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CHAPTER 5

The Pythagorean society and politics

Catherine Rowett

1. Introduction

It is not easy to discover the truth about Pythagoras or the early Pythagoreans. In this chapter, I draw on a variety of evidence about the political life of the period, and the Pythagoreans involvement in it, some from authors concerned with the Pythagorean heritage, and some from historians interested more generally in the cities of southern Italy. I then add my own speculative reasoning, and a critique of the speculations of others. My aim is to give the reader some sense of the historical context, the problems involved in reconstructing the story, and plentiful references to the primary texts where what counts as evidence can be found.

2. Pythagoras in Samos, Delos and Delphi

All our sources attribute Pythagoras' political activity to his period in Croton. For the period before his emigration from Samos, the ancient biographers (citing various earlier sources, mostly of dubious quality) mention his birth, parentage, upbringing, higher education and research travels (to Egypt and Babylon, among other places).¹ We hear that he left Samos, aged about forty,² because Polycrates' dictatorship had rendered Samos inhospitable for a free and philosophically inclined person.³

Porphry reports that Pythagoras established some institutions on Samos (including a school called Pythagoras' Semicircle, "where the Samians gather to discuss community matters").⁴ So let us imagine that Pythagoras,

¹ Iambl. *VP* 19; Diog. Laert. 8.2–3; Porph. *VP* 11–12.

² On this chronology see Philip 1966: 195–6.

³ Porph. *VP* 9 (citing Aristoxenus); 16; Strabo 14 638 (probably using Timaeus of Tauromenium, a fourth-century BC historian). Iamblichus places the departure from Samos later. See Fritz 1940: 47–57.

⁴ Porph. *VP* 9. The testimony sounds like speculation from contemporary geography.

after spending the first forty years studying and traveling in the East, leaves Samos, around 529 or 530 BC.⁵ Then the second half of his life is spent establishing his own influence in the West. He was not absurdly young when he left Samos. Maybe he had already acquired a pious devotion to Apollo, after nursing his teacher Pherecydes through his final illness on Delos.⁶ Such a formative event would explain why, according to the tradition, he first called at Apollo's oracle at Delphi, after leaving Samos. Perhaps it was Delphi that sent him to a part of Italy already linked to the name of Apollo.⁷ Aristoxenus apparently claimed that all Pythagoras' ethical doctrines came from the Delphic priestess Themistocleia.⁸ There is surely some truth in this idea. We know that Delphi took a cosmopolitan interest in the cities of Italy and Greece and was certainly capable of deciding that Croton needed a visitation.

The idea that Pythagoras arrived in Croton around 530 BC is based on the standard dating for Croton's conquest of Sybaris (510 BC),⁹ and the assumption that Pythagoras was politically involved by then. We shall reconsider these constraints below.

3. Pythagoras in Croton

What happened when Pythagoras arrived in Croton? It is hard to say exactly, but all sources agree that his impact was dramatic and pervasive. Diogenes Laertius gives no detail:

He set sail for Croton. And there he legislated for the Italians, and was greatly honored together with his disciples. They numbered something approaching 300 and they ran the city in the best possible way, so that the constitution was more or less literally "an aristocracy."¹⁰

⁵ See von Fritz 1940: 91–2, favoring the testimony of Timaeus. On this date see further below.

⁶ Porph. *VP* 15; Diod. Sic. 10.3.4, probably derived from Aristoxenus. Although some sources place these events later, they seem to me to belong here, though this is incompatible with the supposition that Pherecydes lived to eighty-five (as ps.-Lucian *Macrobioi* 22 claims; for Pherecydes' dates see Schibli 1990: 1–13). The claim that he died on Delos (not far from his native Syros) seems authentic.

⁷ For Croton itself, Giannelli 1924 has only late evidence, from the lives of Pythagoras (e.g. Iambl. *VP* 50 presupposes an existing temple of Pythian Apollo in which Pythagoras addressed the children). But see Giangiulio 1989: 134–60 on connections between Croton and Delphi. If Croton's coins (with their tripod motif) antedate Pythagoras' arrival, they too testify to an existing Apollo cult (Burkert 1972a: 113). See the discussion of coinage below, and on the cult of Apollo Lykeios, note 23.

⁸ Diog. Laert. 8.8. See Chapter 13 below. The very name "Pythagoras" may allude to Pythian Apollo, as Aristippus of Cyrene (fifth to fourth centuries BC), not entirely fancifully, suggests (Diog. Laert. 8.21).

⁹ For alternatives, see below, section 4. ¹⁰ Diog. Laert. 8.3.

Porphyry has a more elaborate legend:

When he disembarked in Italy and arrived in Croton, so Dicaearchus says,¹¹ they were struck by his appearance: he had the look of a gentleman of liberal birth, with a gracious and orderly manner, voice and everything, and he seemed like someone well-travelled, naturally blessed by fortune and remarkably gifted in every way. Such an effect did he have on the city of Crotonians that when he had inspired the council of elder statesmen that was in charge of the city, by presenting a range of admirable ideas to them, the rulers then appointed him to deliver a youth mission program to the adolescents. And after that he was asked to address the children from the schools all congregated together, and then the women. Even a meeting of women was fixed up for him. (*VP* 18)

In Dicaearchus' imagination, Pythagoras' influence flowed from a charismatic personality. Perhaps this is the best available explanation, but if he arrived with a Delphic testimonial that will also have helped.

But what did Pythagoras say to these groups of citizens, and why these ones? Notice that Porphyry mentions no assembly of adult male citizens: Pythagoras first inspires the old men (γέροντες) – presumably the governing council; he then addresses young adults (perhaps males only), school-age children (perhaps boys only), and women (of unspecified age range). That the young people are late teenagers seems confirmed by the Council's instruction to deliver a youth mission (ἡβητικὰς παραινέσεις) – something for adolescents.

It has been suggested that these age-group assemblies indicate that Croton was a traditional society organized into age-related clubs (*hetaireiai*).¹² But no such context is implied: the assemblies seem to be newly arranged for Pythagoras, to enable him to instruct each group separately. The children are collected "from the schools," which probably implies that citizen children went to various private schools, not to a communal age-related training.¹³ Some institutional structure – for military training and athletics – probably existed for the ephebic age-group, so that an assembly of young men would be easily arranged,¹⁴ but Dicaearchus implies that a

¹¹ Dicaearchus was a pupil of Aristotle, late fourth century, and a contemporary of Aristoxenus. Fragments collected in Fortenbaugh and Schürtrumpf 2001. His attitude to Pythagoras is skeptical, emphasizing the charismatic personality. See Chapter 13 below.

¹² Burkert 1972a: 115 (followed by Kahn 2001: 8). But Morrison 1956: 144–5 (to whom Burkert refers) is clearer that Pythagoras does not find this organization already in place, but rather "either reformed or reintroduced" institutions of the older Greek civilization.

¹³ "Schools" could mean a series of age-group schools (junior to senior). But it makes better sense if boys were traditionally dispersed to random teachers, learning in small groups to no common agenda.

¹⁴ See below on the connection with Apollo Lykeios.

gathering of women is unconventional, created especially for the occasion.¹⁵ We should not anticipate the women's groupings that figure later in the story, nor assume that they were typical.¹⁶ If Pythagoras later developed a program of social education through such groupings, he was probably doing something radical, not reviving the failed structures of archaic cities. It is more helpful to compare his project to Plato's famous suggestion, 150 years later, for founding a new society:

They must send all the people older than ten years old into the fields, and remove their children from their current habits, which their parents also have, and raise them instead in their own ways and customs, which are the ones we described then. Would this not be the way they will most quickly and easily establish the city and constitution of which we have spoken. (*Resp.* 541a)

Indeed I would argue that there is more of Pythagoras in Plato's imaginary city than is traditionally supposed – much besides the saying that friends hold things in common, which is widely attested as Pythagorean.¹⁷ Other aspects of the *Republic* – its philosopher rulers, their ascetic and coenobitic life, philosophy for women, the training in geometry, harmonics, rotational geometry and so on – mimic what Plato knew of earlier Pythagorean political establishments. Arguably, Plato's *Republic* is among our earliest evidence for Pythagorean politics, since it antedates virtually all our other sources.¹⁸

In our story, Pythagoras arrives with a mission from the Delphic priestess to instill excellence in Apollo's other city. His mission begins not with adult males, but with those still open to adjusting their expectations and aspirations: the children, the adolescents, the women.¹⁹ Having won the

¹⁵ Porph. *VP* 18. With *kai* in emphatic position, and no definite article, this means “even of women” (not “of the women too”). On women see below.

¹⁶ As Burkert 1972a: 115 implies.

¹⁷ κοινὰ τὰ τῶν φίλων. Pl. *Resp.* 424a, 449c5. Cf. *Phdr.* 279c; *Lysis* 207c10; *Criti.* 112e10; *Leg.* 739c2–d5. See Timaeus in Diog. Laert. 8.10, Schol. in Platonis Phaedrum 279, and Iambl. *VP* 81; Fritz 1940: 35, 39. Porph. *VP* 33 attributes to Pythagoras both κοινὰ τὰ τῶν φίλων and ὁ φίλος ἄλλος ἑαυτός (“the friend is another self”). Iambl. *VP* 167 traces the notion of “calling the same things ‘mine’ and ‘not mine’” (*Resp.* 462c) to the Pythagorean model. For resistance to these themes see Philip 1966: 140–1 and Garnsey 2005 (who ignores Plato's emphasis on shared property).

¹⁸ I have not found this view in the literature. But cf. Pl. *Leg.* 711e; Morrison 1958; Minar 1942: 96–8. Aristophanes may also provide hints, including his portrait of Socrates in the *Clouds* (see Demand 1982).

¹⁹ Interestingly Justin, *Epitome of the Philippic History of Pompeius Trogus* 20.4.13, reporting Pythagoras' missionary meetings, remarks that women are notoriously negatively disposed. He takes Pythagoras' success with them as evidence of his effective communication with the young (implying that the women were juveniles).

trust of the council, Pythagoras summons these assemblies. Where does he hold them? What does he say?

The earliest sources, relayed in Diogenes and Porphyry, record none of the content of these speeches. Yet Iamblichus, somewhat implausibly, recounts each one in detail, but without naming any authority. Perhaps he is using the opportunity to elaborate his own Pythagorean moral teaching,²⁰ or that of his source (conceivably Apollonius). Nevertheless it is possible that some details are authentic. For instance, Pythagoras does not speak to the different groups successively in one theater, but takes them severally to different sanctuaries: the boys to that of Pythian Apollo, the women to that of Hera.²¹ What about the youths? One account reports that they were in “the gymnasium,”²² most likely the military gymnasium under the protection Apollo Lykeios.²³ As elsewhere, most famously the Lyceum in Athens, the ephebic gymnasium would be sacred to the wolf-god.²⁴

There is surely something authentic in the way that Iamblichus distributes these meetings to chosen cult centers. Pythagoras was clearly involving the community groups in ritual activities, focused on Pythian Apollo for the children, Wolf-Apollo for the youths, and Hera for at least some of the women. In Pythagoras’ speech to the schoolboys (imagined by Iamblichus), the association of Pythian Apollo with pre-pubescent boyhood is a running theme.²⁵

One thing worth noting here is that the tradition clearly insists that Pythagoras spoke to the assemblies *within the context of polis religion*, invoking the cults of Hera, Apollo, the Muses and so on.²⁶ No “South Italian” religions or mystery cults are mentioned: there is nothing about life after death, reincarnation, abstinence or magic words. Iamblichus describes a Pythagoras who speaks of virtue, education, care of oneself, purity, sexual mores and honoring the gods. He does not think that Pythagoras gave Croton new doctrines or a strange way of life; his persuasion does not

²⁰ Dillon and Hershbelle 1991: 63 n. 4 compare the speeches to those in St. John’s Gospel.

²¹ Justin 20.4.11. (Supposedly derived from Timaeus. See Fritz 1940: 34; Morrison 1956: 143–4). Iambl. VP 50.

²² Iambl. VP 37.

²³ On Apollo Lykeios and the initiation of ephebes, see Graf 2009: Ch. 5.

²⁴ There is epigraphic evidence for a sixth-century cult of Apollo Lykeios in Metapontum and areas in the immediate vicinity of Croton. See IG XIV 647 (revised reading in SEG XLVI.1322), and SEG XXIX 956–62 (mid sixth century). Discussion in Graf 1987. See Hdt. 4.15; and for Crimissa, Macalla, Chone and Petelia in the hinterland of Croton, see Giannelli 1924: 188–95. Literary sources for an ancient cult of Apollo Lykeios in Metapontum are assembled in Giannelli 1924: 61–8.

²⁵ Iambl. VP 51–3.

²⁶ On the Muses see further below.

rely on rewards or punishments after death. Iamblichus maintains a clear distinction between the moral discourse to the city, couched in exoteric terms, and the secret teachings of the Pythagorean brotherhood.

4. Social and historical considerations

If the traditional dating is right Pythagoreans were the leading political influence in Croton and its regional cities for about eighty years after Pythagoras' arrival. But what exactly was their role? We are faced with a persistent difficulty, of disentangling stories about the Pythagorean "brotherhood" – an inner circle who studied arcane matters, shared some kind of secret passwords, perhaps a coenobitic life – from information concerning the influence that Pythagorean political leaders had on a larger community, the whole city of Croton, and the subsequent alliance of cities in southern Italy. It is implausible to imagine the whole population joining the Pythagorean philosophical circle.²⁷ What, then, was the wider political role of Pythagoras and the Pythagoreans?²⁸

First let us sketch the political situation when Pythagoras arrived. It is widely thought that he came to Croton shortly after Croton was defeated by Locri at the Battle of the Sagra River, conventionally dated *c.* 530 BC.²⁹ Justin (epitomizing Trogus) suggests that Pythagoras revives the Crotonians' morale in the aftermath of that defeat:

After this the Crotonians lost their interest in the exercise of military prowess or arms. For they hated the arms that they had taken up with such bad luck; and had Pythagoras the philosopher not been there, they would have given their life over to luxury [...] Having studied under all these [sc. the Egyptians, Babylonians etc.], Pythagoras came to Croton and by his authority recalled the citizens from the luxury they had fallen into, bringing them back to frugal ways. Every day he praised excellence. (Justin 20.4.1–2, 5–6)

Justin sees the city's post-traumatic disillusionment as the context for Pythagoras' mission, and thinks that the aim was to inspire the young men and boys to military enterprise.

²⁷ On the Pythagorean way of life, see Chapter 6 in this volume.

²⁸ For more detail on the historical evidence for this period see Minar 1942: Ch. 3. I dispute Minar's interpretation, particularly his insistence that the Pythagoreans were aristocratic and reactionary in their political leanings.

²⁹ Strabo 261, 263; Justin 20.2.10–3.9. Bicknell 1966 argues for a much earlier dating (570s) using material from Theopompus found in *Suda: Phormio*.

If Justin is right, Croton would evidently have lost a generation of young men in the disastrous battle, less than a decade before Pythagoras arrived. The citizens are now reluctant to risk provoking war; a whole generation of youth has been raised with a desire to enjoy life while they can, and not to follow their lost brothers into battle. Matching the lost generation of boys would be a generation of young women without husbands or potential husbands. It makes sense that Pythagoras needed to engage the women, and the younger children of both sexes, in raising aspirations.³⁰

Besides this attention to women and children, we hear of young men flocking to join up with Pythagoras. Joining the clique apparently committed the member to a special kind of friendship, sharing of personal property, secrecy and a variety of special rituals or passwords whereby the members could identify who did or did not belong.³¹ These details tell us little about what the recruits would have learned, or how it might bear on politics in Croton or in other cities where, eventually, they obtained positions of power and influence. As I shall go on to suggest, it is not helpful to think of the emergence (or decline) of Pythagorean influence in the traditional terms used for describing political conflict. The emergence of Pythagorean politics is not a coup or a revolution. It is a creeping enthusiasm for certain ideas and ideals. How would Pythagorean thinking have come to replace the earlier approach to government? If, as seems likely, the 2000 followers who joined, with wives and children, after Pythagoras' first speech,³² were mainly younger citizens, rather than serving council members, then we can imagine that Pythagorean ideas would have spread upwards, partly as younger men became elders in their family, and partly as their attitudes and values spread to others, not just the wealthy but also ordinary citizens, thereby changing the rulers' options for internal policy. Similarly, as Pythagorean groups emerged elsewhere in the region, their greater loyalty to the Pythagorean way of life than to their separate *poleis*, and their pact of *philia* towards fellow members, would facilitate the growth of an alliance among the cities of Magna Graecia.³³ Not that this happened entirely without violence, however.

³⁰ On women see further below. ³¹ See Chapter 6 in this volume.

³² Porph. *VP* 20, citing Nicomachus (1st-century-AD Pythagorean mathematician, whose biography of Pythagoras is used by Porphyry and Iamblichus). See Burkert 1972a: 98–9.

³³ Porph. *VP* 20 seems to use the term “Magna Graecia,” normally used to refer generally to the Greek colonies in southern Italy, to mean the voluntary adherence of members to the Pythagorean discipleship and community living, as though it named the Pythagorean political alliance. On the league of cities see below.

Many recent and not-so-recent accounts have suggested that Pythagorean ideology was reactionary, oligarchic, aristocratic and anti-democratic.³⁴ But thinking in terms of oligarchy versus democracy seems quite unhelpful here. The existing regime, when Pythagoras arrived, was evidently a council of elders (resembling the Areopagus).³⁵ No revolution or constitutional disruption is mentioned as Pythagoreans gain influence.³⁶ It seems more likely that the governing elders were themselves impressed by Pythagoras, and impressed by the ideas that their young men and boys were acquiring. There was a change in morale, and values, not in regime or constitution. There is no revolution but instead a creeping enthusiasm for Pythagorean ideas.³⁷

x Probably Croton remained an oligarchy under Pythagorean influence and beyond. But this need not mean that the Pythagoreans favored aristocratic oligarchy over other systems.³⁸ For the most part, the ancient sources do not speak, as modern histories do, of competing parties seeking power, or angling for popular support.³⁹ The Pythagoreans can hardly favor “aristocracy,” if “aristocracy” makes property a criterion for influence. For, by all accounts, Pythagoreans owned no private property, lived a life of simple frugality, and promoted non-materialist values among both themselves and those they governed. Joining meant handing over one’s entire wealth, for five years’ probation. Only if not admitted could one reclaim the property.⁴⁰ A Pythagorean considers nothing *idion* (private): for friends everything is *koinon* (common).⁴¹ So private property would be no mark of esteem or qualification for government, but rather the reverse. When Diogenes remarks that the 300 disciples who ran the city “in the best possible way” constituted literally an “aristocracy,” he means neither that they were, nor that they were not promoting aristocracy: he means that they ruled well.⁴² Surely Pythagoras’ age-related *betaireiai*, his distribution of cult duties by age rather than inherited priesthoods, and his confiscation of members’ property, precisely preclude inherited

³⁴ See Minar 1942: v–vii and Ch. 2, citing Krische 1830 and Oldfather 1938, against a minority represented by Burnet 1930, Thomson 1938: 349 and Thomson 1941: 210–19 (who had suggested that Pythagorean politics was mildly democratic).

³⁵ See Giangiulio 1989: 29. ³⁶ Cf. Delatte 1922a: 18; Minar 1942: 17.

³⁷ On the absence of any coup d’état, see Minar 1942: 8, 17. ³⁸ Pace Minar 1942.

³⁹ For caveats see n. 52 below. Also Timaeus supposes that the factions seeking to bring down the Pythagoreans opposed inherited privilege (see section 6 below), which has led to the idea that the Pythagoreans favored it, but there seems little evidence for either idea.

⁴⁰ Diog. Laert. 8.10; on issues of the monetary value of property see below.

⁴¹ Diog. Laert. 8.23. See above, n. 17. ⁴² Diog. Laert. 8.3.

status. Again the egalitarian aims of Plato's myth of the metals come to mind.⁴³

These egalitarian ideals – against privilege, private property, depravity, hostility; for equality of opportunity, communism, the life of the mind and virtuous friendship – can we square these ideals with the history of southern Italy after Pythagoras' arrival? Two key events are, first, Croton's defeat of Sybaris,⁴⁴ and, second, Croton's dominance in an unusual political and monetary league of cities. The latter (to which we shall return, under *Coinage*) fits well with the idea canvassed here, of a spreading undercurrent of allegiance, as Pythagoreans with an overriding loyalty to each other increasingly dominated neighboring cities. Of this period, Iamblichus writes:

It is said, then, that on moving to Italy and Sicily, he found those cities enslaved to one another – some for many years, and other just recently. By filling these cities with thoughts of freedom by way of his "hearers" in each city, he pulled them back and made them free: Croton and Sybaris and Catania and Rhegium and Himera and Acragas and Tauromenium and some others, for which he established laws through Charondas of Catania and Zaleucus of Locri. As a result of these laws these cities were the most well-provisioned legally and the most worthy of admiration for those dwelling in the vicinity, for a long time. He completely removed civil strife and rival views and difference of opinion, not just among his own associates and their offspring during several generations (as is recorded) but also generally from all the cities in Italy and Sicily, both in terms of their internal affairs and in their relations with the other cities. (*VP* 33–4)⁴⁵

This supports my suggestion that the Pythagorean "revolution" was more philosophical than political. People came from afar to enroll, and to invite Pythagorean communities into their city. Such non-violent change side-steps conventional categories like tyranny, oligarchy, aristocracy and democracy; likewise it eludes standard models of revolution and regime-change. Immaterial ideas, values and allegiance spread by contagion, not by power, force or military success.

Croton's conquest of the notoriously wealthy city of Sybaris is harder to square with this picture. Roughly ten years after Pythagoras arrived,

⁴³ Plato's system for eliminating inherited privilege has been similarly misunderstood by those who use a simple-minded dichotomy between "elitist" and "egalitarian" political systems. An egalitarian system to facilitate equality of opportunity will reject existing criteria of privilege, but have its own criteria to select an elite by merit.

⁴⁴ Probably 510 BC, but see further below.

⁴⁵ Iamblichus' source is probably Nicomachus. Cf. Porph. *VP* 21–2. Porphyry inserts the comment "When Simichus the dictator of Centuripa heard him, he laid aside his dictatorship and he gave some of his property to his sister and some to the citizens" (*VP* 21).

according to the standard chronology, Croton defeated Sybaris at the river Traeis. Not content with victory, they then massacred the survivors, flooded the city and killed the civilians.⁴⁶ This genocide became a byword in the history of hostility of Greek against Greek.

Was this what Pythagoras had taught them to do? Diodorus, placing the battle in 510 BC,⁴⁷ explains it thus: the new despot in Sybaris demands the return and execution of some refugees, presumably his political opponents, who are seeking asylum in the agora at Croton – probably at the shrine of Hera.⁴⁸ Croton must choose: betray the suppliants, or protect them and expect retaliation. At first they favor betrayal, but they are then converted to the nobler choice by Pythagoras. This leads to hostilities. After a surprising victory, given their small army, the Crotoniates, angry and triumphant, kill everyone, instead of taking prisoners of war.⁴⁹

There is nothing here about ideological conflicts between democrats and aristocrats, or commerce and gentry.⁵⁰ Diodorus' mentions no such ideologies,⁵¹ but speaks of moral motivation: whether to betray suppliants at Hera's altar, zealous hatred of a demonized enemy and so on. Such explanations, in terms of human psychology, are compatible with seeing Pythagoras as Croton's moral conscience rather than its political leader.⁵²

If this still seems too violent for Pythagoras to have been responsible, we could experiment with an alternative chronology. Suppose that Pythagoras was prompted to begin his teaching by the moral decline associated with Croton's victory over Sybaris, not by falling morale after the defeat at Sagra River, as Justin had suggested.⁵³ His teaching on friendship, and not punishing in anger, might be measures to prevent a repeat of such atrocities, to replace rivalry with collaboration, substitute common frugality for competitive consumption, and devise a politics of friendship and humane justice: all corrections to the arrogance resulting from a magnificent defeat of the

⁴⁶ Sources for these events include Diod. Sic. 12.9.3; Strabo 6.1.13; Hdt. 5.44; Ath. *Deipn.* 12 521e–f. Some cite the lack of archaeological traces of Sybaris to support the genocide story (but see below on later references to “Sybaris”).

⁴⁷ Diod. Sic. 12.9–10. ⁴⁸ See Ath. 12 522a for implied offence to Hera.

⁴⁹ Diod. Sic. 12.10.1.

⁵⁰ For explanations deploying these concepts see Minar 1942: 12–14.

⁵¹ Minar finds support where Diodorus' describes the dictator (Telys) as a demagogue and the exiles as *megistoi andres* and *euporotatoi*. Diod. Sic. 12.9.2. But surely Diodorus simply means that Telys bought the people's support by confiscating wealth from some fat cats and distributing it to the rest. It says nothing about what existing support he had: arguably it implies that he did not already have popular support; nor whether the fat cats were traditional gentry or commercial types.

⁵² In Athenaeus the Sybarites had not only killed Telys' opponents, but also some Crotoniate ambassadors, and had established some extravagant games to undermine the Olympics. These crimes cause Hera to vomit bile in the agora, and a fountain of blood (12 521d–e).

⁵³ See above, n. 29.

world's most gluttonous city. This otherwise speculative hypothesis finds support in Athenaeus (following Timaeus), who says that Croton became decadent *after* defeating Sybaris,⁵⁴ not after losing at Sagra River, and that Pythagoras' mission to Croton came *after*, not *before*, the destruction of Sybaris. Either chronology makes sense. Perhaps we could even combine them, if Pythagoras has to add new measures to curb the zeal resulting from his first revival of piety.

5. Pythagoras and the women

We have mentioned that Pythagoras chose to speak not just to men and boys, but also to women. They too would have a role in moral support,⁵⁵ and also in the renewal of cult. Pythagoras apparently introduced a combined sanctuary for the Muses, to regularize an earlier plurality of separate cults.⁵⁶ It is not clear why, though a connection with Pythagorean interests in music is tempting. There is no historical evidence to support Morrison's suggestion that the earlier cults involved ritual prostitution,⁵⁷ although Iamblichus' remark that having prostitutes was a regional custom (*epi-chorion*) is certainly strange.⁵⁸

In Iamblichus' account, Pythagoras urges women to avoid animal sacrifice, to offer frugal home-baked goods, and to take their offerings to the sanctuary in person, not by sending a slave. He pictures Pythagoras reviving old-fashioned values, with time-honored domestic and religious roles for men and women. But should we not prefer a different picture, in which Pythagoras has a quite revolutionary and unconventional effect? Notice a widespread tradition whereby Pythagoras did not just teach women to be faithful wives, but made them part of an intellectual project.⁵⁹ As ever, it is hard to separate evidence about polis structures from accounts of the inner Pythagorean circle, but Iamblichus (*VP* 56, following Timaeus, it seems)⁶⁰ says that Pythagoras created an age-related *cursus* for women, identifying them with different deities at different stages of their lives (based on some arcane interest in the meaning of names). A woman starts as a *kore* when

⁵⁴ Ath. 12 522a.

⁵⁵ In Iambl. *VP* 54 wives are to take pride in letting the husband win an argument.

⁵⁶ Iambl. *VP* 45. Cf. *VP* 264 (from Apollonius) where a Pythagorean revival is marked by public sacrifice at "the shrine to the Muses established by Pythagoras"; and Diog. Laert. 8.40. See Boyancé 1937.

⁵⁷ Morrison 1956: 145–6.

⁵⁸ Iambl. *VP* 50. Morrison suggests that Iamblichus does not understand his source. But Iambl. *VP* 210, mentioning a preexisting taboo on sex in sanctuaries and public places is counter-evidence.

⁵⁹ Porph. *VP* 19. ⁶⁰ See also Diog. Laert. 8.11.

unmarried, becomes a *nymphē* when betrothed, a *meter* when producing children, and *maia* (a Doric dialect term) when her child has children.⁶¹ What might such life-stage-groupings be for? Were they to privilege those with children and grandchildren over the childless? To encourage competitive virtue within each category? To distribute cult and ritual duties to different age groups? To provide support and opportunities for unmarried girls and childless widows in the aftermath of war? To assign identities and roles by age or experience, not social status or wealth? While some of these (particularly the first) could be ways to reinforce traditional aristocratic values, others (especially the last two) would be radical egalitarian projects. So which is the better reconstruction?

Another tradition names some women who held important positions in this sequence of sacralized life-stages: Porphyry (*VP* 4, based on Timaeus) says that Pythagoras' daughter "led the girls in Croton" and his wife led the wives. Since these were educated women, "leading the girls" might not just mean leading cult or maidenly duties, but might identify the girl's rank among students; or her role as an instructor for the women's class. Some sayings are attributed to Theano, his wife,⁶² concerning modesty and ritual purity around sexual intercourse.⁶³ She is also said to have written "some things" (unlike her son, Telauges).⁶⁴ Diogenes and Iamblichus give the name Damo for their daughter,⁶⁵ and Bitale for a granddaughter (Damo's daughter, later Telauges' wife – Telauges being much younger than Damo, and raised by Theano after Pythagoras' death).⁶⁶ Much of this must be legend, but the names seem to be authentic, and the tradition that Telauges taught Empedocles fits the chronology, if nothing else.⁶⁷

6. Coinage, money and measures

Many have been tempted by the thought that there could be some link between, on the one hand, the arrival of a monetized economy first in Ionia

⁶¹ Diog. Laert. 8.10 describes a similar fourfold division of life for males in terms of seasons of the year.

⁶² Diogenes Laertius attributes both to Theano. Iamblichus attributes one to Pythagoras (*VP* 55), the other to "Deino, wife of Brontinos" though he knows another tradition ascribing it to Theano (*VP* 132). Some traditions evidently made Pythagoras celibate, and Theano or Deino the wife or daughter of Brontinus.

⁶³ Diog. Laert. 8.43. The point of the remark that "when she puts on her shame again, after removing it for intercourse, she puts on what makes her a woman" is probably that apart from womanly modesty, which is a superficial mark of gender, there is no real distinction between a man and a woman.

⁶⁴ Diog. Laert. 8.43. ⁶⁵ Diog. Laert. 8.42. ⁶⁶ Iambl. *VP* 146.

⁶⁷ See the allegedly spurious verse of Empedocles, DK 31B155, quoted by Diog. Laert. 8.43.

and then in western Greece, and on the other hand, Pythagorean number theory and Pythagorean politics. Pythagoras, growing up in Samos, would have encountered coinage, newly invented in Lydia, as its applications were first becoming apparent and as small denomination coins were being invented to service a wide variety of transactions. This happened first in his native Ionia. Coins start to appear in the western colonies marginally later in the sixth century.

Could Pythagoras himself have brought the practice of making and using coins, to places that had not previously had them? This idea is not entirely plausible. In defending it, C. J. Seltman⁶⁸ appealed to the distinctive incuse coinage⁶⁹ in Magna Graecia, and to the fact that in the late sixth century (the period of rising Pythagorean influence and Croton's regional dominance) there was some kind of "monetary union," characterized by coins bearing Croton's tripod and initials (qoppa, rho, omicron), on one side, and the motif and initials of another city on the other,⁷⁰ suggesting a system of mutually recognized currency across the region. Seltman argued that the chronology suggested a causal connection with Pythagoras.

The fact that these "monetary union" coins occur during the Pythagorean period need not mean that the coinage was designed to secure Croton's dominance, nor that it was inspired by Pythagorean policy, though it may be symptomatic of these things. Seltman suggested that Pythagoras himself invented the incuse coins, to illustrate his "Table of Opposites." This seems unlikely.⁷¹ Nevertheless the idea that Pythagoras might have brought coinage with him from Ionia is partially credible, and was taken up recently in Richard Seaford's ambitious attempt to connect the invention of money with the invention of philosophy, in *Money and the Early Greek Mind*.⁷² Pythagoras is a prime example for Seaford, who suggests that by introducing coinage, with the associated notions of value abstracted from physical substance, and of measuring in discrete multiples of a common (though arbitrary) unit, Pythagoras caused significant and related changes in economic organization and metaphysical thought.

No ancient texts support this idea, unless the following text (from Aristoxenus, quoted by Stobaeus) is relevant:

⁶⁸ Seltman 1933: 76–80; Seltman 1949; Seltman 1956.

⁶⁹ I.e. coins stamped in relief on one side and the same design in intaglio on the obverse.

⁷⁰ Illustrations in Gorini 1975. ⁷¹ Against Seltman see Philip 1966: 197–8.

⁷² Seaford (2004: 266–83) considers Pythagoras and Philolaus, but lacks any satisfactory discussion of how money reached Italy, or of Xenophanes or Parmenides. On these issues see Philip 1966: Appendix I, n. 5.

Pythagoras seems to have revered the business relating to numbers [ἡ περὶ τοὺς ἀριθμοὺς πραγματεία] most of all, and to have advanced [προαγαγεῖν] it for the future by withdrawing [ἀπαγαγὼν] it from the usage of merchants.⁷³

Here Pythagoras promotes one kind of “business with numbers,” by abstracting them from another kind of “business with numbers.” This need not imply that Pythagoras despises commerce; it may simply mean that he starts his inquiries from commercial calculations. Aristoxenus is probably playing with two meanings: does Pythagoras abstract arithmetic from its mercantile use for counting things, or does he take it away from the merchants, in order to move it forward? Aristoxenus might indeed mean that Pythagoras took it away from tradesmen, and into the academy, if the earlier stages of mathematical research had been undertaken by merchants to facilitate complex trading, banking, loans, interest and so on, and then, under Pythagoras, it became the preserve of philosophers and pure mathematicians, and was thereby advanced beyond the limited interests of practitioners.

Clearly Aristoxenus cannot mean that Pythagoras stopped the traders from using sums. Perhaps he even promoted coinage, and other standard units of weight or value in trade. Hints of such intervention have sometimes been detected in Aristoxenus’ claim that Pythagoras was the first to introduce weights and measures to the Greeks.⁷⁴ This must be false, but could derive from something true. Since early coinage developed from tokens measured by weight, and the names for the older and larger units (antedating small coinage for minor transactions) are the names of old units of weight (e.g. the Stater), introducing those large monetary tokens was, in effect, parasitic upon first introducing standard weights and measures, to which issues of coinage could be pegged, on a local or pan-Hellenic basis. Such measures were surely already in use elsewhere, but in introducing matching coinage, Pythagoras might have standardized Croton’s measures to match the ones he had used in the East. Such standardized measures would greatly facilitate shared currencies with other cities, and international trade.

Among recent attempts to discredit Seltman’s theories, some are not well founded: Burkert, following De Vogel, argued that Sybaris, not

⁷³ From Aristox. *On Arithmetic*: fr. 23 (Wehrli), Number V 2 05 in Kaiser. Stobaeus *Ecl.* I. Prooem 6; DK 58B2.

⁷⁴ Diog. Laert. 8.14 (DK 14.12).

Croton, had coinage first.⁷⁵ But this is apparently largely guesswork,⁷⁶ based on Sybaris's mid-sixth-century affluence, prior to its defeat by Croton. Certainly some coins have Sybaris' emblems and initials, so they should antedate its destruction. But the exact dating, relative to the first coins of Croton, is uncertain.⁷⁷

Still, even if coinage arrived before Pythagoras, and the incuse technique was not invented by Pythagoreans but in Sybaris, say, at the very least Pythagoras had come from a culture in which money had been used for longer and for more things; doubtless he could see the potential economic and social advantages for Croton. Even if he did not bring coinage to Croton, he may have made it work as never before. This could indeed have helped with regenerating that city. The ancient sources mention no economic reforms, however.

Another question arises, concerning the fact that you had to deposit your wealth on joining the Pythagorean society. The reports imply that it was not just loaned, but became common property. This raises the following puzzle: in what form did you donate your property? Did owners of land or buildings transfer ownership of their real estate to the community, and then get the same land and buildings back, in sound condition, if expelled? Or did they donate their wealth in the form of money? The latter seems unlikely unless the economy was already fully monetized, with land being bought and sold for cash, not rented out for services or contributions in kind; but it requires a relatively advanced economy to have established a way of determining the uncontroversial monetary value of landed property.

One way to make sense of these traditions is to suppose that most postulants were young men (and women, perhaps) who did not own their family property. Perhaps they were the sons and daughters of propertied families. If some came from trading families, they might not yet own the family's workshop or ships and warehouses. Perhaps many were in their ephebic years. These young adults would not have much wealth to bring. Rarely would they be depositing large sums of money or property. And perhaps if they did own property, buildings or land, it was just ownership of the property that was transferred without measuring its monetary value.

So the idea of a community of friends having all things in common does not require measurable contributions of property, nor any assessment of

⁷⁵ Burkert 1972a: 113 n. 125; De Vogel 1966: 52–4.

⁷⁶ It seems to stem from a speculative hypothesis in Kraay 1976: 163. I have seen no confirmation from datable finds. Detailed discussion on the chronological significance of the region's coinage in Fritz 1940: 80–6. See also Kahrstedt 1932 and (with caution) Giannelli 1928: Ch. 1.

⁷⁷ Further discussion in Gorini 1975: 50–1 (who rejects the connection with Pythagoras, on chronological grounds) and Demand 1976 (who argues the same, on grounds of technique).

monetary value. They could do all this without the notion of monetary value at all.

7. Political opposition to the Pythagoreans

The Pythagoreans' years of political success seem to have extended well into the fifth century and over a large region, although there is only limited evidence for the details.⁷⁸ By contrast, the Pythagorean writers have plenty to say about the end of Pythagorean influence in the region, but their reports seem somewhat muddled.

Many authors mention a fire at the house of Milon in Croton, where influential Pythagoreans were meeting at the time. Some accounts say that all the Pythagorean meeting rooms, in all the Pythagorean-dominated cities, were torched.⁷⁹ As a result the leading officials in all the cities died, they suggest, and disorder followed. Diogenes Laertius reckons that Pythagoras died in this event (though he knows of variant versions in which he did not);⁸⁰ Iamblichus knows a version from Aristoxenus in which the fire happened in Croton, after Pythagoras had moved (in old age) to Metapontum.⁸¹ He also offers a second version, from Nicomachus, and a third, with an alternative chronology, that he found in Apollonius.⁸² Plutarch thinks that the arson attack happened in Metapontum, not Croton.⁸³ Most sources agree that Pythagoras was not killed, though they disagree on whether this was because he had left Croton, was temporarily absent, or was in the house but escaped. Most conclude that he was absent, and that only two people escaped (though there are discrepancies on the names of the two survivors).⁸⁴

Most scholars think that these writers are confusing the circumstances of several periods of political opposition, which they combine into a single story of the end of Pythagorean control in the region.⁸⁵ Zhmud and others suggest that the reports of fires in the meeting places across the cities of the region refer to an event in the fifth century that signaled the end of the period of Pythagorean influence. But by then Pythagoras was not just absent but long dead. I do not think that we can be wholly sure about the

⁷⁸ For details see Minar 1942: Ch. 3. ⁷⁹ Polyb. 2.39.

⁸⁰ Diog. Laert. 8.39. ⁸¹ Iambl. *VP* 248–9.

⁸² Iambl. *VP* 251–3 (citing Nicomachus) and from 254 on (citing Apollonius). Nicomachus thinks Pythagoras was away caring for Pherecydes in Delos (see above, n. 6).

⁸³ Plut. *De Gen.* 583a–c.

⁸⁴ Archippus and Lysis according to Aristoxenus (Iambl. *VP* 250).

⁸⁵ See Zhmud 2012b: Ch. 2.4. Also Riedweg 2005: 104; Minar 1942: Ch. 4.

chronology, but investigating the reports will provide further hints about the Pythagorean political agenda and why it was under attack.

We shall start with the period when Pythagoras was still alive. Was there hostility during Pythagoras' own lifetime? Did he have to run for his life? Certainly politics in Croton was not entirely uneventful. Seemingly a dictator named Cleinias seized power briefly around 494,⁸⁶ which might conceivably have made Pythagoras emigrate to Metapontum. There are also references to Croton beleaguering "the Sybarites" in c. 476, which means either that Sybaris was re-occupied or that some exiles were still called "Sybarites."⁸⁷ According to Diodorus Siculus, Sybaris was restored in 453, and destroyed again by Croton not much later.⁸⁸ Furthermore the city known as Thurii, founded in either 446 or 444,⁸⁹ was apparently first called Sybaris.⁹⁰ Its citizens may have called themselves Sybarites.⁹¹ Certainly the old hostilities between Croton and Sybaris extended into the fifth century.

Ancient writers mostly blame a man called Cylon for the fires that killed the Pythagorean leaders, so that the events have become known as the Cylonian conspiracy. Cylon, they claim, was someone who wanted to join the Pythagorean society, but on being refused after some years of probation, he became angry.⁹² In distinguishing two distinct periods of hostility, modern scholars generally keep Cylon himself in the late sixth century, but separate him from the fire in the meeting rooms and the end of Pythagorean political dominance. But did Cylon object to Pythagorean political control in Croton? Or was he one of the Pythagoreans? The name "Cylon" appears occasionally among Pythagorean administrators; notably one such is listed as administrator (Exarch) of the subject city Sybaris.⁹³ So perhaps there was a squabble between Pythagoreans, not challenges from non-Pythagoreans in the sixth century? This is the view recommended by Zhmud.⁹⁴

How might we square Zhmud's idea with the story that Cylon was a Pythagorean reject?⁹⁵ Here is one solution, fanciful but not impossible: suppose that Cylon had once applied to join, not because he liked the

⁸⁶ Diod. Hal. *Ant. Rom.* 20.7 makes Cleinias a contemporary of Anaxilas, 494–76 BC. See Fritz 1940: 68; Riedweg 2005: 61; Mele 1984: 57; Zhmud 2012b: Ch. 3.1.

⁸⁷ Fritz 1940: 68–9. ⁸⁸ Diod. Sic. 11.90 and 12.10.

⁸⁹ Diod. Sic. 12.9–10 gives 446, but pseudo-Plutarch *Lives of the Ten Orators: Lysias* 835d and Dion. Hal. *Lys.* 1 date it 444 BC.

⁹⁰ Pseudo-Plutarch *Lives of the Ten Orators: Lysias* 835d. The change of name is confirmed by coinage. The discrepancy on foundation date may reflect the "refounding" under a new name.

⁹¹ Cf. Hdt. 5.45, referring to Sybarites in about 443 BC. ⁹² Aristox. fr. 18 in Iambl. *VP* 248.

⁹³ Iambl. *VP* 74. ⁹⁴ Zhmud 2012b: Ch. 2.4.

⁹⁵ Iambl. *VP* 252; Diod. Sic. 10.11.1. Above, n. 33.

Pythagorean ideology, but because he resented its power in Croton. Perhaps Cylon wanted power for himself, and tried to get it under the Pythagorean umbrella, hoping to undermine the Pythagoreans from within. This would explain why his name appears in lists of Pythagoreans; but also his failure in the loyalty tests, his anger, and his violent response. So what looks like a “rift within the Pythagorean society,”⁹⁶ could also be a conspiracy against them.

Turning to the fifth century and the end of Pythagorean political success in the region, we should consider what motivated the opposition at that stage. Presumably there was indeed some catastrophic event involving fires in the meeting rooms of the society’s political wing; presumably if the attack brought down the administration in all the cities of the region, there must have been coordinated fires in several places, unless several leaders were gathered for some regional council meeting in Croton. But I see no reason to think that opposition to the Pythagoreans was either “democratic” or “oligarchic” in ambition. Apart from the brief period of tyranny under Cleinias, Croton seems throughout to have been run by a council of 1000 citizens. As we saw, Pythagorean political involvement did not alter the number or range of citizens participating in this body. The emergence of Pythagorean *hetaireiai* (clubs) in the cities of southern Italy seems to be the most likely route to influence on the young men from the ruling families. Any opposition to Pythagorean influence would therefore probably come from rival clubs of propertied citizens, offering not a different constitution but *different policies*. Presumably they chose assassination because widespread respect for the Pythagoreans left no prospect of a popular uprising.

As before, the standard political categories seem unhelpful. Perhaps the same is true for most of the political and legislative reforms attributed to intellectuals and philosophers in the archaic period. Not all (if any) of the known cases of this turned out reactionary or aristocratic in spirit. In Athens, the reforms of Solon and Cleisthenes tended toward democracy. And in Tarentum, more than a century after Pythagoras’ involvement at Croton, the Pythagorean Archytas served repeatedly as general under a democratic regime.⁹⁷

A complete treatment of Pythagorean political policy would need to investigate the history of Pythagoreanism in Tarentum, and particularly Archytas’ influence there during the fourth century.⁹⁸ It is striking that the

⁹⁶ Zhmud 2012b: Ch. 2.4. ⁹⁷ See Huffman 2005: 8–18.

⁹⁸ For relevant material see Huffman 2005 and Chapter 3 above. Minar 1942: 86–92 suffers from insisting that Pythagoreanism was reactionary.

two survivors of the fifth century fire at the house of Milon, according to Iamblichus, were Archippus and Lysis,⁹⁹ apparently from Tarentum (which is whither Archippus then fled, suggesting that Tarentum was already a Pythagorean haven). Given the constraints of space here, we cannot do justice to the later history of that city, but its presence in the Pythagorean circuit already in the fifth century suggests that the Pythagoreans were not anti-democratic in principle. This in turn makes it unlikely that those responsible for overthrowing the Pythagoreans in Croton were motivated by some recognizably ideological considerations, such as promoting democratic or commercial interests over traditional aristocracy. Perhaps the key to the Pythagorean monopoly on power was their notion that friends have all things in common (a belief that eliminates all such ideological divisions). This may also be sufficient to explain why some who were not among their friends and did not have that powerful network of support might feel excluded from the corridors of power

⁹⁹ See n. 84.