

PYTHAGORAS OF SAMOS

PYTHAGORAS OF SAMOS was in his prime around 530 BC. He left no written works.

Three versions of the same legend:

From Cicero (106-43 BC)

“According to Heraclides of Ponticus, the pupil of Plato and a learned man of first rank, Pythagoras, so the story goes, came to Phlius and with a wealth of learning discussed certain subjects with Leon the ruler of the Phliasians. And Leon after wondering at his talent and eloquence asked him to name the art [*arte*] in which he put so much reliance.. But Pythagoras said that for his part he had no acquaintance with any art, but was a philosopher [*philosophum*]. Leon was astonished at the novelty of the term and asked who philosophers were and in what they differed from the rest of the world. Pythagoras, the story continues, replied that the life of man seemed to him to resemble the festival which was celebrated with most magnificent games before a concourse collected from the whole of Greece; for at this festival some men whose bodies had been trained sought to win the glorious distinction of a crown, others were attracted by the prospect of making gain by buying or selling, whilst there was on the other hand a certain class, and that quite the best type of free-born men, who looked neither for applause nor gain, but came for the sake of the spectacle and closely watched what was done and how it was done. So also we, as though we had come from some city to a kind of crowded festival, leaving in like fashion another life and nature of being, entered upon this life, and some were slaves of ambition, some of money; there were a special few who, counting all else as nothing, closely scanned the nature of things; these men gave themselves the name of lovers of wisdom (for that is the meaning of the word philosopher); and just as at the games the men of truest breeding looked on without any self-seeking, so in life the contemplation and discovery of nature far surpassed all other pursuits.”— Cicero, *Tusculan Disputations*. V, III, 8-9 (Loeb Classical Library, trans. J.E. King, Harvard University Press, 1945, pp. 431 & 433)

From Diogenes Laertes (c. 200 AD)

“When Leon, the tyrant of Phlius, asked Pythagoras who he was, he answered, ‘a philosopher’ (*philosophos*), and went on to explain: ‘Life is like a public festival; just as some people come to compete for the prize, and others come to sell their wares, the best people (*belistoi*) come as spectators (*theatai*), so in life the slavish men go hunting for fame (*doxa*) or gain, the philosophers seek for the truth’ (*aletheia*).” – Diogenes Laertes, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, VIII, 8 (Loeb Classical Library, trans. R.D. Hicks, Harvard University Press, 1931, Vol II. pp. 327 & 329)

From Iamblichus (c 242-327 AD)

“Pythagoras is said to have been the first person to call himself a philosopher. It was not just a new word that he invented: he used it to explain a concern special to him. He said that people approach life like the crowds that gather at a festival. People come from all around, for different reasons: one is eager to sell his wares and make a profit, another to win fame by displaying his physical strength; and there is a third kind, the best sort of free man, who comes to see places and fine craftsmanship and excellence in action and words, such as are generally on display at festivals. Just so in life, people with all kinds of concerns assemble at one place. Some hanker after money and an easy life; some are in the clutches of desire for power and frantic competition for fame; but the person of the greatest authority [*eilikrinestaton*] is the one who has chosen the study of that which is finest [*kalliston theorian*], and that one we call a philosopher. . . . Wisdom is real knowledge (*onti epistēmē*) of the fine (*ta kala*) as knowledge of what is primary [*protā*], divine [*theia*], immutable [*agerata*], eternal [*aei*].” – Iamblichus, *The Life of Pythagoras*, chap. XII. (translated by R. Burch from *De vita Pythagorica liber*, ed. [A.M. Hakkert, 1965], pp. 39-41).

