stucco room measuring thirty by thirty-six feet revealing various mythological scenes and mystery practices. Tom Mueller writes, “Handsome mosaic floors, three aisles, and a semicircular apse give it the look of a church, but stucco friezes on the walls show Orpheus leading Eurydice back from Hades, Heracles rescuing Hesione from the sea monster, and other scenes of mythological deliverance.”²

Archaeologists dated this structure to around the first century CE; however, the floor plan was not at all laid out like the traditional Roman temples but was similar to the early Christian temples with a nave and two aisles separated by pillar-supported arches set in three parallel sections. Pierre

Berloquin summarizes: “It is obvious that the construction was carried out as secretly as possible by a group intent on remaining unnoticed both during and after the building of the temple. The masons first dug shafts for the walls and the roof and filled them with concrete. Only after the concrete had set did they dig out the earth inside the church beneath the concrete roof; up to that point the earth had played the role of the scaffolding. Finally, they decorated the interior with white stucco.”³

Samuel Ball Platner sums up the importance of this find for architectural history:

“The recent discovery of the underground basilica just outside the Porta Maggiore has somewhat modified the views

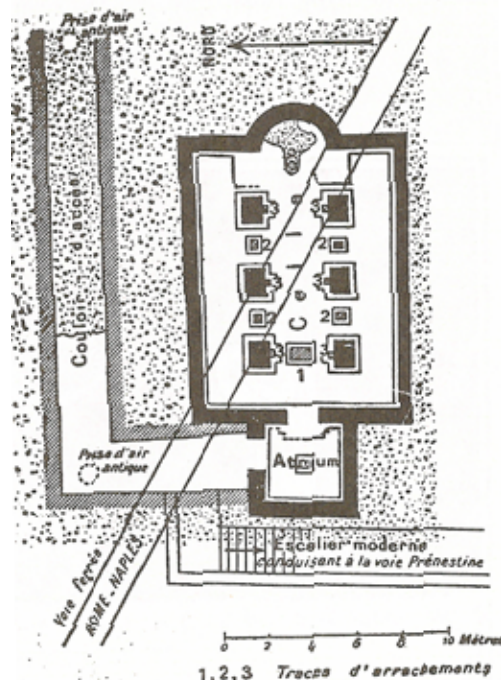


Diagram of the Neopythagorean Basilica, underneath the Rome-Naples rail line.



Richard Majka, F.R.C., *Maenads with the Head of Pentheus, Who Refused to Worship Dionysus*, after a bas-relief in the Neopythagorean Basilica. Neophytes would learn the dangers of *hubris* from this lesson.

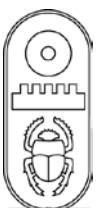
previously held. Here we have a building, undoubtedly pagan, belonging to the first century after Christ, which already shows, fully developed, the plan of the Christian basilica with a nave and two aisles, separated by pillars supporting arches.... This basilica is not mentioned in classical literature, and was quite unexpectedly discovered in 1915. It was reached by a long subterranean passage, with two lightshafts (which have now been closed up, a new approach having been constructed from the Via Praenestina), which led into a square vestibule with a larger shaft. (It was the earth falling into this shaft—which lay right under the Naples railway line—which led to the discovery of the basilica.)

“The vestibule was decorated with painted stucco; and from it a window over the entrance door threw scanty light into the basilica itself, which was decorated entirely with reliefs in white stucco. The subjects are very varied, and have given rise to much discussion. The basilica can be inferred from them to have served for the meetings of a Neopythagorean sect which believed in a future life, as they can all be referred to the adventures of the soul in its passage towards the otherworld, the scene in the apse showing the actual plunge into the purifying flood.

The worship was obviously secret: and the building was probably constructed in such a way as to excite as little attention as possible, the piers having been made by excavating pits, which were then filled with concrete. The vaults and arches were supported until the concrete had set on the solid earth (not on scaffolding) which accounts for their irregularity: and it was only afterwards that the earth was cleared out from beneath.”⁴

In examining the many icons and bas-reliefs that decorated the small basilica, the strong Pythagorean influence was clear. According to scholars, one of the important icons found in the basilica was the *Medusa* heads that were found on the wall and one at the entrance. Medusa means “sovereign female wisdom,” and was imported into Greece from Libya. The Medusa, ever watchful, “welcomes souls onto their new path.”⁵ The basilica appears to have been sealed up and rubble used to fill the space. However, the rubble that was found dated from the first century CE and also from the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries. Was it reopened and then again resealed with new rubble?

Through inspection it was discovered that the room was not looted since the frescos were intact and the furniture had



been removed. Also, if there had been looters, chances are they would not have refilled the building and sealed it. Scholars believe the time frame of the first closure to have been during the reign of the Emperor Claudius, 41 to 54 CE. The second closure during the sixteenth or seventeenth centuries also places its secret use at an important time: that of the release of the Rosicrucian Manifestos. Today, the basilica is still mostly intact, but closed to the public. Restoration of the site is difficult due to the location and cost. According to Pierre Berloquin, "Today, the basilica is rarely mentioned in guidebooks and visits are difficult to arrange."⁶

The Neopythagoreans

Cicero's comrade, Nigidius Figulus (died 45 BCE), made an attempt to revive Pythagorean doctrines; however the Neopythagorean movement began in earnest in the mid-first century CE due to the efforts of Apollonius of Tyana and Moderatus of Gades. This Greco-Alexandrian school of philosophy focused on the Pythagorean rules of life and religious conduct which included vegetarianism, tolerance, mathematics, and metaphysics.

"There has been much discussion as to whether the Pythagorean literature which was widely published at the time in Alexandria was the original work of first-century writers or merely reproductions of and commentaries on the older Pythagorean writings. Other important Neopythagoreans include the mathematician Nicomachus of Gerasa, who wrote about the mystical properties of numbers. In the second century, Numenius of Apamea sought to fuse additional elements of Platonism into Neopythagoreanism, prefiguring the rise of Neoplatonism."⁷

Apollonius of Tyana, the sage and miracle worker, believed that he was the reincarnation of Pythagoras. Philostratus (c.170-c.245 CE) wrote the longest and most important work on the life of Apollonius. Philostratus wrote:

"Apollonius was born in the year 4 BCE, the acknowledged year of the birth of Christ. His birth, like his conception, was miraculous. Just before his nativity, his mother was walking in a meadow, where she lay down on the grass and went to sleep. Some wild swans, at the end of a long flight, approached her and by their cries and the beating of their wings, awakened her so suddenly that her child was born before its time. The swans, apparently, had foreseen and marked by their presence the fact that on that day was to be born a being whose soul would be as white as their own plumage and who, like them, would be a glorious wanderer."⁸

At the age of fourteen, Apollonius went to Tarsus to finish his education. It was during this time that he recognized that there were two paths: one to pleasure and love, and the other to philosophy and wisdom. For Apollonius, the choice to philosophy and wisdom was an easy one. Apollonius also "refused to touch anything that had animal life in it, on the grounds that it densified the mind and rendered it impure. He considered that the only pure form of food was what the earth produced—fruits and vegetables. He also abstained from wine, for though it was made from fruit, it rendered turbid the ether in the soul, and destroyed the composure of the mind."⁹

"Legend has it that an Indian magician made him seven rings representing the seven planets and presented them to Apollonius who wore a different one each day. It is said this enabled him to maintain his youthful vigor well into old age. He is reputed to have live to one hundred."¹⁰

Moderatus of Gades lived during the same period as Apollonius of Tyana. "Almost nothing is known about the life of Moderatus. It seems that he taught in Rome for at least part of his career and that he wrote several important works. Chief among those is his *Pythagorikai Scholai* (Lectures on Pythagoreanism). In this work, which

seems to be one of the most comprehensive written examples of Pythagorean thought, Moderatus shows that many important philosophical ideas traditionally associated with other philosophers were in fact the creation of Pythagoras.

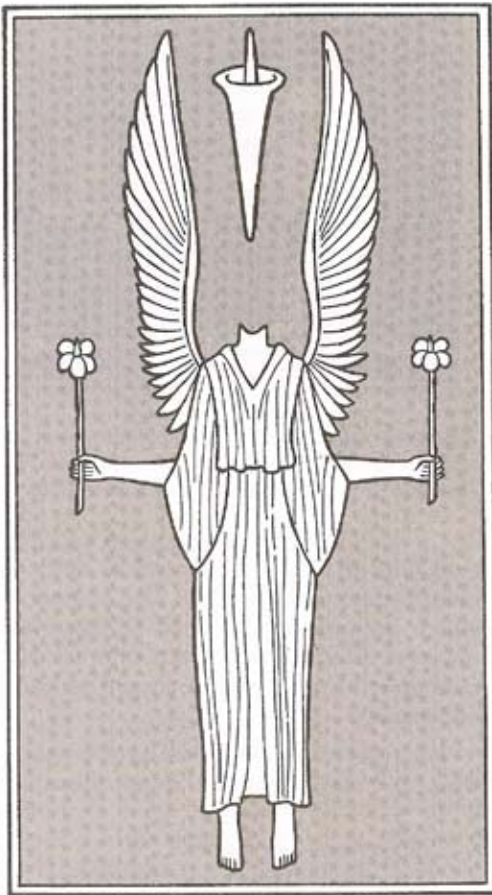
“Moderatus was adamant in his belief that Plato and his followers were merely

philosophers. In putting to paper the ideas born from Pythagoras, and more importantly, in separating them from later philosophers and philosophic schools, Moderatus gives us important insight into the actual makeup of the original Pythagorean movement, in addition to helping to define that of the Neopythagorean.”¹¹

While some scholars previously held the view that Neopythagoreanism was only a revival of Pythagorean doctrine, and not in direct continuity with the original, this is no longer tenable given twentieth- and twenty-first-century researches:

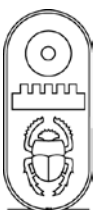
“...when we turn to the actual evidence it becomes clear that—at least as far back as the early fourth century BCE—Pythagorean circles tended to be very small, sometimes no larger than a single household; and certainly they were not the sort of arrangements likely to advertise themselves in any archaeological remains. Preference for this kind of social arrangement is easy to understand. With the dispersion of the Pythagoreans which evidently occurred in the mid-fifth century [BCE] as a direct consequence of the dramatic attacks and oppression they suffered in southern Italy, it was inevitable that what communities had existed until then would become fragmented and, to some extent at least, go underground.

“As a result, any account of subsequent history which allows for the transmission of Pythagorean ideas from generation to generation on a modest, even one-to-one, basis must be taken seriously—all the more so because we know that this method of transmission dates back to the classical period of Pythagoreanism. The view held by Cumont and others that, far from dying out, Pythagoreanism continued to lead a more or less ‘underground’ existence in southern Italy under the Romans makes perfect sense on this basis; and, what is more, it has been strikingly corroborated in the meantime by recent archaeological finds.”¹²



Richard Majka F.R.C., *The Psyche in Transformation*, after an image in the Neopythagorean Basilica representing the recognition of the Divine within the human, and also recalling the myth of Eros (Cupid) and Psyche, which is the basis of the fairy tale *Beauty and the Beast*.

followers of Pythagoras, a belief that has gained increasing acceptance, as more becomes known about both figures. This work by Moderatus was—and remains—a vitally important work for determining the thought of the Pythagoreans, and in separating it from the thought of other Greek



Neopythagorean Teachings and Initiation

Many of the teachings and practices of the Pythagorean and Neopythagorean schools are quite similar to Orphism, with which they were often connected. The immortality of the soul is a primary tenet, and purification of one's soul is a primary purpose of all of these mystery schools. This would be carried out by ethical living, and in particular for the Pythagorean movements, the study of mathematics and music. Many of these doctrines and practices were incorporated into the writings of Plato, which then became a point of dissemination to later generations.

Initiations in the Underground Basilica

As to the initiations that apparently took place in the underground basilica, these might have followed the four-fold Pythagorean path explained by Édouarde Schuré.¹³ Before entering the First Degree or "Novitiate" the candidates were subjected to a period of testing and observation, which included athletics and interaction with others. Laughter and a good sense of humor were highly valued. Then one night, a "few months afterwards came decisive tests in imitation of Egyptian initiation, though greatly modified and adapted to the Greek nature, whose sensitiveness had not submitted to the mortal terrors of the crypts of Memphis and Thebes. The Pythagorean aspirant was made to spend the night in a cavern, in the outskirts of the town, alleged to be haunted by various apparitions and monsters. Those who had not sufficient strength to endure the terrible impressions

of solitude and night, who refused to enter, or made their escape before the morning, were deemed too weak for initiation and rejected."¹⁴

Finally, a moral test was given. The candidates were placed in cells with a mathematical or geometric symbol of which they must intuit the meaning. They had twelve hours to solve the puzzle, and nothing but bread and water for nourishment. They would then be brought into an assembly where they would be mocked, and their answers ridiculed. Only those who were able to retain their equanimity and continue to seek wisdom with good humor were judged worthy.¹⁵

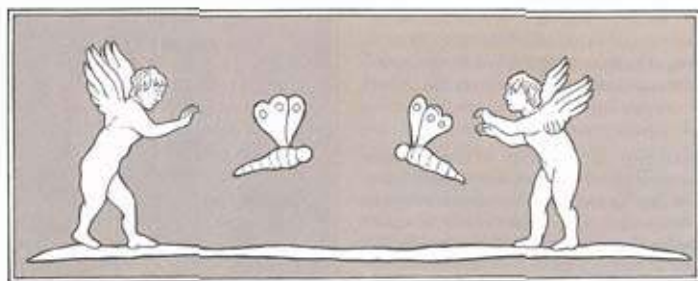
Following admission into the school, the initiatory path continued in four stages:

The First Degree – Preparation (Neophytes)

"Then only began the novitiate called the *preparation* (paraskeia), which lasted at least two years, and might be prolonged to five. The novices, or *listeners* (akousikoi), during the lessons they received, were subjected to the rule of absolute silence. They had no right either to offer any objection to their masters or to discuss the teaching they were absorbing. This latter they were to receive with respect and to meditate upon at length. To impress this rule in the mind of the new listeners, they were shown the statue of a woman, enveloped in a long veil, her finger raised to her mouth, *The Muse of Silence*."¹⁶

The Second Degree – Numbers – Theogony

"It was a happy day, 'a day of gold,' as the ancients said, when Pythagoras received



Richard Majka F.R.C., *Cupids with Butterflies*, after the image in the Neopythagorean Basilica. It symbolically represents Divinity revealed within the human soul through the power of Eros (Love).

the novices into his dwelling and solemnly welcomed them into the rank of his disciples. First of all they entered into direct and connected relations with the master; they came into the inner court of his dwelling reserved for his faithful followers. Hence the name of *esoteric* (those from within) in opposition to that of *exoteric* (those from without). The real initiation now began.

these principles, they had now to descend the heights of the Absolute and plunge into the depths of nature, there to lay hold of the divine thought in the formation of things and the evolution of the soul through the worlds. Esoteric cosmogony and psychology touched the greatest mysteries of life as well as dangerous and jealously guarded secrets of the occult arts and sciences.

Legend has it that an Indian magician made him seven rings representing the seven planets and presented them to Apollonius who wore a different one each day. It is said this enabled him to maintain his youthful vigor well into old age.

This revelation consisted of a complete, rational exposition of occult doctrine, from its principles as contained in the mysterious science of numbers to the final consequences of universal evolution, the destiny and end of divine Psyche, the human soul.

“This science of numbers was known under different names in the temples of Egypt and Asia. As it afforded a key to the whole doctrine, it was carefully concealed from the people. The figures and letters, the geometric forms and human representations, which served as signs in this algebra of the occult world, were understood by none but the initiate.”¹⁷

The Third Degree – Perfection: Cosmogony and Psychology – The Evolution of the Soul

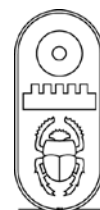
“The disciples had received the principles of science from their master. This first initiation had dispelled the dense scales of matter which covered the eyes of their spirits. Tearing away the shining veil of mythology, it had removed them from the visible world to cast them blindly into boundless space and plunge them into the sun of Intelligence, whence Truth beams forth over the three worlds. The science of numbers, however, was nothing but the beginning of the great initiation. Armed with

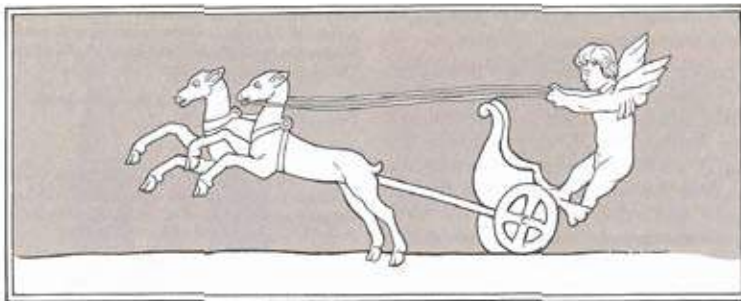
“For this reason Pythagoras loved to give these lessons, when the profane light of day had disappeared, at night by the seaside, on the terraces of the Temple of Ceres, before the gentle murmur of the Ionian Sea with its melodious cadence, and beneath the distant phosphorescence of the starry kosmos; or else in the crypts of the sanctuary where a gentle steady light was given by Egyptian lamps of naphtha. Female initiates were present at these night meetings. At times, priests or priestesses from Delphi or Eleusis came to confirm the master’s teachings by relating their experiences or through the lucid words of clairvoyant sleep.

“The material and the spiritual evolution of the world are two inverse movements, though parallel and concordant along the whole scale of being. The one can be explained only by the other, and, considered together, they explain the world.”¹⁸

The Fourth Degree – Epiphany: The Adept (Mathematicians)

“With Pythagoras we have now reached the summit of initiation in ancient times. From these heights the earth appears drowned in shadow, like a dying star. Sidereal perspectives open out—and the vision from on high, the epiphany of the universe, is





Richard Majka, F.R.C.,
Eros and the Chariot,
after an image in the
Neopythagorean Basilica,
reminiscent of Plato's
description of the soul
as a properly guided
chariot in the *Phaedo*.

unfolded before one's wondering gaze in its entirety. The object of his instruction, however, was not our absorption in contemplation or ecstasy. The master had brought his disciples into the unmeasurable regions of the Kosmos, plunging them into the abyss of the invisible. After this terrifying journey, the true initiates were to return to earth better, stronger, and more prepared for the trials of life.

"The initiation of the intelligence was to be followed by that of the will, the most difficult of all. The disciples had now to become imbued with truth in the very depths of their beings, to put it into practice in everyday life. To attain to this ideal, one must, according to Pythagoras, unite three kinds of perfection: the realization of truth in intelligence, of virtue in soul, and of purity in body."¹⁹

It is easy to visualize, hundreds of years after Pythagoras, similar initiations taking place in the intimate basilica at the Porta Maggiore. It is reasonable to assume that these would have been conducted by small groups of initiates and candidates, and one is reminded of the way that the sublime teachings of Martinism were handed down from one initiate to another—often within families—from Louis Claude de Saint-Martin to Papus and Augustin Chaboseau. This is the method that has often conveyed the primordial tradition through the many tributaries of the Rosicrucian Path.

The Pythagorean Heritage Continues

Pythagoras's influence extended to Plato's school during the second half of the fourth

century BCE, from which source it then reached the Middle Ages and Renaissance. As we have seen, there is a direct connection with Orphism, and with the Essenes:

"It connects the teaching of Plato with the doctrines of Neoplatonism and brings it into line with the later Stoicism and with the ascetic system of the Essenes. A comparison between the Essenes and the Neopythagoreans shows a parallel so striking as to warrant the theory that the Essenes were profoundly influenced by Neopythagoreanism. Lastly, Neopythagoreanism furnished Neoplatonism with the weapons with which pagan philosophy made its last stand against Christianity."²⁰

Vitruvius lived in the first century CE and was an architect whose eye for beauty in architecture was based on the works of Pythagoras. He emphasized ideal proportions and used geometry and the "golden mean" to create his art. He created "The Ten Books on Architecture." This would later prove an inspiration for Leonardo da Vinci, whose *Vitruvian Man* demonstrates these proportions in the microcosm of the human person.

Fibonacci, or Leonard of Pisa, was born about 1182 CE. (Fibonacci was actually the shortened version for *filius Bonacci*, meaning "the son of Bonaccio.") Fibonacci was a Franciscan Monk who loved numbers and in 1202 wrote a book called *Liber Abbaci* (The Book of Calculations) describing the use of the decimal system using the modern Arabic-origin system of ten digits that we use today. According to Pierre Berloquin he "extended the Pythagorean universe."

Another group that embraced the Pythagorean teachings was the Knights Templar. They led their lives following many of the same rules laid down by Pythagoras. "They built monasteries and chapels in a style of architecture that also transmitted the geometric heritage of the Pythagoreans."²¹ As Peter Kingsley demonstrates elsewhere in this Digest issue, the tradition was also transmitted through Muslim scholarship and Sufism.²²

Dr. Kingsley's description of what was remarkable about the Pythagorean approach also resonates strongly with the Rosicrucian approach today, and highlights the continuity with this tradition. While discussing the influences on Parmenides and Zeno, he describes the ancient Pythagoreans:

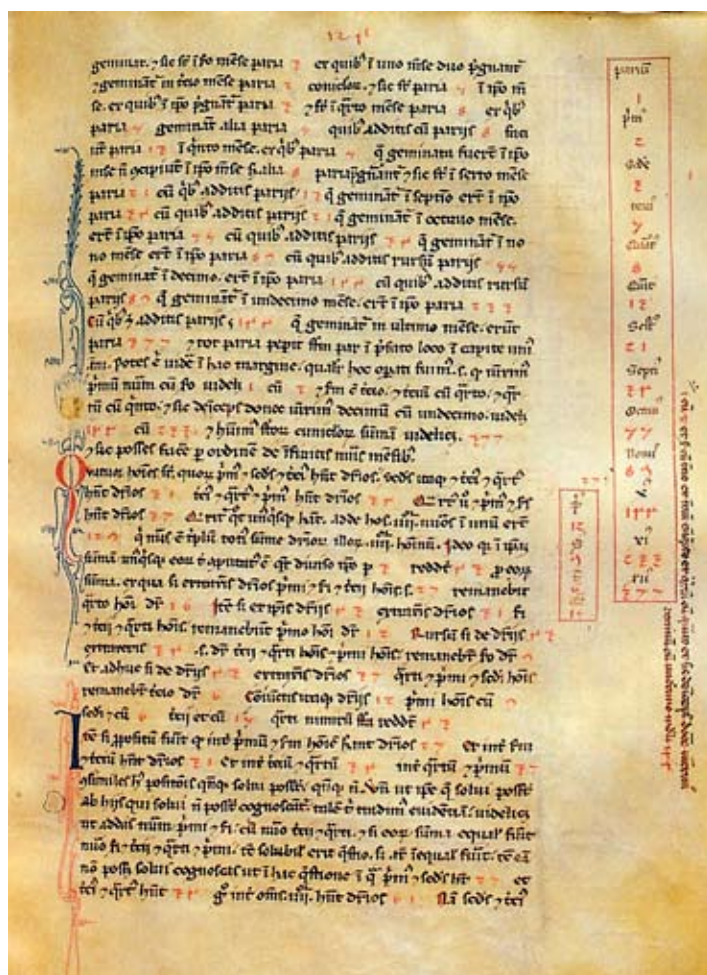
"Another comparison was also waiting to be made. But this one was even more obvious; and it brings everything much nearer back to home.

"There's a certain group of people that ancient writers used to say Parmenides and Zeno had the closest of connections with. Guessing which group that was shouldn't be too hard: it was the Pythagoreans in southern Italy. In fact, both of them were quite often referred to as Pythagoreans themselves.

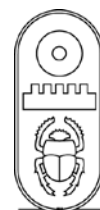
"Nowadays it's normal not to want to take these connections seriously. Parmenides and Zeno were such creative, original writers; and the notion of belonging to a group or system, especially a mystical group like the Pythagoreans, seems so incompatible with anything original or creative.

"And yet that's to miss one crucial point. Originally, Pythagoreans weren't so concerned with fixed ideas or doctrines as they were with something quite different: something that didn't just tolerate creativity and originality but encouraged them, nurtured them, guided people to their source. This is why the Pythagorean tradition managed to stay so elusive—why it was so open-ended, blending with other traditions, defying our modern ideas of orthodoxy or self-definition.

"The evidence is still there to show how highly valued individuality and creative freedom once were in Pythagorean circles. That can sound such a paradox to us; we're so used to thinking of religious groups or sects as made up of brainwashed, mindless men and women. But as a matter of fact this is one of the least paradoxical



Leonardo da Pisa (Fibonacci), *Liber Abaci*, Codice Magliabechiano Manuscript, Florence, National Library.



things about Pythagoreanism. The problem is simply a problem of understanding. Originality and creativity have come to be imagined in such superficial terms, and the cult of the individual has developed into such an effective form of brainwashing, that it's not easy any longer even to conceive of anything else."²³

The task, then as now, is not so much to learn truths from others; rather, it is to facilitate access to the source of all Truth, the inexhaustible font of all that is. To be truly original is to be in union with the Origin of all.²⁴

Today we still live many of Pythagoras's teachings. His wisdom touches us through music, mathematics, art, science, and religion. The melodies of his philosophy flow through the ages, and resonate harmoniously in the Rosicrucian tradition today.

ENDNOTES

¹ For further studies on this fascinating find, please see Jerome Carcopino, *La Basilique Pythagoricienne de la Porte Majeure* (Paris: L'Artisan du livre, 1926); Salvatore Aurigemma, *La Basilica Sotteranea Neopitagorica di Porta Maggiore in Roma* (Rome: Istituto poligrafico dello Stato, Libreria dello Stato, 1961); Paul McKendrick, *The Mute Stones Speak*, 2nd ed. (New York: Norton, 1983).

² "Underground Rome," by Tom Mueller <http://www.theatlantic.com/issues/97apr/rome.htm>.

³ Pierre Berloquin, *Hidden Codes and Grand Designs*, (New York: Sterling Publishing Co., Inc., 2008), 55.

⁴ Samuel Ball Platner (as completed and revised by Thomas Ashby), *A Topographical Dictionary of Ancient Rome* (London: Oxford University Press, 1929), 71-72. Available at http://penelope.uchicago.edu/Thayer/E/Gazetteer/Places/Europe/Italy/Lazio/Roma/Rome/_Texts/PLATOP*/basilicae.html.

⁵ Berloquin, *Hidden Codes*, 55.

⁶ Ibid., 58.

⁷ "Neopythagoreanism," *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, 11th ed., republished in <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Neo-Pythagoreanism>.

⁸ <http://www.apollonius.net/bernard4e.html>.

⁹ <http://www.apollonius.net/bernard4e.html>.

¹⁰ http://www.themystica.com/mystica/articles/a/apollonius_of_tyana.html.

¹¹ "Key Notes in Neopythagoreanism," <http://students.roanoke.edu/groups/relg211/johnson/KeyFigures.html>.

¹² Peter Kingsley, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery and Magic* (Oxford, UK: Clarendon Press, 1995), 322-323. (ed. note: brackets added)

¹³ Édouard Schuré, "Pythagoras and the Delphic Mysteries," in *The Great Initiates* (London: William Rider & Son, Ltd., 1913), 63-161. Schuré's sources for his summary are works on the life of Pythagoras by Iamblichus, Porphyry, and Diogenes Laertius. These may be found in this updated edition: Kenneth Sylvan Guthrie, *The Pythagorean Sourcebook and Library* (Grand Rapids, MI: Phanes Press, 1987), 57-122; 123-136; 141-158.

¹⁴ Schuré, *Pythagoras*, 72.

¹⁵ Ibid., 72-74.

¹⁶ Ibid., 74.

¹⁷ Ibid., 83-84.

¹⁸ Ibid., 99-100.

¹⁹ Ibid., 138-39.

²⁰ <http://www.1911encyclopedia.org/Neopythagoreanism>.

²¹ Berloquin, *Hidden Codes*, 85.

²² Peter Kingsley, "Paths of the Ancient Sages: A Pythagorean History" *Rosicrucian Digest*, vol. 87, no. 1 (2009), 2-9. See also: Kingsley, "From Empedocles to the Sufis: 'The Pythagorean Leaven,'" *Ancient Philosophy*, 359-370; and Kingsley, "Empedocles and the Ismā'īlīs," *Ancient Philosophy*, 395-396.

²³ Peter Kingsley, *In the Dark Places of Wisdom* (Inverness, CA: Golden Sufi Center, 1999), 153-154.

²⁴ See Cynthia Bourgeault, *The Wisdom Way of Knowing* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003), 86-88.