Papers of the British School at Rome

<http://journals.cambridge.org/ROM>

Additional services for *Papers of the British School at Rome*:

Email alerts: [Click here](#)

Subscriptions: [Click here](#)

Commercial reprints: [Click here](#)

Terms of use : [Click here](#)

A Portrait of Pythagoras

Katharine A. McDowall

Papers of the British School at Rome / Volume 3 / January 1906, pp 306 - 314
DOI: 10.1017/S0068246200005067, Published online: 09 August 2013

Link to this article: http://journals.cambridge.org/abstract_S0068246200005067

How to cite this article:

Katharine A. McDowall (1906). A Portrait of Pythagoras. Papers of the British School at Rome, 3, pp 306-314 doi:10.1017/S0068246200005067

Request Permissions : [Click here](#)

PAPERS OF THE BRITISH SCHOOL AT ROME

VOL. III. No. 5

A PORTRAIT OF PYTHAGORAS

BY

KATHARINE A. McDOWALL

LONDON: 1905

A PORTRAIT OF PYTHAGORAS.

THE fairly numerous ideal portraits of Homer and the Sages which have come down to us, and the yet more numerous headless herms whose inscriptions bear witness to the frequency of such works in antiquity, naturally suggest that others may exist in our museums representing the more famous rulers and philosophers of the sixth century, among whom the most interesting and important is Pythagoras. From the Renaissance onwards, archæologists have been on the alert to discover a portrait with some claim to represent him, and no less than seven identifications have been at various times proposed.¹ None, however, has found anything like universal acceptance, in spite of the fact that the numismatic evidence is fuller and more trustworthy than usual. A series of Samian coins show the philosopher either seated or standing before a celestial globe set on a pillar.² He is richly draped and is bearded, while a band, whose exact nature is difficult to determine, usually runs round his head. The figures are, however, merely generalized and conventional like those of other poets and sages on the coin types figured by Bernoulli. The Paris conterniate must be reserved for fuller treatment, as a discussion of the literary evidence is important for its right understanding.

Pythagoras was, by writers who exceeded the canonical number of Seven, reckoned among the Sages; thus Hermippus places him sixteenth in a list of seventeen arranged in chronological order,³ and Hippobotus makes him the last of twelve, beginning, significantly, from Orpheus.⁴ The ancients seem to have seen in him almost the last man worthy of being reckoned among them of old time, the sages and lawgivers of their tradition. Even before his birth, Apollo proclaimed from Delphi that he

¹ For list see Bernoulli, *Gr. Ikonographie*, i. p. 275.

² Bern. *op. cit. Münztaf.* ii. Figs. 21-2; B.M. Cat. *Ionian*, Pl. XXXVII. 14.

³ *Ap. Diog. Laert. Vit. Phil.* i. 1, 42.

⁴ *Ibid.*

should be a man τῶν πώποτε κάλλει καὶ σοφίᾳ διοίσοντα,¹ and Diogenes Laertius says τὴν δὲ σεμνοπρέπειαν τοῦ Πυθαγόρου καὶ Τίμων ἐν τοῖς Σίλλοις δάκνων αὐτὸν ὁμῶς οὐ παρέλιπεν.² His life did not belie the divine prediction, ὥς δὴ δαίμων τις ἀγαθὸς ἐπιδημῶν τῇ Σάμῳ,³ and again we read, 'as he went about to the cities, the rumour spread that Pythagoras was come, not to teach but to heal.'⁴

His mind was deeply tinged with Oriental thought; he had travelled widely, in Egypt, Babylonia, Arabia, India even,⁵ and was versed in the religious and philosophic systems of Egypt and Chaldaea, from which he adopted many tenets and observances, *e.g.* ceremonial sprinkling and lustration, silence, abstinence from certain kinds of food, and (probably) the entire doctrine of Metempsychosis.⁶ The object of life was to be ἀγνεία⁷—ceremonial purity—which, once defiled, could only be regained by elaborate purification. Such defilement came by contact with death in any shape, by unchastity, by touching certain kinds of food—beans, flesh, cuttlefish, eggs and creatures raised from eggs.⁸ His raiment was pure white and woven from wool, and though later legends declare that he wore only linen, as flax grows by the bounty of Heaven, whereas wool is taken from animals,⁹ Herodotus speaks of the woollen garments of the Pythagoreans,¹⁰ and Diogenes expressly states that he wore wool because 'the use of linen had not penetrated to those parts.'¹¹ Like all Ionians of the period, Pythagoras would wear his hair long, and the custom was kept up by his great disciple Empedocles in the next century¹² and by the later Pythagorean communities at least.¹³ Oriental dress is attributed to him by Aelian,¹⁴ but a Greek philosopher would hardly have worn the ἀναξυρίδες here mentioned. The coins show distinct traces of a band or kerchief round the head, and a statue with such a decoration might, taken in

¹ Iamblichus, *de vit. Pyth.* ii. 5.

² *Vit.* 36.

³ Iambl. *op. cit.* ii. 10.

⁴ Ael. *V.H.* iv. 17.

⁵ Isocr. *Busiris*, 28; Strabo, xiv. i. 16; Diog. Laert. *Vit.* viii. 13; Plut. *de Is. et Os.* 10; Philostr. *Vit. Apoll.* viii. 15, etc.

⁶ See Hdt. ii. 122, 2.

⁷ Diog. Laert. *Vit.* 33.

⁸ It is clear that the question of Pythagorean food was a disputed one; Aristoxenus (*ap. Aul. Gell.* iv. 11, 1) maintained that Pythagoras used no vegetable more frequently than beans, and the same authority declared (*ap. Diog. Laert. Vit. Pyth.* 20) that things which had life might be eaten by Pythagoreans, provided that they refrained from the plough-ox and the ram.

⁹ Philostr. *Vit. Apoll.* i. 32, *et saepe*.

¹⁰ ii. 81.

¹¹ *Vit.* 19.

¹² Diog. Laert. *Vit. Emped.* 73.

¹³ Athenaeus, iv. 163e; Philostr. *Vit. Apoll.* i. 32, 2.

¹⁴ *V.H.* xii. 32.

connection with his Oriental travels, easily give rise to the idea that he adopted a purely Eastern dress.

As early as Herodotus even, myths had gathered round his name, and Aristotle is full of them; here, however, any discussion would be irrelevant, and the testimony of popular superstition is not needed in the face of the witness of antiquity from Xenophanes to Plato and Aristotle, to omit all lesser names.

Whether Pythagoras left any writing was a subject of dispute among the ancients. Galen,¹ Plutarch,² and Josephus³ deny it, but Diogenes Laertius quotes a decisive passage from Heracleitus,⁴ giving the names of three treatises, παιδευτικόν,⁵ πολιτικόν, φυσικόν.⁶ He also gives the first line of a *ἱερὸς λόγος*, on the authority of Heracleides,⁴ which is, considering the Pythagorean system of silence, at least *ben trovato* :—

ὦ νέοι, ἀλλὰ σέβεσθε μεθ' ἡσυχίης τὰδε πάντα.

Many of his reputed sayings are also in metre.

Lucian gives us a comic view of the Pythagorean system,⁷ and Pythagoras himself is accused of avarice and cheating, and is forced to inhabit the body of a cock as a punishment for silence in life. In the *Pseudo-Mantis*, on the other hand, the tone is widely different:⁸ ἀλλ' ἔλεως μὲν ὁ Πυθαγόρας εἶη, σοφὸς ἀνὴρ καὶ τὴν γνώμην θεσπέσιος.

Two statues of Pythagoras are recorded, one in Rome set up during the Samnite War by command of Apollo,⁹ the other in Constantinople,¹⁰ but others in all probability existed, and it is *prima facie* highly probable that the fifth century, which saw the creation of the Anacreon, the Epimenides, the Seven, and other ideal portraits of similar character, also witnessed the erection of statues in honour of a man whose influence was felt by its greatest minds. From some such statue the Paris contorniate would appear to be derived; and this, the one important piece of monumental evidence hitherto brought forward, must now be dealt with (Fig. 1).

On the obverse of this, one of the most interesting of contorniate

¹ *De plac. Hipp. et. Plat.* 459.

² *De Virt. Alex.* i. 4, 328.

³ *C. Apion.* i. 163.

⁴ *Vit. Pyth.* 6 *seqq.*

⁵ *Cf. Plato, Resp.* x. 600 B.

⁶ Suidas, *s.v. Pythagoras*, mentions them also, doubtless from the same source.

⁷ xlv. (*Somnium seu Gallus*) 4.

⁸ xxxii. 4.

⁹ *Plut. Vit. Num.* viii. 12: not noticed by Bernoulli. *Plin. N.H.* xxxiv. 26.

¹⁰ Christodor. *Ecphrasis*, 120 *seqq.*

types, is a bust of Helios, radiate and holding a sceptre ; on the reverse the inscription ΠΥΘΑΓΟΡΑΣ, and a figure of the philosopher seated on a high-backed throne, supporting his head on his left hand. The drapery is full and majestic, the gesture dignified and appropriate, the whole differing *toto caelo* from the conventional figures on the Samian coins. The head is of peculiar shape, deep from back to front, strongly curved behind and flat on top. It is encircled with, but not covered by, a sort of kerchief knotted on the right side,¹ and throwing a distinct shadow on the forehead. The neck is thick, the eye recessed and set far from the nose, the profile 'classical,' the nostrils well marked, the mouth shaded by a moustache which mingles with the close-cut pointed beard, recalling Martial's epigram,

*Sic quasi Pythagorae loqueris successor et heres,
Praependet sane nec tibi barba minor.* (ix. 47.)

FIG. 1.

The contorniate is on various grounds interesting. It is, in the first place, rare for the obverse type to bear any relation to the reverse, rarer still for that type to be the head of a divinity, but the connexion of Pythagoras with Apollo-Helios lay at the bottom of the popular conception of him as a divinely appointed leader of men, as the son of Light,² even as light itself.³

¹ In Sabatier (*Méd. Contorniates*, pl. xv. 1) and Visconti (*Iconogr. Gr.* pl. xvi. 3) this kerchief is not indicated. In the latter the engraver has mistaken for hair the projecting line across the brow. Fig. 1 is taken from a cast in the British Museum.

² 'Poeta quidam Samius,' ap. Iamblichus, *Vit. Pyth.* 5.

³ He was early identified with the Hyperborean Apollo (Aristotle, *Fragm.* vol. iv. p. 69^a, ed. Didot. (Cf. the later writers cited in this paper.)

It is highly probable that the figure is a copy of an actual statue; instances of such copies occur on a number of contorniates,¹ and the accuracy of detail, in close agreement with the literary evidence, implies acquaintance with, and faithfulness to, an actual original.

Among the unidentified philosopher-heads in the Capitol is one² (Fig. 2) unique in character, of excellent workmanship, though not, as Arndt suggests,³ a Greek original, as the sculptor has misunderstood the arrange-

FIG. 2.

ment of the hair. It represents a man in middle life, wearing a kerchief bound turban-wise about his head and knotted over the right ear, casting a strong shadow on the forehead. The skull is square in form, broad between the temples and very flat on top. The neck is unusually thick, and the

¹ I hope to deal at length with these types in a forthcoming number of the *Numismatic Chronicle*.

² Sala dei Filosofi 80; illustrated *Mus. Capit.* i. 88, 'Archytas of Tarentum'; Arndt-Bruckmann, *Gr. u. röm. Porträts*, 151-2. Cp. Bernoulli, *Griechische Ikonographie* ii, p. 17. I owe the photograph here reproduced to the kindness of Mr. Stuart Jones.

³ Text to *Gr. u. röm. Porträts* 152-2.

head set well forward upon it. The eyebrows are straight and the lids clear-cut, the upper thin, the lower full and drooping. The eyeballs are so prominent as, seen from the front, almost to form an angle with the outer corners of the eyes; and it is this peculiar treatment which gives that expression of remoteness, of mystic earnestness, which distinguishes the head from all others.¹ The nose is, unfortunately, modern. The mouth is small and curved, the upper lip thin, the lower straighter and very thick. The drooping ends of the moustache mingle with the pointed beard, which is, like them, composed of fine wavy locks, adding much to the straightness of the profile. The hair has evidently puzzled the copyist, and he has worked out no definite scheme, only marking the masses by a series of irregular lines. In the original the locks clearly were turned back from the face and plaited round the head, while the hair growing behind the ears was similarly treated; instead of these plaits we have here a roll of hair beneath the kerchief, and a mass of lines, mainly parallel to this roll, below, ending abruptly above the neck. The same treatment is applied to the space on top of the head above the kerchief, where it is entirely inappropriate. It is clear that in the original the hair was laid in plaits round the head, but, the fashion being unknown to him, the copyist has worked unintelligently though with sufficient faithfulness to enable us to reconstruct the original from his rendering of it.²

A comparison with the contorniate leads to the conclusion that both represent not the same man merely but the same work. The correspondence in every detail is too minute to be accidental. It is impossible to describe one head in terms that do not equally apply to the other, and the literary evidence, though insufficient in itself to form a basis for any identification, strongly confirms the attribution,³ which is made certain from the inscription on the contorniate.

The date of the original was, probably, earlier than that proposed by Dr. Arndt, who assigns it to the turn of the fifth and fourth centuries. If we accept Furtwängler's date, 445-440, for the Anacreon

¹ [Plaster has been used to restore the eyeballs, and it is not therefore advisable to lay too much stress on their present form.—H. S. J.]

² The head has been compared with a bronze portrait-head in the Naples Museum (No. 5607) from the villa of the Pisones at Herculaneum. (Comparetti and de Petra, *La Villa Ercolanese*, Pl. VIII, 2; *Mus. Ital.* iii, Pl. V; *Gr. u. röm. Porträts* 153-4; but this, as I hope to shew elsewhere, represents a different individual.)

³ The treatment of the eyes recalls the phrase of Christodorus (*Ecphr. l.c.*) where he says of Pythagoras, *Ὀὐρανὸν ἀχράντοισιν ἐμέτρεε μούνον ὀπωπαῖς*.

Borghese¹—and it is in every way probable—we must allow a date at least equally early for the Pythagoras, which is distinctly less advanced and plastic in the treatment of hair and mouth.

The original was certainly bronze, as a careful examination of the head (for the technique) and the contorniate (for the drapery and details) makes absolutely certain, and may probably be assigned to the early Pheidian period, when Athens had recovered from the Persian Wars and was peopling her city with noble forms of gods and men.²

It is interesting to find Dr. Arndt writing thus of the head and the problem of the turban: 'Dürfen wir annehmen, dass der Turban als Attribut auch solchen Leuten verleihen wurde, die nicht dauernd in einem der genannten Länder (*i.e.* Chaldaea and Egypt) wohnten, wie Solon, Pythagoras, dieselben nur für kürzere Zeit aufsuchten?' The contorniate, with its trustworthy presentment of a statue and its inscription, makes it possible to decide the matter, and to identify this portrait as a fifth-century ideal of the man who could create the doctrine of the Music of the Spheres,³ of whom it was said that he was the son of Light itself,⁴ whose rule of life was *Μὴ λέγειν ἀνεν φωτός*.⁵

NOTE.—There is a further point of importance in regard to the date of the original statue from which the contorniate and bust are derived. The *cathedra* on which he is seated is not the typical *cathedra* of the Roman professor,⁶ neither is it the familiar armchair type of the third century, on which Poseidippus and his companion-poet are seated in the famous Vatican statues.⁷ On the other hand, this form occurs on many

¹ *M.W.* p. 93.

² Of the sculptor it is impossible to speak with any degree of certainty. Cresilas is out of the question, from the difference between the heavy eyelids of the Pericles and those of this head, which, seen in profile, disappear under the brow. Colotes, *qui (fecit) philosophos*, is possible, but we know nothing of his work. There is a strong likeness between this head and the bearded Dionysos in the Mus. Chiaramonti (No. 44), (*M.W.* p. 95). The spirit of the two is identical, and there are mannerisms in both which, despite the later date of the Dionysos, can hardly be assigned to different hands. I incline to think the Pythagoras an early work by the master of the Dionysos. I owe to Mr. Stuart Jones this interesting and suggestive comparison.

³ Arist. *de Caelo*, ii. 9.

⁴ 'Poeta quidam Samius,' ap. Iamblichus, *Vit. Pyth.* 5.

⁵ Iamblich. *Vit.* 84.

⁶ See for example *Daremberg and Saglio*, p. 971, Fig. 1225.

⁷ Br. Bruckm. *Denkm.* Nos. 494, 495.

fifth-century vases¹ and stelae,² and there can be little doubt that the date of this form of *cathedra* offers a further confirmation of the period and character of the original.

¹ *E.g.* Gerh. *Gr. Vasenbilder*, Nos. 305, 306.

² Conze, *Attische Grabreliefs*, Tafelband i. ; xxi. ; xxiii. 125 ; xxvi. ; xxvii. 62, 63. Fourth-century examples are numerous and include the stele of Hegeso.