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Pythagoras is full of beans!

Posted on May 17, 2011 by Roger Pearse

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From Aulus Gellius' *Attic Nights*, book 4, chapter 11, we find this curious tale about Pythagoras, the philosopher well-known for his vegetarianism and opposition to eating beans. It is, perhaps, from an anti-Pythagoras source.

11. The nature of the information which Aristoxenus has handed down about Pythagoras on the ground that it was more authoritative; and also what Plutarch wrote in the same vein about that same Pythagoras.

An erroneous belief of long standing has established itself and become current, that the philosopher Pythagoras did not eat of animals: also that he abstained from the bean, which the Greeks call κύαρος. In accordance with that belief the poet Callimachus wrote:

I tell you too, as did Pythagoras,
Withhold your hands from beans, a
hurtful food.

Also, as the result of the same belief, Marcus Cicero wrote these words in the first book of his work *On Divination*: "Plato therefore bids us go to our sleep in such bodily condition that there may be nothing to cause delusion and disturbance in our minds. It is thought to be for that reason too that the

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Pythagoreans were forbidden to eat beans, a food that produces great flatulency, which is disturbing to those who seek mental calm.”

So then Cicero. But Aristoxenus the musician, a man thoroughly versed in early literature, a pupil of the philosopher Aristotle, in the book *On Pythagoras* which he has left us, says that Pythagoras used no vegetable more often than beans, since that food gently loosened the bowels and relieved them. I add Aristoxenus’ own words: “Pythagoras among vegetables especially recommended the bean, saying that it was both digestible and loosening; and therefore he most frequently made use of it.”

Aristoxenus also relates that Pythagoras ate very young pigs and tender kids. This fact he seems to have learned from his intimate friend Xenophilus the Pythagorean and from some other older men, who lived not long after the time of Pythagoras. And the same information about animal food is given by the poet Alexis, in the comedy entitled “The Pythagorean Bluestocking.” Furthermore, the reason for the mistaken idea about abstaining from beans seems to be, that in a poem of Empedocles, who was a follower of Pythagoras, this line is found:

O wretches, utter wretches, from beans
withhold your hands.

For most men thought that κῆμους meant the vegetable, according to the common use of the word. But those who have studied the poems of Empedocles with greater care and knowledge say that here κῆμους refers to the testicles, and that after the Pythagorean manner they were called in a covert and symbolic way κῆμοι, because they are the cause of pregnancy and furnish the power for human generation: and that therefore Empedocles in that verse desired to keep men, not from eating beans, but from excess in venery.

Plutarch too, a man of weight in scientific matters, in the first book of his work *On Homer* wrote that Aristotle gave the same account of the Pythagoreans:

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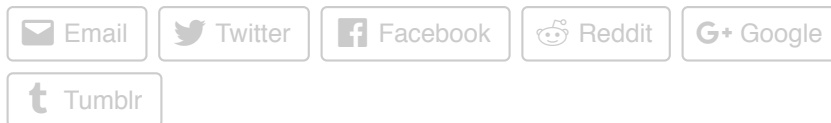
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namely, that except for a few parts of the flesh they did not abstain from eating animals. Since the statement is contrary to the general belief, I have appended Plutarch's own words: "Aristotle says that the Pythagoreans abstained from the matrix, the heart, the ἄκαλήφη and some other such things, but used all other animal food." Now the ἄκαλήφη is a marine creature which is called the sea-nettle. But Plutarch in his Table Talk says that the Pythagoreans also abstained from mullets.

But as to Pythagoras himself, while it is well known that he declared that he had come into the world as Euphorbus, what Cleanthes and Dicaearchus have recorded is less familiar—that he was afterwards Pyrrhus Pyranthius, then Aethalides, and then a beautiful courtesan, whose name was Alco.

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5 thoughts on “Pythagoras is full of beans!”

James Snapp, Jr. says:
May 18, 2011 at 5:52 am

Hmm. All this reminds me of a story about two philosophers — I wish I could recollect their names. Anyway, it goes something like this: one was a royal advisor; the other was poor and

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independent. The royal advisor, after enjoying a satisfying meal, was on his way back to the palace when he encountered the other philosopher in the street, and said, "Friend, you could have good meals every day, if only you would learn to flatter people." To which the other philosopher answered, "And you could be an honest philosopher every day, if only you would learn to like beans."

Yours in Christ,

James Snapp, Jr.

Roger Pearse says:

May 18, 2011 at 7:32 pm

I find the story in Paley's "Greek wit", almost on the first page.

Diogenes the Cynic was washing some vegetables, when he saw Aristippus pass. Says the Cynic, "If you had learnt to clean cabbages you would not have been a courtier in the halls of the great."

"And if you," retorted the other, "had learnt how to associate with your fellow men, you would not now have been cleaning cabbages." — Diogenes Laertius, book 2, 8:68.

Somewhat later in Paley is the following, which perhaps explains the first.

The wife of King Hiero once asked Simonides whether it was better to be born wealthy or wise? "Wealthy, it would seem," he replied, "for I always see the wise hanging about the doors of the rich." — Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, book 2 ch. 16.

Paley's Greek wit (in two volumes) can be found at [Archive.org](http://www.archive.org).

James Snapp, Jr. says:

May 18, 2011 at 9:47 pm

Thanks; I'll have to check that out!

Yours in Christ,

James Snapp, Jr.

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Maureen says:

May 20, 2011 at 12:31 pm

I realize the mullet mentioned is a fish, but I had a sudden picture of Pythagoras pointing at a disciple and demanding he cut his hair short in back. 😊

Roger Pearse says:

May 20, 2011 at 7:26 pm

Arf.

Few Pythagoreans, then, were in 80's synth-bands...

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