

A Genealogy of Pythagoras

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Abstract. *This article deals with different traditions of the genealogy of Pythagoras of Samos (c. 570–480 BC). It shows how three versions of Pythagoras's lineage were combined in antiquity. Firstly, Pythagoras could be seen as the son of human parents who themselves descend from Ancaeus, the mythical founder and first king of Samos who is closely connected with both Greek and Near Eastern mythology. Secondly, there is the tradition that Pythagoras was the son of a human mother and Apollo, which goes together with the important role that this deity played in the religion of Pythagoreanism from the very start. Finally, the Pythagorean doctrine of metempsychosis holds another possibility in explaining Pythagoras's genealogy that connects him directly with the shamanistic motif of the soul-journey. A distinct analysis of the sources shows that the symbiosis of all three traditions was obviously the most common way of explaining Pythagoras's genealogy.*

Rezumat. *Acest articol tratează diferite tradiții ale genealogiei lui Pitagora din Samos (c. 570–480 î.Hr.). Se arată modul în care trei versiuni ale liniei lui Pitagora au fost combinate în antichitate. În primul rând, Pitagora ar putea fi văzut ca fiul părinților umani care ei înșiși coboară din Ancaeus, fondatorul mitic și primul rege al lui Samos, strâns legat atât de mitologia greacă, cât și de Orientul Apropiat. În al doilea rând, există tradiția că Pitagora a fost fiul unei mame umane și a lui Apollo, ceea ce este alături de rolul important pe care această zeitate îl joacă în religia pitagoreanului încă de la început. În cele din urmă, doctrina pitagoreică a metempsihozei oferă o altă posibilitate în a explica genealogia lui Pitagora: îl conectează direct cu motivul șamanic al călătoriei sufletului. O analiză distinctă a surselor arată că simbioza celor trei tradiții a fost în mod evident cea mai comună modalitate de explicare a genealogiei lui Pitagora.*

Keywords: Pythagoras, Genealogy, Ancaeus, Samos.

1. Introduction

This paper deals with the different traditions of Pythagoras of Samos's genealogy. The sources offer at least three versions of Pythagoras's lineage if we take the term in a more generous way: Pythagoras can be seen as the son of human parents who themselves are descendants of Ancaeus (Ἀγκάϊος), a son of Poseidon or Zeus and mythical king of Samos. Other sources speak of Pythagoras as the son of Apollo and a human mother, whereas it is also possible to

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see Pythagoras as “Hyperborean Apollo” (Ἀπόλλων ἐξ Ὑπερβορέων)², a certain epiphany of this deity. Still there is a third version because some authors of Graeco-Roman antiquity refer to the Pythagorean doctrine of metempsychosis and give us one to four more or less famous pre-existences for Pythagoras’s soul. Pythagoras thus turns out to have a rather complex lineage. Obviously, these versions are based on different traditions that are told in the sources. I will discuss these three traditions and their intertextual connections after providing some important biographical information.

2. Biographical information

Pythagoras of Samos (c. 570–480 BC)³ was a natural philosopher and founded a political and religious community in Croton in Southern Italy, by the members of which he was regarded as their charismatic teacher and leader. Born most likely on the Greek island of Samos,⁴ he is supposed to have travelled to Egypt and the Orient to study the old wisdom of the local priests.⁵ The later sources also present the Persians, the Jews and the Chaldeans as Pythagoras’s teachers;⁶ our latest but most extensive biography of Pythagoras, written by the Neoplatonist Iamblichus of Chalkis (c. 240–325 AD) at the turn of the third to the fourth century AD,⁷ even lets Pythagoras study with Celtic and Iberian instructors,⁸ a piece of information which shows a legendary aspect of Pythagoras’s biography.

Around 530 BC, Pythagoras left Samos and moved to Croton in Southern Italy. Aristoxenus explains Pythagoras’s migration with the tyranny of Polycrates which seemed too oppressive and obviously did not reflect Pythagoras’s own political convictions.⁹ Porphyrius of Tyre (c. 234–305/310 AD), another Neoplatonist philosopher and scholar, who wrote his *Life of Pythagoras* within his greater history of philosophy and who was both teacher and, later, philosophical opponent of Iamblichus,¹⁰ tells us two strange stories that happened on Pythagoras’s way to Italy. We want to discuss these stories, as they show Pythagoras’s special relationship to the divine world, a motive that has to be taken into account when analyzing Pythagoras’s genealogic tree.

² Diogenes Laertios 8,11.

³ For discussions about Pythagoras’s lifetime, see e.g. MANSFELD 1987, 98; RIEDWEG 2001, 649; GEMELLI MARCIANO 2009, 170.

⁴ Some sources present other birthplaces, such as Tyre at the Levantine coast, the island of Lemnos, or Phleius on the Peloponnesus; see RIEDWEG 2007, 19. Also see chapter 3 for detailed information on this topic.

⁵ Antiphon, FGrH 1096 1a, 1b; Isocrates, Orations 11,28.

⁶ Hermippos, FGrH 1026 F21; Porphyrius, Vita Pythagorae 6, 11; Iamblichus, Vita Pythagorica 19, 151, 154.

⁷ See BRISSON 1998, 848–849.

⁸ Iamblichus, Vita Pythagorica 151.

⁹ Aristoxenus fr. 16 Wehrli; see RIEDWEG 2007, 25. — Pythagoras himself and the Pythagoreans obviously preferred oligarchic tendencies; see BURKERT 1962, 182; RIEDWEG 2007, 33–34; GEMELLI MARCIANO 2009, 170.

¹⁰ See CHASE 2001, 175; TANASEANU-DÖBLER 2012, 76.

At first, Pythagoras is supposed to have stopped in Delphi where he left an elegy on the tomb of Apollo, “declaring that Apollo was the son of Silenus, but was slain by Pytho”.¹¹ This seems weird, as the traditional myth about Apollo and the dragon or giant snake Pytho ends with Apollo’s victory over the dragon and not the other way round.¹² We will not get into further detail here, but let us just state that obviously Porphyrius thought that Pythagoras was somehow linked to the Delphic Apollonian cults and had a special knowledge about Apollo’s true destiny; this will turn out to be important when we discuss Pythagoras’s closeness to Apollo a little later.

The second stop on Pythagoras’s way to Italy was in Crete. Pythagoras is said to have been purified by the priests of Morgos who also initiated him into secret rites. He even descended into the Idaean cave where he stayed for 27 days.¹³ Very similar to the previous story about Apollo, Pythagoras again left an epigram, this time at the tomb of Zeus: “Pythagoras to Zeus. Zan [Zeus] deceased here lies, whom men call Jove.”¹⁴ These two episodes hint a certain dimension of Pythagoras’s knowledge about the netherworld¹⁵ as well as his special relationship to the gods, in particular Apollo and Zeus. This seems interesting because these two gods play a certain role in at least two versions of Pythagoras’s genealogy.

Having finally arrived in Southern Italy, Pythagoras became a political and religious leader for his community in the cities of Croton, Metapontum and Sybaris. Pythagoras’s closeness to Apollo finds its analogy in the distinguished role that this deity was attributed to in the *Magna Graecia*.¹⁶ The Pythagorean doctrines refer to ethics and politics, mathematics, astronomy and cosmogony, but also cover many religious aspects. Pythagoras is portrayed as a superb speaker, and in fact the Pythagoreans gained political influence in some Italian cities.¹⁷ However, after some years of great success, we can notice a number of anti-Pythagorean rebellions, probably headed by Cylon, a Crotonian who, if we believe Porphyrius, wanted to become a Pythagorean himself but was rejected by Pythagoras because of his rough and violent disposition.¹⁸ The Pythagoreans’ opponents even attacked them physically during

¹¹ Porphyrius, *Vita Pythagorae* 16, translated by K.S. Guthrie.

¹² See RIEDWEG 2007, 25.

¹³ Porphyrius, *Vita Pythagorae* 16; the story is also told by Diogenes Laertios 8,3 with the addition that Pythagoras descended into the cave together with Epimenides.

¹⁴ Porphyrius, *Vita Pythagorae* 16, translated by K.S. Guthrie.

¹⁵ See RIEDWEG 2007, 26.

¹⁶ There were ancient places of worship to Apollo in Metapontum and in Makalla near Croton; see BURKERT 1962, 178–179. During the time of Greek colonization, the Apollonian oracle of Delphi became an important place for the expanding ventures and Apollo himself a “promotor of civilization”: PHILIP 1966, 154.

¹⁷ Porphyrius, *Vita Pythagorae* 54; see RIEDWEG 2007, 33. — The hegemony of Croton in Southern Italy until 450 BC and its flourishing cultural and political developments might be attributed to the Pythagoreans; see BURKERT 1962, 182; RIEDWEG 2001, 650; GEMELLI MARCIANO 2009, 170.

¹⁸ Porphyrius, *Vita Pythagorae* 54.

their gatherings. We do not know the exact circumstances of Pythagoras's death — the sources give us at least three different stories,¹⁹ but they all agree on a very sad ending. Nevertheless, many of the Pythagorean doctrines were still being discussed, and so Pythagoras stayed a well-known person even after his death.

The sources also give us an idea about Pythagoras's own family, although there exist a number of different versions. Diogenes Laertius tells us that

“Pythagoras had a wife, Theano by name, daughter of Brontinus of Croton, though some call her Brontinus's wife and Pythagoras's pupil. He had a daughter Damo [...]. They also had a son Telauges, who succeeded his father and, according to some, was Empedocles's instructor [...] Telauges wrote nothing, so far as we know, but his mother Theano wrote a few things.”²⁰

Porphyrius, on the other hand, hints that

“by Theano, a Cretan, the daughter of Pythonax, he had a son, Telauges and a daughter, Myia; to whom some add Arignota, whose Pythagorean writings are still extant. Timaeus relates that Pythagoras's daughter, while a maiden, took precedence among the maidens in Crotona, and when a wife, among married men. The Crotonians made her house a temple of Demeter, and the neighboring street they called a museum.”²¹

We can conclude that there was definitely a tradition of Theano being the wife of Pythagoras, even though her own ancestry is unsure; we may also take for certain that Pythagoras fathered some children, although we do not know their number and their names for sure. Obviously, there was a tradition about one or more famous daughters (Damo, Myia, Arignota), and about Telauges being Pythagoras's son. Iamblichos, *Vita Pythagorica* 146 also mentions Damo and Telauges as siblings who received writings from their father. Apart from that, Iamblichus also hints another son to Pythagoras with the name Mnesarchus;²² this is obviously a reference to Pythagoras's father who was said to have had the same name.

In this paper, I want to focus on the genealogy of Pythagoras. As we have already seen, the Greek gods Apollo and Zeus seem to be very close to Pythagoras's biography, and indeed there are some sources that call Pythagoras the son of Apollo or some kind of epiphany of Apollo. Apart from that, there are two different traditions concerning Pythagoras's genealogy. One of them speaks of Pythagoras's human parents, who themselves are supposed to stand in the lineage of Ancaeus, a mythical king of Samos and the son of Poseidon or Zeus. We will also see that Ancaeus's mother Astypalaia originates from a famous family. The last tradition is based on the Pythagorean doctrine of metempsychosis which belongs to the most

¹⁹ Dikaiarchus fr. 41a and 41b Mirhady tell us that Pythagoras fled to Metapontum where he died after 40 days without food; Diogenes Laertius 8,39 knows that Pythagoras was killed on the run by his opponents, because he hesitated to step on a field of beans; finally, Porphyrius, *Vita Pythagorae* 57 reports that Pythagoras died full of grief after having seen that none of his followers was left after the attacks.

²⁰ Diogenes Laertius 42–43, translated by R.D. Hicks.

²¹ Porphyrius, *Vita Pythagorae* 4, translated by K.S. Guthrie.

²² Iamblichus, *Vita Pythagorica* 265.

ancient of all the Pythagorean beliefs.²³ Diogenes Laertios 8,4 and Porphyrius, *Vita Pythagorae* 45 most likely refer to the tradition told by Heraclides Ponticus (c. 390–320 BC)²⁴ and list four pre-existences for Pythagoras. These are: Aethalides, a son of Hermes; Euphorbos, who fought during the Trojan war and was killed by Menelaus; Hermotimus of Clazomenae, a legendary philosopher and miracle-worker; and Pyrrhus, a fisherman from Delos. We now want to examine these three different lines of tradition in search of the genealogy of Pythagoras.

3. Pythagoras and his human parents in the line of Ancaeus

Let us begin with the tradition of Pythagoras's human parents. Our oldest sources already speak of a certain Mnesarchus (Μνήσαρχος) as Pythagoras's father. Heraclitus of Ephesus mentions the father's name without going into further detail.²⁵ Herodotus also knows of Mnesarchus's fatherhood to Pythagoras.²⁶ Porphyrius of Tyre, *Vita Pythagorae* 1 tells us that all the sources agree 'concordantly' (συμφωνεῖται) about the name Mnesarchus, but obviously there were different opinions on Mnesarchus's origin:

"Some thinking him a Samian, while Neanthes, in the fifth book of his *Fables* states he was a Syrian, from the city of Tyre. As a famine had arisen in Samos, Mnesarchus went thither to trade, and was naturalized there. There also was born his son Pythagoras [...]."²⁷

Apart from being a Samian or a Syrian, there were still other speculations on the origin of Mnesarchus. Some sources claim that Mnesarchus came from the Tyrrenian island of Lemnos²⁸ or that he originated from Phlius (Phleius) on the Peloponnese.²⁹ This last city of origin might have been taken into account as a new center of Pythagoreanism developed in Phlius after the expulsion of the Pythagoreans from Southern Italy.³⁰ Diogenes Laertios 8,1, however, gives us another name of Pythagoras's father when he writes about this possible origin:

"Some indeed say that he was descended through Euthyphro, Hippasus and Marmacus from Cleonymus, who was exiled from Phlius, and that, as Marmacus lived in Samos, so Pythagoras was called a Samian."³¹

²³ See ZHMUD 2005, 13–14; HUFFMAN 2009, 21; SCHÄFER 2009, 47, 54.

²⁴ See STANZEL / ZAMINER 1998, 373; BURKERT 1962, 114; KAHN 2001, 66.

²⁵ Heraclitus 22 B 129 DK, in Diogenes Laertios 8,6.

²⁶ Herodotus 4,95.

²⁷ Porphyrius, *Vita Pythagorae* 1; translated by K.S. Guthrie.

²⁸ Neanthes FGrH 84 F 29; Aristoteles fr. 155 Gigon; Aristoxenus fr. 11 Wehrli; Porphyrius, *Vita Pythagorae* 2.

²⁹ Diogenes Laertios 8,1.

³⁰ See RIEDWEG 2007, 19–20; 136–139.

³¹ Diogenes Laertios 8,1; translated by R.D. Hicks.

When Diogenes Laertios talks about this special tradition, he traces back Pythagoras's lineage to Cleonymus. In fact, Cleonymus is the name of a tyrant who ruled the city of Phlius until 229/228 BC but renounced his control to join his city to the Achaean Confederacy.³² Still, we face a major chronological problem in this part: Since Pythagoras is dated back to the 6th century BC, one of his ancestors cannot have lived in the 3rd century BC. Maybe this is the reason why the other authors do not tell us the lineage through Cleonymus of Phlius and Marmacus, but only refer to Mnesarchus as Pythagoras's father.

Mnesarchus's Syrian provenience from Tyre at the Levantine coast may be explained by Porphyrius's own Near Eastern background. Porphyrius himself came from an aristocratic family of Tyre, which he left for Athens in order to study mathematics, grammar, rhetoric, philology, and philosophy there. In 263 AD, Porphyrius left Athens and joined the school of Plotinus in Rome.³³ Porphyrius's work about Pythagoras thus stands in an orientalizing tradition that also applies to his own sources which were Nicomachus of Gerasa (c. 60–120 AD) and Numenius of Apamea (second half of the 2nd century AD): all three try to make clear that Pythagoras's oriental background gives reason for his special wisdom and abilities.³⁴

In the cited text above, Porphyrius tells us that Mnesarchus was a merchant and saved the Samians during a famine. Later on, Porphyrius repeats that Mnesarchus traded goods by ship and also took the young Pythagoras with him on a trading trip to Italy.³⁵ Speaking about Pythagoras's father, Porphyrius also mentions two brothers of Pythagoras, obviously referring to Neanthes of Cyzikus (died before 300 BC): their names were Eunostos and Tyrrhenus.³⁶ The names are also mentioned by Diogenes Laertios 8,2 who knows that they were older than Pythagoras. Maybe they are aptronyms: Eunostos ("good yield") might refer to the merchant's hope to make lucrative deals, and the name of Tyrrhenus could relate to one of the possible origins of Mnesarchus from the Tyrrhenian Island of Lemnos. Besides, Diogenes Laertios knows that Pythagoras had an uncle named Zoilos who took Pythagoras to Lesbos where he was instructed by Pherecydes.³⁷ We do not know, however, if this Zoilos was the brother of Pythagoras's father or mother.

Other authors claim that Mnesarchus was not a trader, but a gem-cutter or gem-engraver (δακτυλιολύφος).³⁸ The time of Pythagoras's childhood, the second half of the sixth century BC, is quite famous for the Greek art of gem engraving.³⁹ The Greeks combined their own techniques with Phoenician and other oriental elements, and probably learned the new styles

³² Polybios 2,44,6; see Cobet BNP s.v. Cleonymus [4].

³³ See CHASE 2001, 174–175.

³⁴ Porphyrius, *Vita Pythagorae* 5–8; 11–12.

³⁵ Porphyrius, *Vita Pythagorae* 2.

³⁶ Porphyrius, *Vita Pythagorae* 2.

³⁷ Diogenes Laertios 8,2.

³⁸ Diogenes Laertios 8,1; Apuleius, *Florida* 15; see RIEDWEG 2000, 304.

³⁹ See DEMAND 1973, 92.

via contacts on Cyprus. It is definitely possible for Mnesarchus to have been one of those Greek craftsmen who went to foreign workshops where he got to know the new techniques. Pythagoras's birthplace, the island of Samos, is very well known for its important role as a cultural bridge between the Near Eastern and the Greek world.⁴⁰ We could easily imagine that Pythagoras, being the son of a Greek merchant and/or gem-engraver, was taken to oriental workshops himself by his father, and indeed the ancient sources tell us about such travels: Iamblichus, *Vita Pythagorica* 2–3 speaks of a journey to Sidon, on which Pythagoras was supposed to have been born; Porphyrius, *Vita Pythagorae* 1 tells us that Mnesarchus brought his son to Tyre.⁴¹

Interestingly enough, another center for the new engraving techniques, apart from the Eastern Greek islands—such as Samos—and Cyprus was Etruria.⁴² This is worth mentioning, as we have already talked about Pythagoras's migration to Southern Italy where he stayed, amongst other cities, in Sybaris. Some authors tell us that the Sybarites in particular traded a lot of goods with Etruria,⁴³ and it is possible that the gem- or seal-engraving family background connects with Pythagoras's presence in Southern Italy here.

Let us now have a look at Pythagoras's mother. While Diogenes Laertios does not mention the mother's name at all, Porphyrius, who relies on the information given by Apollonios (1st century AD), knows that her name was Pythais.⁴⁴ Pythais is said to be a descendant of Ancaeus, the founder of Samos. Iamblichus can tell us even more: Both Pythagoras's mother and father, Pythais and Mnemarchus,⁴⁵ stand in the lineage of Ancaeus: “The tradition is that Mnemarchus and Pythais, Pythagoras's parents, were from the household and family started by Ancaeus.”⁴⁶ Their common ancestor Ancaeus marks both Mnemarchus/Mnesarchus and Pythais part of an old and influential Samian family, and it is important to have a closer look at this mythological ancestor.

⁴⁰ Herodotus 3,60 reports the technical improvements on Samos such as the construction of the tunnel of Eupalinos, a water pipeline that was dug through a mountain from two sides simultaneously, or the inner harbor of Samos, or also the Heraion of Samos. Detailed analysis has shown that the architects based their works on the technical knowledge of Oriental and Egyptian prototypes; see KIENAST 1995, passim; RIEDWEG 2007, 65–68; WÜST 2008, 92–94. — We also know that during the 6th century BC, Greeks were definitely on their way in the Ancient Near East. For these early cultural contacts see HAIDER 1996; ROLLINGER 1996; ROLLINGER 1997; ROLLINGER 2001; NIEMEIER 2001; KUHRT 2002; BURKERT 2004; ROLLINGER 2004; ROLLINGER 2006; ROLLINGER 2007; ROLLINGER 2009; ROLLINGER 2011a; SULLIVAN 2011; ROLLINGER 2014b. — Obviously, the Greeks even turned up as far East as in Kandahar, see ROLLINGER / HENKELMAN 2009, 336–337.

⁴¹ Also see DEMAND 1973, 92–93; RIEDWEG 2007, 18–21.

⁴² See BOARDMAN 1968, 176; DEMAND 1973, 94.

⁴³ Strabo 6,252; see DEMAND 1973, 94–95.

⁴⁴ Porphyrius, *Vita Pythagorae* 2; also see Apollodoros FGrH 1064 F 1. — The tradition of Pythais being Pythagoras's mother certainly is younger than the tradition of Mnesarchus' fatherhood to Pythagoras. For a discussion of the name 'Pythais', see chapter 4.

⁴⁵ The notation “Mnemarchus” instead of “Mnesarchus” only appears in the *Vita Pythagorica* by Iamblichus.

⁴⁶ Iamblichus, *Vita Pythagorica* 4, translated by J. Dillon and J. Hershbell.

The tradition says that Ancaeus, son of Poseidon or Zeus⁴⁷ and Astypalaea, took part in the journey of the Argonauts, on which he became their helmsman after the death of Tiphys.⁴⁸ He then became a Lelegian king on Samos, where he also founded the Hera temple.⁴⁹ But let us first consider Ancaeus's own genealogy. Pausanias, referring to Asios, a Samian poet who probably lived at the end of the 5th century BC and wrote genealogical epics,⁵⁰ gives us a good impression about his family tree:

“Asios, the son of Amphiptolemos, a Samian, says in his epic (*EpGF* 7) that there were born to Phoenix Astypalaia and Europa, whose mother was Perimede, the daughter of Oineus; that Astypalaia had by Poseidon a son Ankaios, who reigned over those called Leleges; that Ankaios took to wife Samia, the daughter of the river Maeander, and begat Perilaos, Enoudos, Samos, Alitherses, and a daughter Parthenope; and that Parthenope had a son Lykomedes by Apollo.”⁵¹

Ancaeus thus has quite prominent ancestors. His father, according to Asios and Pausanias, is Poseidon, the god of the sea, of horses and earthquakes,⁵² a deity that belongs to the older history of Greek religion, since the name was already used in Mycenaean times.⁵³ Poseidon was also important to the Argonauts to whom Ancaeus belonged to: The Argonauts dedicated their ship, mythologically spoken, the first in world history, to Poseidon.⁵⁴ Ancaeus's mother Astypalaea, on the other hand, comes from a well-known family of Greek mythology. Her parents are Phoenix, the son of Agenor and Telephassa, successor to his father, Agenor, as mythical king of Sidon or Tyre,⁵⁵ and Perimede, the daughter of the god Oeneus, probably a wine god who was later replaced by Dionysus.⁵⁶ Europa, a sister to Perimede, is the beloved of Zeus, who abducts her from her Levantine home to Crete.⁵⁷ Regarding this oriental family background, we may again mention the closeness of Pythagoras's family tree to the Levantine coast: When some authors speak of Pythagoras's actual Near Eastern lineage, they could also refer to his mythical family background from Sidon or Tyre.

⁴⁷ Only Iamblichus calls Zeus the father of Ancaeus, see *Vita Pythagorica* 3–4; the older version obviously tells us about Poseidon's fatherhood to Ancaeus.

⁴⁸ Apollonius of Rhodes 2,894.

⁴⁹ See GRAF 1996, 706.

⁵⁰ See MADREITER 2015 s.v. 'Asios'.

⁵¹ Pausanias, *Graecae descriptio* 7,4,1, translated by W.H.S. Jones.

⁵² See Pausanias, *Graecae descriptio* 7, 21, 7.

⁵³ Poseidon, probably together with his wife, was worshipped in Knossos and Pylus; see BREMMER 2001, 201.

⁵⁴ Ps.-Apollodorus 1,9,27; see BREMMER 2001, 203.

⁵⁵ Apollodorus 3,2–4; see KÄPPEL 2000a, 936. — Remarkably, also Thales's family is traced back to Agenor and Cadmus by Diogenes Laertius 1,22.

⁵⁶ See KÄPPEL 2000b, 1141. — The connection to Dionysus is quite interesting because of the Pythagoreans' closeness to Orphic-Bacchic ideas; see Herodotus 2,81; KAHN 2001, 20–21; DREWERMANN 1985b, 169–170; KINGSLEY 1995, 262–263; ZELLER 2003, 42; RIEDWEG 2007, 117–119.

⁵⁷ See HARDER 1998, 293.

Pausanias continues with the piece of information that Ancaeus was king of the Leleges. This makes him ruler to a non- (or pre-) Greek people, connected to the early history of Greece and Asia Minor that was already mentioned by Homer, *Iliad* 20,89ff and 21,86ff; most likely, they had a Balkan origin and then migrated to south-western Asia Minor and to western central Greece at the end of the 2nd or at the beginning of the 1st millennium BC.⁵⁸ Apart from this non-Greek kingship, Ancaeus was married to Samia, daughter of Maeander. This stresses a close connection to Asia Minor's mainland, Maeander being the god of the homonymous river Maeander in south-western Asia Minor.⁵⁹ This story integrates both non-Greek ideas and the traditional Greek pantheon: "The family tree creates a collective identity with Samos being part of a bigger Greek entity."⁶⁰

It is said that Ancaeus and Samia had five children, one of them with the name 'Samos'; this, together with Ancaeus's wife 'Samia' might indicate Ancaeus's destiny to rule over the island of Samos. Another child, their daughter Parthenope, was believed to have Apollo's son named Lykomedes. We will return to this special piece of information within the family tree in the next chapter, in which we will analyze Apollo's contribution to Pythagoras's descent.

Iamblichus tells us another story about Ancaeus that also connects him to Apollo:

"The story goes, then, that Ankaios, who dwelt in Same in Kephallenia, was sired by Zeus . . . (and) surpassed the other Kephallenians in judgement and renown. He received an oracle from the Pythia to assemble a colony from Kephallenia, Arcadia, and Thessaly [...]. In charge of all these, he was to colonize an island, which because of its excellent soil and land was called Melamphyllos, and to name the *polis* Samos after Same which is on Kephallenia. The oracle went as follows: 'Ankaios, the sea-island Samos instead of Same, / I command you to settle. And this (island) is named Phyllis.' [...] The tradition is that Mnemarchos and Pythais, Pythagoras's parents, were from the household and family started by Ankaios."⁶¹

Opposed to Pausanias, Iamblichus reports about Zeus's fatherhood to Ancaeus, and he explains Ancaeus's reign over Samos in another way: At first, he lived in Same in Cephalonia, but the Pythia, the priestess of the Oracle of Apollo at Delphi, told him to colonize another fertile island, Samos. We might add that in this version, Apollo is the one who makes the divine decision that Ancaeus must leave his old home and move to Samos. Apollodorus of Rhodes 1,188 also tells us that having arrived on Samos, Ancaeus founded not only the city, but also the famous temple of Hera.

⁵⁸ Pausanias, *Graecae Descriptio* 3,1,1; see Gschnitzer 1999, 39; MADREITER 2015 s.v. 'Leleges'.

⁵⁹ See FREY 1999, 708; MADREITER 2015 s.v. 'Phoenix'.

⁶⁰ MADREITER 2015 s.v. 'Phoenix'.

⁶¹ Iamblichus, *Vita Pythagorica* 3–4, translated by J. Dillon and J. Hershbell.

We also know a story of the death of Ancaeus. Pherecydes of Athens (5th century BC) was one of the first to report that Ancaeus was struck by the wild Calydonian boar (during the hunt?⁶²) and died.⁶³ This story connects Ancaeus with his mythological great-grandfather Oeneus, who was supposed to be king of Calydon and forgot to offer sacrifices to Artemis in one year,⁶⁴ so that the goddess sent a ferocious monster to the king's land. In his need to get rid of the wild boar, king Oeneus asked the most prominent Greek hunters for help; Ancaeus obviously was thought to have been one of them, even though, of course, the family tree provides a chronological problem here.

This chapter is concluded with a graphical representation of the genealogical tree of Pythagoras via his prominent ancestor, Ancaeus, that sums up our precedent statements (see Figure 1).⁶⁵

4. Pythagoras, son of Apollo?

Since the time of Aristotle, Pythagoras had been considered superhuman by some of his followers. Aristotle mentions in a fragment that the Pythagorean community had a trifold distinction among rational beings: There are gods, men, and beings “like Pythagoras” (οἷον Πυθαγόρα).⁶⁶ So people obviously postulated a status somewhere between man and god for Pythagoras; a status that is quite similar to the one of the heroes of the Homeric era or of mythological persons with an oriental background.⁶⁷ Later on, Pythagoras was even attested a divine ancestry. Porphyrius preserved the distichon of an unknown Samian poet:

“Pythais, of all Samians the most fair,
Jove-loved Pythagoras to Phoebus bare!”⁶⁸

The poet calls Pythais, Pythagoras's mother, “the most fair” of all the Samian women; the emphasis of the physical beauty is a typical motive in the ancient presentation of divine men and their families.⁶⁹ When we read that Pythagoras is “Jove-loved”, it means that he is a special friend of Zeus's. This is remarkable, as we have already seen that at least Iamblichus tells us about Zeus's fatherhood to Ancaeus, the ancestor of Pythais (and Mnesarchus). But more than that, Pythagoras is called the son of Phoebus, i.e. Apollo, by the poet.

⁶² See MORISON 2011 s.v. ‘Ankaios’.

⁶³ Schol. Apollodorus of Rhodes 2, 895; Schol. Lycophron 488; see GRAF 1996, 706.

⁶⁴ Homer, Iliad 9, 933.

⁶⁵ A part of this genealogical tree can also be found at MADREITER 2015 s.v. ‘Phoenix’.

⁶⁶ Aristotle fr. 192 Rose, in Iamblichus, Vita Pythagorica 31.

⁶⁷ See BIELER 1967, 10–14; KUHR 2007, 475; ROLLINGER 2011b, 46; also see FINK 2013 for Gilgamesh's status of being two thirds god and one third human.

⁶⁸ Apollonios FGrH F 1, in Porphyrius, Vita Pythagorae 2; translated by K. S. Guthrie.

⁶⁹ See BIELER 1967, 52–53. Also compare GUFLE 2010 about the beauty of the Persian king.

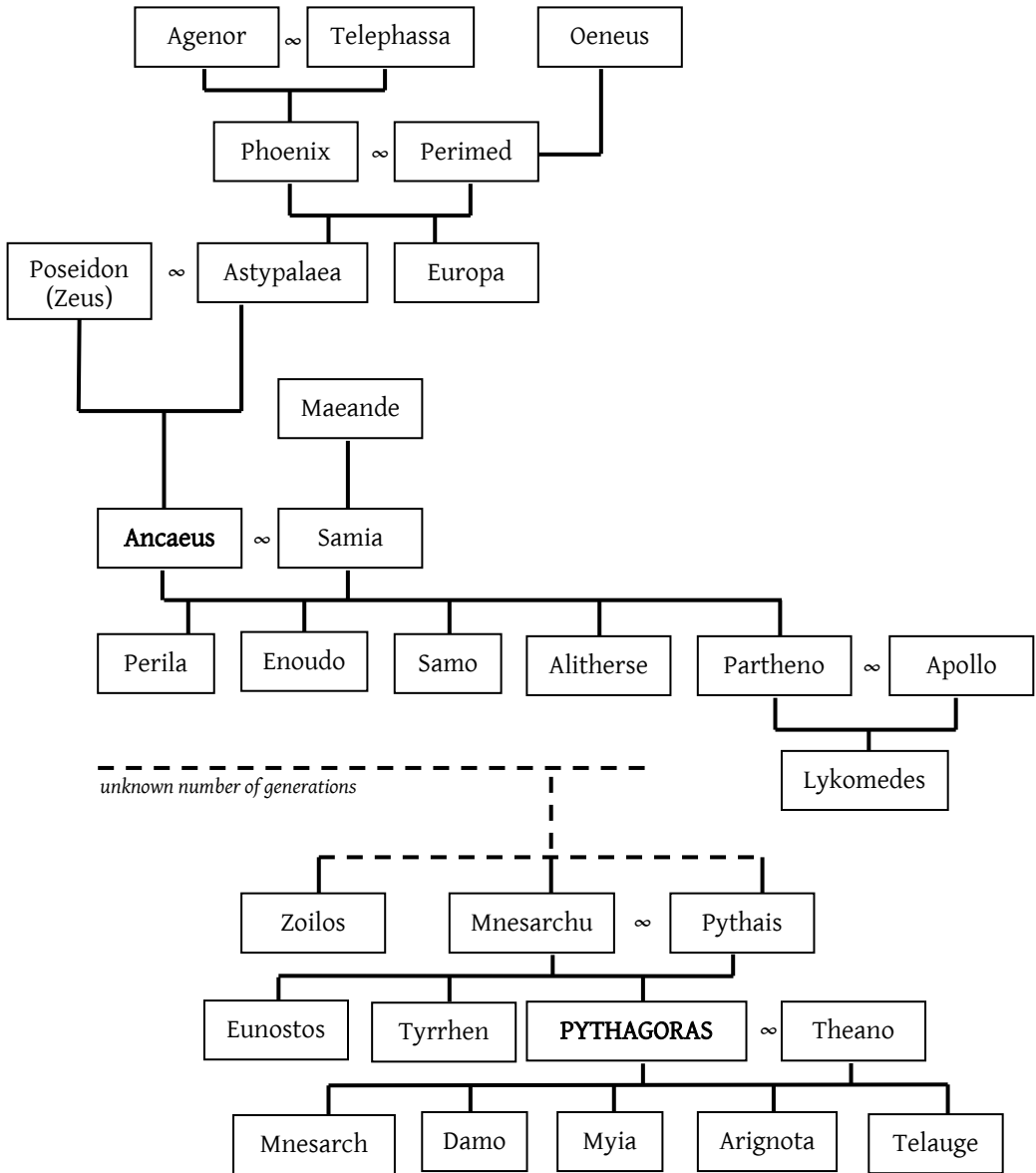


Figure 1. Genealogical tree of the family of Pythagoras (via Ancaeus)

Pythagoras would not have been the only man being called a son of Apollo. Pindar, for example, speaks of Orpheus as Apollo's son,⁷⁰ and also the Roman emperor Augustus was portrayed as a son of Apollo by Sueton.⁷¹

Iamblichus tells us an elaborate story about the birth of Pythagoras. At first, Pythagoras's birth is announced through the Delphic oracle. The Pythia, priestess of Apollo in Delphi, predicted to Pythagoras's father, Mnesarchus, that his wife was pregnant with a son

“who would surpass all who had ever lived in beauty and wisdom, and that he would be of the greatest benefit to the human race in everything pertaining to human achievements”.⁷²

Such a divine oracle is of course not restricted to Pythagoras: Augustus's birth was indicated by a flash of lightening,⁷³ and Jesus's incarnation was prophesied by an angel.⁷⁴

Iamblichus's story goes on that Mnesarchus

“immediately changed his wife's former name Parthenis to one reminiscent of the Delphic prophet and her son, naming her Pythais, and the infant [...] Pythagoras, by this name commemorating that such an offspring had been promised [to] him by the Pythian Apollo.”⁷⁵

With this story, Iamblichus tries to explain Pythagoras's own name and his mother's name: Both were given their names by Mnesarchus in remembrance of the Pythian oracle of Apollo in Delphi. The motive of changing one's name is well known to the ancient audience. Changing the name goes together with changing the inner nature of a person, and in a religious context the person gets a new name after the conversion or vocation.⁷⁶

Another interesting detail in Iamblichus's story is the hint for a virgin birth. Pythagoras's mother's former name was, according to Iamblichus, Parthenis ('virgin'), probably a side blow on the Christian παρθένος Mary.⁷⁷ As mentioned above, Apollo had already played a certain part in Pythagoras's genealogy earlier on by fathering Parthenope's son. Of course, the sources do not give any hints at all on which of Ancaeus's children Pythagoras's parents were descendants of. Yet we might spot the idea of a virgin birth with Apollo as the divine father of a son already in this union of Apollo and 'Parthenope', literally meaning 'virgin's voice'. The image of a virgin birth is common in the presentation of the Hellenistic divine man,⁷⁸ and even though it is not explicitly made clear for Pythagoras, the audience will have noticed the story all the same without further elaboration. Pythagoras's miraculous birth story on the

⁷⁰ Pindar, Pythian Ode 4,169–184.

⁷¹ Sueton, Augustus 94, 3–4.

⁷² Iamblichus, Vita Pythagorica 5; translated by J. Dillon and J. Hershbell.

⁷³ Sueton, Augustus 94, 2–3.

⁷⁴ In Mt 1, 20–21, an angel appears in Jesus's father's dream, whereas in Lk 1,26–38 the angel tells Jesus's mother about her pregnancy.

⁷⁵ Iamblichus, Vita Pythagorica 7.

⁷⁶ A well-known biblical example is given by the apostle Peter, in Mk 3, 16; Lk 6, 14; John 1, 42; see BIELER 1967, 31–32.

⁷⁷ See RIEDWEG 2007, 19.

⁷⁸ See SMITH 1981, 53; DREWERMANN 1985a, 85, 393.

one hand shows his intensive relationship to the divine world, while on the other hand, it marks the beginning of his “soteriological mission”⁷⁹ in the world.

Apart from other sons of gods in Greek mythology, the technical term ‘son-of-god’ also emerges in the magical literature of Late Antiquity. Obviously, being the son of a god did not necessarily have to be part of the traditional *curriculum vitae* of a magician, but we know that in some magical rites the magus identified himself with the ‘son’, a superhuman being which enables the magician to do miracles.⁸⁰ In other texts, the executor of the ritual relates to Hermes (*Papyri Graecae Magicae* 8, 50) or Apollo (*Papyri Graecae Magicae* 2, 1) and thus does not act as a human being, but as a god.⁸¹ This is why Pythagoras’s reputation as son of the god Apollo might also be based on the magical background that Pythagoras was connected with in Late Antiquity.⁸²

Still, there is another explanation for Pythagoras’s supposed filiation of Apollo. Iamblichus reports the *akousma*, i.e. a Pythagorean proverb, that Pythagoras is the “Hyperborean Apollo”.⁸³ While the Pythagorean community and the authors reporting the life of Pythagoras tell us matter-of-factly about this special status, the cult of “Hyperborean Apollo” is nowhere else to be found outside the Pythagorean tradition. Of course, according to mythology, Apollo spends the winter months in the land of the Hyperboreans, a land which is located somewhere in the far north.⁸⁴ There, Apollo appears as an agrarian deity that requests a vegetarian diet and bloodless sacrifices, and indeed the Hyperboreans are supposed to have brought their offerings to the sanctuary of Apollo on the island of Delos.⁸⁵ This shows a number of similarities to Pythagorean rules for a ‘correct’ lifestyle, as Pythagoras also prescribed non-animal sacrifices and a nutrition that is based on either no meat at all or that at least prohibited some kinds of meat.⁸⁶

It stays unclear, however, if Pythagoras was definitely seen as a god when he was called “Hyperborean Apollo” or if this was only an “honorable nickname”,⁸⁷ but not a real identification with the deity. For the authors of Late Antiquity, it might only have been a small step to extend Pythagoras’s evident closeness to Apollo to a father-son-relationship and thus be able to integrate a common Hellenistic motive into the biography of Pythagoras.

⁷⁹ O’MEARA 1990, 39.

⁸⁰ See e.g. PGM 4, 535–538; also compare SMITH 1981, 166, 178–179; LUCK 1999, 125.

⁸¹ See BINGHAM KOLENKOW 1980, 1479.

⁸² See KINGSLEY 1995, 227; BURKERT 2004, 122–129.

⁸³ Iamblichus, *Vita Pythagorica* 140; see BURKERT 1962, 153.

⁸⁴ See Paian of Alcaeus fr. 307c; Pindar, *Pythian Ode* 10,29.

⁸⁵ Diogenes Laertius 8,13; Iamblichus, *Vita Pythagorica* 30; GRANT / HAZEL 2009, 213.

⁸⁶ See RIEDWEG 2007, 89–98.

⁸⁷ ZHMUD 2015, 13.

Both perspectives, namely Pythagoras as son of human parents and as son of the god Apollo, were simultaneously reported by Iamblichus,⁸⁸ and obviously nobody felt irritated by the two rivalling traditions.

5. Pythagoras and his pre-existences

As we have already mentioned, the doctrine of metempsychosis belongs to the oldest stratum of the Pythagorean lore and may easily be traced back to Pythagoras himself.⁸⁹ Pythagoras and the Pythagoreans obviously used the term ψυχή to describe the transmigrating soul; not the intellectual self, but the emotional personality reincarnates.⁹⁰ Diogenes Laertius 8,4 and Porphyrius, *Vita Pythagorae* 45, here depending on Heraclides Ponticus, report that the pre-existences of Pythagoras were Aethalides, Euphorbus, Hermotimus and Pyrrhus (see Figure 2). Iamblichus, amongst others, tells us about Euphorbus as the only pre-existence of Pythagoras, and there is good reason to suggest that this tradition is older than the nomination of the other persons;⁹¹ this might also be the reason why Porphyrius mentions Euphorbus first.⁹² Let us thus start with a brief examination of this Trojan hero.

The *Iliad* 17,40 tells us that Euphorbus is the son of Panthous, a priest of—again—Apollo, and Phrontis. The mother's name Φροντίς was translated as 'to ponder seriously' or 'thoughtful care'⁹³ and therefore seems to fit into place to Pythagoras's biography, since he himself was portrayed as considerate, caring and disciplined.⁹⁴ Euphorbus was killed by Menelaus, who took all his weapons.⁹⁵ Pythagoras now 'proves' that Euphorbus really was one of his pre-existences because he recognizes 'his', i.e. Euphorbus's, Phrygian shield when he catches sight of it in the sanctuary of Argos or Mycenae respectively.⁹⁶ The audience reacts with amazement about Pythagoras's wisdom and beliefs that he once really was Euphorbus.

Via Euphorbus's father Panthous, the priest of Apollo, Euphorbus himself stands in close connection to this deity, but there is even more: In the *Iliad* the dying Patroclus tells Hector:

⁸⁸ Iamblichus, *Vita Pythagorica* 8; 10; 215; see ZHMUD 2015, 16.

⁸⁹ See e.g. Xenophanes 21 B 7 DK in Diogenes Laertius 8,36; Ion 36 B 4 DK in Diogenes Laertius 1,120; see BURKERT 1962, 100; RIEDWEG 2007, 87–88.

⁹⁰ See HUFFMAN 2009, 23–27.

⁹¹ See BURKERT 1962, 116.

⁹² Indeed, Porphyrius reports both versions: In *Vita Pythagorae* 26–27, he speaks of Euphorbus as the only pre-existence of Pythagoras, whereas in *Vita Pythagorae* 45 he also refers to the other incarnations of Pythagoras's *psyche*, though starting with Euphorbus.

⁹³ See SCHOTTENLAENDER 1956, 345.

⁹⁴ Iamblichus, *Vita Pythagorica* 46–49; see RIEDWEG 2007, 29–31.

⁹⁵ Homer, *Iliad* 17,9–109.

⁹⁶ Porphyrius, *Vita Pythagorae* 27; Iamblichus, *Vita Pythagorica* 63, 134. — Maximus of Tyre 10,2 even knows about an inscription on the shield: "Menelaus dedicates this shield, that was taken from Euphorbus, to Pallas Athene."

“Fate [μοῖρα] and the son of Leto have overpowered me, and among mortal men Euphorbus; you are yourself third only in the killing of me.”⁹⁷

If Hector is called the “third” one, then fate (*moira*), Leto’s son—this is Apollo, of course—and Euphorbus obviously are only two persons; two of them must be identical. W. Burkert suggested that if someone wanted to say, ‘I might be Apollo’, he could call himself ‘Euphorbus’ relating to this passage of the *Iliad*.⁹⁸ By mentioning Euphorbus as one of the early incarnations of Pythagoras’s soul, Pythagoras is again close to Apollo, or he might even be identified with this deity.

A very intense connection to Apollo may also be seen in Pyrrhus, the fisherman⁹⁹ from the island of Delos, who appears in the list of the pre-existences to Pythagoras. The Pythagorean biographies come to speak of Delos in other regards as well: Pythagoras is supposed to have sacrificed bloodless offerings at the altar of Apollo on Delos,¹⁰⁰ thus imitating, as we have seen above, the mythological people of the Hyperboreans, and we also learn that Pherecydes of Syros, one of Pythagoras’s instructors, was buried on Delos by his faithful pupil.¹⁰¹ Euphorbus as well as Pyrrhus give a hint that these two pre-existences are to be seen in contact with ideas from the Apollonian religion.

Also the next—or, as is the case with the reports by Heraclides Ponticus and Diogenes Laertius, the first—incarnation of Pythagoras’s soul gives hints for the divine sphere. The authors suggest that Pythagoras himself claimed that he once was Aethalides, a son of Hermes. His divine father permitted him to express one wish—apart from immortality, this being “the distinctive attribute of the gods”¹⁰² only—and so Aethalides wished to keep in mind all events that happened during life and after death.¹⁰³ This wish was fulfilled, and so Aethalides was able to memorize all his rebirths. Of course, this story requires the doctrine of metempsychosis to make sense, and indeed Pherecydes of Syros wrote that Aethalides was given the privilege of reincarnation.¹⁰⁴ It was also believed that Aethalides was an Argonaut,¹⁰⁵ which connects him to Ancaeus, the important ancestor in the genealogical tree of Pythagoras, and also to Orpheus or Heracles, the heroes that played an outstanding role in

⁹⁷ Homer, *Iliad* 16,849–850; translated by S. Butler.

⁹⁸ BURKERT 1962, 117; also see DREWERMANN 1985b, 145.

⁹⁹ A rather famous miracle story also connects Pythagoras to his pre-existence Pyrrhus, the fisherman: Porphyrius, *Vita Pythagorae* 25 and Iamblichus, *Vita Pythagorica* 36 report that Pythagoras once predicted the exact number of the fish that were caught by fishermen, and what was even more wonderful, no fish died while the fishermen were counting; of course, Pythagoras was right with his prophecy.

¹⁰⁰ Diogenes Laertius 8, 13; Iamblichus, *Vita Pythagorica* 30.

¹⁰¹ Porphyrius, *Vita Pythagorae* 15.

¹⁰² KAHN 2001, 4.

¹⁰³ Diogenes Laertius 8, 4.

¹⁰⁴ Pherecydes fr. 3, in Apollonius of Rhodes 1, 645; see PHILIP 1966, 188.

¹⁰⁵ Apollonius of Rhodes 1, 51–55.

Pythagoreanism as well.¹⁰⁶ Hermes, on the other hand, Aethalides's father, is unusual to be connected to Pythagoras. If we remember, however, that the story about Aethalides implies the journey to the netherworld and back to the world of the living by his rebirth, we should not forget that Hermes was responsible for exactly this situation in his function as the guide of souls.¹⁰⁷

One last reincarnation of Pythagoras's soul was Hermotimus, who, according to Diogenes Laertius 8,5, was the first to have recognized Euphorbus's shield and thus 'proved' that he had the Trojan hero's soul in him. Hermotimus of Clazomenae was a legendary philosopher who cannot easily be classified in terms of chronology. Pliny reports that Hermotimus's soul could leave his body, and after the soul's return he made prophecies; Apollonios paradoxographus tells us that Hermotimus died during such a soul-journey because his enemies burnt his sleeping body.¹⁰⁸ Scholars have suggested that Hermotimus, together with other (semi-) mythological or also historical figures like Orpheus, Aristeeas of Proconnesus, the Hyperborean priest Abaris, Empedocles and Pythagoras, belong to the type of 'Greek shamans',¹⁰⁹ and the doctrine of metempsychosis in particular seems to be closely related to the shamanistic soul-journey that is insinuated in the reports about Hermotimus. Additionally, we could even suggest that the etymology of the name 'Hermotimus' already points to Hermes, the guide of souls, and his gift to his son Aethalides who remembered every detail on his soul's journey in this world and the hereafter.

6. Results

The analysis of Pythagoras's pre-existences or, in other words, his different incarnations, obviously does not contribute a lot of new information to Pythagoras's ancestry. However, the early incarnations directly refer to the Pythagorean doctrine of metempsychosis and show some interesting connections to the people mentioned in other reports about Pythagoras's genealogy: Aethalides, the son of Hermes, is an Argonaut just like Ancaeus; Euphorbus is another mythological hero who is close to Apollo, just like the fisherman Pyrrhus from Delos; Hermotimus, finally, is a shamanistic figure that indicates the motive of the soul-journey in connection with metempsychosis.

Still, we could find out that the divine world did play an important part in the genealogy of Pythagoras. Most authors agree on the old tradition of Mnesarchus being Pythagoras's father; Pythais as Pythagoras's mother is obviously a younger addition. Interestingly enough,

¹⁰⁶ See KINGSLEY 1995, 274–275; RIEDWEG 2007, 21–22, 117–119.

¹⁰⁷ Aeschylus, *Psychagogai* F273, F273a, F275; also see OGDEN 2002, 26–27.

¹⁰⁸ Pliny, *Naturalis historia* 7, 174; Apollonios Paradoxographus, *Mirabilia* 3.

¹⁰⁹ See ELIADE / TRASK 1972, 270; KOLLMANN 1996, 90; LUCK 1999, 95; OGDEN 2002, 9, 14.

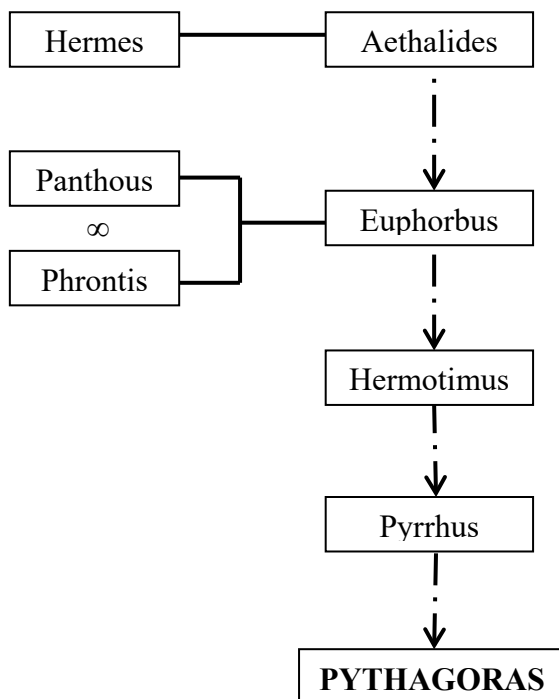


Figure 2. Pythagoras's pre-existences (according to Heraclides Ponticus)

though, Pythagoras's descent from Ancaeus, the mythical founder and first king of Samos, runs via Pythais in Porphyrius's report; only Iamblichus makes both Pythagoras's parents derive from Ancaeus's family. Thus, the story goes that Pythagoras descended from an old aristocratic and influential Samian family. But what is more, we have also seen that the genealogical tree via Ancaeus on the one hand leads to a connection of Pythagoras's family with the traditional Greek mythology, especially when we think of Poseidon (or, in Iamblichus's account, Zeus) as the father of Ancaeus, or of Oeneus and his part in the myth of the Caledonian Boar Hunt, while on the other hand it also links Pythagoras to a Phoenician or Near Eastern background (Agenor, Phoenix, Asytpalaea, Maeander). This matches with the tales that Mnesarchus himself originally might have come from the Levantine coast; his (and his brother's?) profession as a merchant and/or gem-engraver also indicate an oriental connection.

Ancaeus was definitely regarded as one of the most important ancestors of Pythagoras. This might also have to do with his participation in the journey of the Argonauts, a story that might have been linked to shamanistic motives;¹¹⁰ Pythagoras himself and his pre-existences

¹¹⁰ The common motives are the journey of the hero together with superhuman companions into the Eastern home of the sun, an area that could be interpreted as the afterworld; on their way, the protagonists have to master difficult

Aethalides and, most of all, Hermotimus show some of those shamanistic aspects just as well. Furthermore, Orpheus and Heracles, two heroes with a special status in the Pythagorean doctrines, also took part in the journey of the Argonauts which again connects Pythagoreanism with the traditional Greek mythology.

Finally, we have also made clear the role that Apollo played in Pythagoras's biography. Pythagoras's closeness to Apollo, the Pythian god of Delphi, is expressed in various ways: the names 'Pythagoras' and 'Pythais' were explained by Apollo's prophecy concerning Pythagoras's birth by Iamblichus; the tradition of Pythagoras as "Hyperborean Apollo", i.e. some kind of epiphany of Apollo that connects him to the mythical people of the Hyperboreans with similar religious ideas to the Pythagoreans, is old and goes back to Aristotle; Euphorbus and the Delian fisherman Pyrrhus, two of the pre-existences of Pythagoras, were seen in close connections to Apollo; and it may have been a small step to even declare Apollo to the divine father of Pythagoras in Hellenistic times, so that Pythagoras could be seen as a true son of a god. Iamblichus's story about Pythagoras's mother originally being called 'Parthenis' could be reminiscent of the motive of a virgin birth, and indeed we can recognize a doublet of the motive here because of Apollo's and Parthenope's liaison earlier in the genealogical tree of Pythagoras.

The three different traditions of Pythagoras's lineage—Pythagoras as the son of human parents, or as the son of Apollo and a human mother, or the Pythagorean doctrine of metempsychosis—go hand in hand with each other. Hence it is no wonder that the ancient authors could relate to the varying stories simultaneously without feeling disturbed by possible contradictions: These contradictions are rather part of our modern perspective, but obviously the contemporary view permitted the symbiosis of all three traditions.

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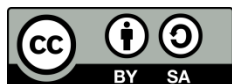
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challenges to reach their aim, a talisman that is, in this case, the Golden Fleece. See MEULI 1935, 166; BURKERT 1967, 15, 18, 26; DRÄGER 1996, 1068–1069.

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