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From Heroes to Zeroes: the Pythagorean Refugees of the 6th and 5th Centuries

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In this paper I analyze the evidence about the Pythagorean philosophers who, in the 6th and 5th centuries BC, had to flee from the cities they governed in southern Italy and seek refuge elsewhere because of attacks from their political opponents.¹ I argue that, despite the different traditions about the reasons of these attacks and the opposing interpretations of the sources given by today's scholars, it is possible to find a root cause on which all authors, ancient and modern, would agree. As a matter of fact, the essential cause of the opposition against the Pythagoreans was in any case their elitism.

Of course proposing a common feature of the different possible causes of the attacks to the Pythagoreans is not the same as asserting that such feature is sufficient to explain the attacks. The generic anti-elitism that is in my opinion at the basis of the rebellions against the Pythagoreans is declined in very different ways in the different explanations of the rebellions, because it is linked to and specified by several other complex factors, which range from the anthropological and sociological realm to intricate economic and political circumstances. Consequently, suggesting that anti-elitism is implied by virtually all ancient sources and modern studies on the anti-Pythagorean attacks is not an attempt at simplifying the analyses of the attacks. Rather, it is a proposal to consider the typical Pythagorean snobbery as a common factor shared by the different analyses, a factor that must be specified in order to distinguish an explanation from the others. More specifically, while the elitist approach of the Pythagoreans is universally recognized, I have never seen this approach mentioned as a feature that can be found in all the explanations of the anti-Pythagorean rebellions reported by ancient authors and in all the modern hypotheses about the causes of those rebellions.

1 Of course studying the Pythagoreans is not easy, since we know their lives and doctrines through sources which are not always factually reliable and have a biased point of view anyway. As a result, the data we get from different sources are often inconsistent, and any statement about the Pythagoreans comes from a choice about which sources should be paid attention to, and how they should be interpreted. On this problem, see, among others, Casertano, 2009, p. 55-59; Centrone, 2013.

In the sixth and fifth centuries BC, the policies of several Greek cities in southern Italy were inspired and guided by philosophers belonging to the Pythagorean school.² The first Pythagorean philosopher to get significant influence over a city's government was Pythagoras himself, after he reached Croton from Delphi. Justin, Porphyry, Iamblichus and Athenaeus all tell the story of Pythagoras' arrival in Croton, and each of these reports gives some important hints that can help us understand how the philosopher managed to charm the people of that city. Justin says that, when Pythagoras arrived, Croton had just lost the battle of the Sagra river to Locri, and that the philosopher had a decisive role in invigorating the morale of the Crotonians. This tells us not just that Pythagoras arrived in Croton a few years after 530, since the battle of the Sagra river is thought to have happened around that year, but also why the philosopher was acclaimed. As a matter of fact, if Justin is right, the crisis that the city suffered surely made it easier for Pythagoras to be listened to: Croton needed the moral help and encouragement that the philosopher offered. However, Athenaeus suggests a different chronology, because according to him Pythagoras reached Croton later, after the city had conquered Sybaris. This account implies a considerably different view of Pythagoras' arrival in Croton – not just of its chronology, but also of the appeal the philosopher's speeches could have on the Crotonians. Since Croton defeated Sybaris around 510, Athenaeus places Pythagoras' arrival about twenty years later than Justin. In both cases, the city the philosopher came in was in a state of crisis, but the reasons of this upheaval are very different, because, while after losing to Locri Croton did not trust anymore its own military strength, Athenaeus tells us about a city that was in a state of moral decadence because it was haughty and violent. Croton's haughtiness derived from the unexpected win against the wealthy Sybaris, and its violence is proved by the conduct against the defeated city, as all the Sybarites – warriors and civilians alike – were killed. If Athenaeus is right, Pythagoras appealed to the Crotonians' sense of humanity and taught them to be friendlier and fairer to their fellow Greeks. The Crotonians' conduct towards the Sybarites could seem hard to reconcile with a Pythagorean influence on the citizens, so one may doubt Justin's chronology. However, such a ruthlessness could just be an unwanted effect of Pythagoras invigorating the Crotonians' trust in themselves.

On his part, Porphyry states that Pythagoras talked to four groups separately: first to the elder – that is, the magistrates – then to the young people followed by the kids, and finally to the women.³ There is a disagreement about the nature of the latter three assemblies, because, while some scholars – for example, Catherine Rowett – think that they were specially created for the occasion, others – among them, Walter Burkert and Charles Kahn – hypothesize that they already existed and were part of the organization of the city.⁴ In any case, the identity of these groups makes sense if Justin's account is truthful, because, if Croton had just lost a major battle, many young adult males had died, and only the previous and next generations of men were present in the city in a significant amount, together with the women of all ages. If this was the case, what Pythagoras said to the Crotonians was influenced by the tragedy

2 On Pythagoreanism and politics, see, among others, Delatte, 1922; von Fritz, 1940; Minar, 1942; Dunbabin, 1948, p. 355-375; Casertano, 1985; Id., 1988; Id., 1999, p. 71-74; Giangiulio, 1989; Musti, 1989; Centrone, 1996, p. 23-52.

3 Porph. *VP*, 18.

4 Rowett, 2014, p. 114-115; Burkert, 1972, p. 115; Kahn, 2001, p. 8.

that had just struck, since, as Justin tells, the philosopher aimed at rekindling the taste for war in boys and kids, and it is reasonable to think that he wanted to sooth the war widows. If, on the other had, the truthful account is the one we find in Athenaeus, one can imagine that Pythagoras did not talk to the middle aged men because they were the ones guilty of the atrocities against the Sybarites, that is the ones who could not be reformed by then.

In any case, an important aspect of Pythagoras' persuasive means can be deduced from Iamblichus' account. As a matter of fact, the Neoplatonic philosopher tells that Pythagoras talked to the young in the gymnasium – which was probably devoted to Apollo Lykeios, protector of the youth,⁵ who was worshipped near Croton -,⁶ to the kids in the temple of Pythian Apollo, and to the women in the temple of Hera.⁷ It is possible to infer that Pythagoras wanted to associate his teachings with a religious theme.

In the years after Pythagoras' speeches to the Crotonians, he and his fellows had a substantial influence on the political life of several cities in southern Italy. A group of followers started forming right after Pythagoras delivered his speeches; this way, the Pythagorean circle in Croton, a congregation of young men, was born. I will briefly describe how this group got power in Croton and elsewhere, sticking to Rowett's interpretation of the few sources we have.⁸ It looks like the Pythagoreans gained more and more influence on the elders who governed Croton. If this is true, it means that the system of government was not altered and power did not change hands⁹ – a council of a thousand elders kept governing the city.¹⁰ Rather, the policies that the Pythagoreans advocated for were often adopted.¹¹ Croton benefited from these policies, as its leadership of a league of allied cities shows.¹² Eventually, Pythagorean circles (*hetaireiai*) formed in nearby cities,¹³ either because the young men from the families that governed these cities¹⁴ joined the brotherhood or because some Pythagoreans were invited by governors who were impressed by the example of Croton.¹⁵ This way, the Pythagorean ideals gained more and more weight on the political decisions of all the cities in the region.¹⁶

However, at least twice, the Pythagorean communities in Magna Graecia were attacked by the people of the cities they were based in.¹⁷ We have many accounts of these attacks. There are two main traditions, both reporting fires in buildings where the Pythagoreans met.

5 Graf, 2009, p. 84-103.

6 *IG XIV 647 = SEG 46.1322; SEG 29.956-958; SEG 39.961-962; Hdt. 4.15; Giannelli, 1924, p. 61-68, 188-195; Graf, 1987.*

7 Iamb., *VP*, 50.

8 Rowett 2014, p. 127.

9 *Ibid.* p. 119.

10 *Ibid.* p. 129.

11 *Ibid.* p. 119.

12 *Ibid.* p. 120.

13 *Ibid.* p. 120, 129.

14 *Ibid.* p. 129.

15 *Ibid.* p. 120.

16 *Ibid.* p. 129.

17 On the revolts against the Pythagoreans, see, among others, Musti, 1989; Bugno, 1999; Riedweg, 2002, p. 136-139; Robinson, 2011, p. 107-111.

More precisely, one tradition only talks about the house of Milon in Croton being burned down, while the other ancient historians make references to fires in all the cities controlled by the Pythagoreans. In both versions, most Pythagoreans met their death. It is likely that these reports do not describe the facts as they happened. Indeed, according to most scholars, including Christoph Riedweg, there were two main rebellions against the Pythagoreans. While I will follow this historiographical tradition, one should always remember that we cannot be absolutely certain about the events that led to the end of the Pythagorean influence on the cities of Magna Graecia.

The first attack has been dated at the end of the sixth century. This attack, or at least the growing hostility against the Pythagorean circle that preceded it, may have forced Pythagoras to seek refuge elsewhere. An alternative explanation of Pythagoras' relocation to Metapontum is that it could have happened when, around 494, Cleinias became the dictator of Croton and expelled the notable citizens that he had not killed. In any case, Cleinias' regime did not last long, and the Pythagoreans probably regained their former influence on the city. In other accounts of Pythagoras' life, the attack caused the philosopher's death. In fact, Diogenes Laertius tells us that, even though Pythagoras managed to survive the fire and flee from Croton, he was caught and killed by his enemies as he stopped when he reached a field of beans. He refused to cross the field, as beans were unholy,¹⁸ and, when he was captured, he preferred dying to explaining his doctrines to those who were not worthy of hearing them.¹⁹ Porphyry, on his hand, cites the tradition according to which, even though Pythagoras' pupils allowed him to escape the fire by forming a human bridge, the philosopher, realizing that he was now without friends, killed himself.²⁰ One can note how in both these accounts Pythagoras escapes the fire, but prefers dying to contradicting his own beliefs (friendship was one of the highest values for Pythagoras). In yet other accounts, Pythagoras left Croton before the attacks, seemingly independently of any hostility towards him. In fact Iamblichus does not only repeat Aristoxenus' tale that Pythagoras went to Metapontum because of Cylon's campaign against him,²¹ but also mentions a different tradition, according to which Pythagoras departed from Croton to visit Pherecydes of Syros.²² Interestingly, Dicaearchus (as reported by Porphyry) confuted this tradition, on the basis of the death of Pherecydes predating Pythagoras' arrival in Croton, and a fortiori his departure from the city.²³ Anyway, considering that Iamblichus also says that the "plot" (ἐπιβουλὴ) against the Pythagoreans was born when the founder of the movement was already away,²⁴ it is possible that the Neoplatonic biographer found in a source of his the report that Cylon's revolt started after Pythagoras had already left Croton in order to live with Pherecydes. Of course it is also possible that, just as Aristoxenus, all of Iamblichus' sources had Pythagoras moving because of a growing hostility (even if not a real

18 See Diog. Laert. 8.19; 8.24; 8.33-34.

19 Diog. Laert. 8.39; see similar anecdotes about Pythagoras or some of his followers being killed because they did not cross a beanfield in *ibid.* 8.40; Iambl. *VP* 191.

20 Porph. *VP* 57.

21 See below.

22 Iamb. *VP* 248.

23 Porph. *VP* 56.

24 Iamb. *VP* 248.

“plot” yet), the difference between the different biographies being just the destination of the philosopher after leaving Croton – Metapontum or Pherecydes’ home.

That Pythagoras had to flee from Croton after having escaped the attack is what Dicaearchus narrated – we know his version of the story both from Porphyry and Diogenes Laertius.²⁵ Aristotle and Aristoxenus – whose accounts we know through Apollonius and Iamblichus, respectively – told a different story, because according to them Pythagoras had already left Croton when the burning happened. However, they both imputed Pythagoras’ flight to the enmity of those Crotonians that would later burn down the meeting room of the Pythagoreans. As a matter of fact, Apollonius – the otherwise unknown author of the *Mirabilia* – says that he has read in a work by Aristotle that Pythagoras, foreseeing that there would be a revolt against him, left Croton.²⁶ Iamblichus, on his part, retells Aristoxenus’ narration, according to which Pythagoras had to leave Croton because of the hostility of the followers of Cylon, which later culminated in the fire of the house of Milon.²⁷ Cylon was also mentioned in Heraclides’ report, which we know from Diogenes Laertius. More precisely, Heraclides related that Pythagoras left Croton after seeing Cylon offering a banquet to many Crotonians.²⁸ While Cylon’s hostility towards the philosopher is not mentioned here, it is likely implied.

As for Pythagoras’ life after fleeing from Croton, there are two different traditions. According to some sources, after all the cities he sought asylum in rejected him, he had to kill himself. However, from other writings we can gather that Pythagoras was able to settle in Metapontum. As for the first tradition, Porphyry tells that, according to Dicaearchus, after the massacre Pythagoras sheltered in Caulonia, and from there he tried to go to Locri. However, some of the elders of this city prevented him from entering the territory of the city, stating that they did not want him to change their laws. After having been rejected by the citizens of Tarentum as well and, more generally, seeing that crowds protested against him everywhere, Pythagoras found shelter in the temple of the Muses in Metapontum, where he died after starving for forty days.²⁹ Diogenes Laertius’ version is more succinct, because he just says that, according to Dicaerchus, Pythagoras, after having fled to the temple of the Muses in Metapontum, left himself die by starvation (Diogenes Laertius, too, reports that the fasting lasted forty days).³⁰ Heraclides, too, narrated that Pythagoras, after leaving Croton, reached Metapontum, where he left himself die by starvation.³¹ Aristoxenus likely narrated

25 Porph. *VP* 56-57; Diog. Laert. 8.40. Pythagoras also survives the attack in another version of the story, which Porphyry reports in the following lines. In Dicaerchus’ version of the story, when the meeting house where Pythagoras and his pupils met was burned down, the philosopher was in Croton, but not in the house. In the variant tale, Pythagoras was in the house, and survived only because of the help of his pupils, who lifted him above the flames and out of the house even though this meant death for all of them. However, in this version Pythagoras does not seek refuge elsewhere, but rather dies because of the grief.

26 Apollonius *Mir.* 6.

27 Iambl. *VP* 249.

28 Diog. Laert. 8.40.

29 Porph. *VP* 56-57.

30 Diog. Laert. 8.40.

31 *Ibid.* 8.40.

a similar story, because, when Iamblichus retells Aristoxenus' version of the attacks, he says that Pythagoras «departed towards Metapontum, and it is said that there he brought his life to an end».³²

On the other hand, Apollonius says that, after foreseeing the rebellion against him, Pythagoras moved to Metapontum, and tells several anecdotes about his life there.³³ Other writers, too, tell that Pythagoras lived in Metapontum,³⁴ where he was held in high regard.³⁵ If this is the case, it is possible that the philosopher never left the city, since Timaeus told that Pythagoras, after living for some time in Metapontum, died in that city.³⁶

There is an interesting parallel between these two seemingly opposite traditions, because in both cases Pythagoras' place of death seems to be Metapontum. Indeed, in a sense both traditions tell that Pythagoras died *in a temple* and *in a place consecrated to the Muses* in Metapontum. As we have seen, this is what Dicaearchus narrated, but this would be the case even if Pythagoras had settled in Metapontum and had died at home. As a matter of fact, Diogenes Laertius knows from Favorinus that Metapontines used to call the house of Pythagoras “temple of Demeter” and his porch “Museum”.³⁷ Iamblichus confirms this, even though he seems to imply that these places were consecrated after Pythagoras' death.³⁸ Justin, too, tells that Pythagoras' house was a temple for the Metapontines, because they treated the philosopher as a god.³⁹

Modern historians think that the Pythagoreans were attacked a second time around the middle of the fifth century. These attacks marked the end of the Pythagoreans' influence on the cities of Magna Graecia. One of the main sources on this final blow to the influence of the Pythagoreans on the politics of southern Italy is Polybius, who tells that the burning of the Pythagorean meeting places in all the cities they had settled in meant the beginning of civil wars, as the people who had been killed held the power in those cities.⁴⁰ Both traditions about the attacks could apply to this final blow to the Pythagoreans. As a matter of fact, if the Pythagoreans lost their control on all the cities at once, it is likely that all their headquarters were burned down simultaneously; if this is the case, the opponents of the Pythagoreans must have arranged their attacks in advance. But the destruction of the single house of Milon could have been enough, if all the main members of the brotherhood had gathered there for a meeting. Indeed, such a meeting would probably happen exactly in Croton, the main city of the region and the centre of the Pythagorean influence.

32 Iambl. *VP* 249, l. 7-8.

33 Apollonius *Mir.* 6.

34 Andron of Ephesus, *apud* Porph. ἀπὸ τοῦ ἄ τῆς Φιλολόγου ἀκροάσεως, *apud* Eus. *Praep. evang.* 10.3.6; Iambl. *VP* 248.

35 Favorinus, *apud* Diog. Laert. 8.15; Iambl. *VP* 170; Timaeus, *apud* Just. *Epit.* 20.4.

36 Timaeus, *apud* Just. *Epit.* 20.4.

37 Diog. Laert. 8.15.

38 Iambl. *VP* 170. Iamblichus also reports that according to Apollonius the Crotonians were persuaded by the Pythagoreans to build a temple of the Muses (*ibid.* 264).

39 Timaeus, *apud* Just. *Epit.* 20.4.

40 Polyb. 2.39.1-3.

The surviving Pythagoreans were forced to shelter in other cities. Several sources tell that only two Pythagoreans escaped from death when a Pythagorean meeting room was burned down, even though the names and the fates of the survivors are different in different sources. From what these sources tell, we can also infer that this fire was part of the uprising that definitely ended the Pythagorean influence on politics in Magna Graecia.

Aristoxenus – whose narration of the attack we know only indirectly, through Iamblichus – told that only Archippus of Tarentum and Lysis – being the youngest, hence the strongest, among those present – managed to survive the fire of the house of Milon in Croton. Since according to Aristoxenus the fire happened when Pythagoras was already dead, and after it the Pythagoreans refrained from any political involvement,⁴¹ this attack is the one that, in the middle of the fifth century, ended the Pythagorean influence on the cities of southern Italy. Archippus and Lysis were the only two Pythagoreans who survived the fire of the house of Milon not only in Aristoxenus' narration, but also according to Neanthes, whose version we know through Porphyry.⁴² Porphyry adds that after the attack the Pythagorean doctrines, which were only known by the ones who were meeting at the house of Milon, were almost entirely forgotten,⁴³ so in Porphyry the attack these two philosophers survive is the final blow to the Pythagorean community. That Archippus and Lysis were the only two men who survived the burning of the house of Milon and the subsequent slaughter of the members of the Crotonian Pythagorean club, is also reported by Diogenes Laertius.⁴⁴

We find a similar story in Plutarch of Chaeronea's *On the Daemon of Socrates*, even though in this version the two survivors are Philolaus and Lysis, and the house where the Pythagoreans were gathered was in Metapontum. Like Aristoxenus, Plutarch says that the two philosophers escaped the burning thanks to their agility and strength, which are explained by their young age. More importantly, Plutarch, too, states that the attack Lysis and his fellow escaped alive from was part of the uprising that marked the end of the Pythagorean influence on the cities of southern Italy.⁴⁵

So Aristoxenus, Neanthes, Diogenes Laertius and Plutarch all agree about Lysis having to leave the city where he lived because of the attacks on the Pythagoreans. Diodorus Siculus, too, tells so.⁴⁶ However, in Olympiodorus' scholia to Plato's *Phaedo*, the names of the two Pythagoreans who survived the fire are Hipparchus and Philolaus. In this version of the story, Philolaus managed to survive the burning as he had been expelled from the brotherhood «because of his being unfit to philosophy».⁴⁷ This may be a reference to Philolaus breaking the rule of not divulging the Pythagorean doctrines to the people outside the sect.⁴⁸ As for Hipparchus, it is commonly opined by scholars that this philosopher did not exist, and that the sources that cite him really refer to either Archippus or Hippasus of Metapontum.

41 Iambl. *VP* 249-250.

42 Porph. *VP* 55.

43 *Ibid.* 57.

44 Diog. Laert. 8.39.

45 Plut. *De gen.* 13, p. 583 a.

46 Diod. Sic. 10.11.2.

47 Olymp. *in Phd.* 1.13, 13-20.

48 Diog. Laert. 8.15, ll. 84-85; Iambl. *VP* 199. See Euseb. *Hierocl.* p. 380, l. 8.

However, according to a tradition attested by Clement of Alexandria, a Pythagorean named Hipparchus was banned by the brotherhood because he had divulged their secrets,⁴⁹ and in a letter wrongly attributed to Lysis Hipparchus is rebuked for exposing the doctrines of the sect, so Olympiodorus may mean that all the philosophers that were attending the meeting died, and that only the ones that were not there because their desire to spread the Pythagorean theories had got them expelled survived.

So, even if we assume that Olympiodorus' Ipparchus is no other than Archippus, we have three different names for the two only philosophers that, according to all sources, survived the fire. Interestingly, all three possible combinations of these names are mentioned by at least one source, as Aristoxenus and Neanthes referred to Archippus and Lysis, Plutarch names Lysis and Philolaus, and Olympiodorus may mean Philolaus and Archippus.

As for the fate of these philosophers, Aristoxenus told that, while Archippus retreated to Tarentum, which was his hometown, Lysis migrated to Greece. More precisely, he moved first to the Achaia of Peloponnesus and then to Thebes, where he taught, namely to Epaminondas. It is in Thebes that Lysis ended his days.⁵⁰ That Lysis fled to Thebes, where he instructed Epaminondas, is a report that can be also found in Diogenes Laertius, Diodorus Siculus, and Cornelius Nepos.⁵¹ Porphyry's version of the story is slightly different, because he says that Lysis was the teacher of Epaminondas when they were both in Italy, and that they took refuge in Greece together.⁵² In Plutarch we find a third version, because he says that Lysis settled in Thebes, and that Epaminondas went there only after Lysis' death, to take care of the burial.⁵³ Olympiodorus tells that, after the fire in the Pythagorean meeting room, Philolaus left Italy.⁵⁴ Other sources tell us that he settled in Thebes, where he taught, among others, Simmias and Cebes. However, according to Plutarch, Philolaus sheltered first in Lucania and then among some Pythagoreans that had started to fight back against the opposition.⁵⁵

Several sources tell us that other Pythagoreans had to leave the cities where they lived, too. After narrating the fate of Archippus and Lysis, Iamblichus reports that, according to Aristoxenus, the other Pythagoreans took refuge in Rhegium before leaving Italy (I am here following Domenico Musti's interpretation of the passage);⁵⁶ the only Pythagorean who remained in Magna Graecia was Archytas of Tarentum.⁵⁷ Iamblichus also reports what a certain «Apollonius» – maybe Apollonius of Tyana - ⁵⁸ told about the revolts, and in this version of the story, too, there are some refugees. Apollonius said that, after Pythagoras left Croton, the Crotonians grew more and more hostile towards his followers, and finally attacked them. Democedes, foreseeing the attack, left Croton with the youngest men among

49 Clem. Al. *Strom.* 5.58 [II, 364, 27].

50 Iambl. *VP* 250.

51 Diog. Laert. 8.7; Diod. Sic. 10.11.2; Nep. *Epam.* 2.

52 Porph. *VP* 55.

53 Plut. *De gen.* 13, p. 583.

54 Olymp. in *Phd.* 1.13, ll. 13-23.

55 Plut. *De gen.* 13, p. 583 a.

56 Interpretation of Iamblichus' references to Italy and Rhegium: Musti, 1990, p. 51-52.

57 Iambl. *VP* 250, l. 14 - 251, l. 2.

58 On the identity of Iamblichus' «Apollonius», see Zhmud, 2012, p. 74-75.

the Pythagoreans (the ephebes). After having defeated the Pythagoreans and established a new regime, the enemies of the brotherhood exiled everyone who did not agree with Croton's new government – including the Pythagoreans who, having foreseen the attack just like Democedes, had avoided death by taking refuge in an inn.⁵⁹ Apollonius also said that Democedes took the ephebes to Plataea, and that then he was killed by Theages, who was given the bounty the Crotonians had offered for Democedes' death.⁶⁰ Justin, on his part, tells that after the burning of the meeting room, which killed sixty of the three hundreds young men who were part of the Pythagorean circle of Croton, all the other members of the circle had to go into exile.⁶¹

So more than once the Pythagoreans in southern Italy, after having had significant influence over the administration of a city, had to seek refuge because of their fellow citizens' hostility. The specific case of the Pythagoreans is an interesting example of a more general pattern in the history of political refugees in ancient Greece: the refugees are often people who were once in power.

There are different traditions about the reasons of the persecutions of the Pythagoreans. Briefly, we can say that sources cite different reasons for the hostility against the Pythagoreans: the leader of the anti-Pythagorean movement had tried to join the brotherhood, but has been rejected by Pythagoras⁶² for his violent and tyrannical tendencies;⁶³ the Pythagoreans had not only declined the application of several people, but also publicly shamed them;⁶⁴ Pythagoras' followers were seen as privileged because at some point the philosopher stopped addressing all the citizens and chose to talk only to his disciples;⁶⁵ there was a conjecture that the Pythagoreans were conspiring to seize power;⁶⁶ the Pythagoreans were members of the most famous and rich families in the city;⁶⁷ the three hundred or so members of the Pythagorean club got more and more power in Croton, with the result that their ideals were overrepresented in the leadership of the city;⁶⁸ although Pythagoras' charisma had managed to curtail the public outrage against his followers, when he left the city there was no more such a restraint;⁶⁹ the Pythagoreans who were in power did not satisfy the plebs' wishes when they distributed the land Croton had gained by defeating Sybaris;⁷⁰ the leaders of the revolt, who belonged to the same families as the Pythagoreans, felt like their relatives dishonoured

59 Iambl. *VP* 255-264.

60 *Ibid.* 261.

61 Just. *Epit.* 20.4.

62 Diog. Laert. 8.39.

63 Iambl. *VP* 248-249; Porph. *VP* 54-55; Diod. Sic. 10.11.1.

64 Iambl. *VP* 252.

65 *Ibid.* 254.

66 *Ibid.* 254; Diog. Laert. 8.39; Just. *Epit.* 20.4.

67 Iambl. *VP* 254.

68 *Ibid.* 254.

69 *Ibid.* 255.

70 *Ibid.* 255.

them;⁷¹ they were also annoyed by the fact that their relatives did not shake their hands,⁷² even though this greeting was used among the member of the sect;⁷³ furthermore, they were irritated because their relatives shared their goods with the other Pythagoreans but not with them;⁷⁴ the Pythagoreans' way of life differed from the custom of everyone else, and was perceived as odd;⁷⁵ a member of the brotherhood would always comply with another member's wishes and with the rules of the brotherhood, but never with someone else's requests;⁷⁶ the Pythagoreans opposed the proposal to open up public offices to everybody;⁷⁷ public discourses against the Pythagoreans were held;⁷⁸ a libel falsely claiming to report the Pythagorean secrets mentioned rules such as treating friends – that is, members of the sect – as gods, but other people as beasts, trying to become tyrants and in any case opposing random allocation of public offices, and following the sect's own rule while publicly praising the city's customs;⁷⁹ the Pythagoreans were accused to conjure against common people;⁸⁰ the fact that the Pythagoreans were given the reins of the cities caused envy in the ones who were excluded from power;⁸¹ the Pythagoreans lived in isolation;⁸² Pythagoras and his followers had high moral principles, and everyone who is so noble is the subject of envy.⁸³ One should also remind that Cylon, the member of one of the most prominent families in Croton,⁸⁴ and Nino, a supporter of the rights of common people,⁸⁵ are mentioned as leaders of the anti-Pythagorean movement.

These sources have been interpreted by modern scholars in two different ways. According to some experts, the revolts against the Pythagoreans should be considered a democratic uprising against an aristocratic regime. According to other scholars, the Pythagoreans were overthrown by people who sought power, but were unable to achieve it because they were not part of the Pythagorean circles. In other words, according to these scholars, if a city's Pythagorean club gathered members of the propertied class who managed to give a certain address to the city's policies, it is reasonable to think that the opposition to such a club came from other clubs whose members belonged to the same social group but wanted the city to take a different course of action.

Rowett argues for the latter theory because she thinks that the Pythagoreans, who did not change the constitution of the cities they controlled, gave no reason to democrats to target

71 *Ibid.* 255.

72 The Pythagoreans shook their parents' hands, though.

73 *Iambl. VP* 257.

74 *Ibid.* 257.

75 *Ibid.* 255-257.

76 *Ibid.* 256-257.

77 *Ibid.* 257.

78 *Ibid.* 258-261.

79 *Ibid.* 258-261.

80 *Ibid.* 260.

81 *Porph. VP* 54.

82 *Just. Epit.* 20.4.

83 *Diod. Sic.* 10.10.2.

84 *Iambl. VP* 248, 258; *Porph. VP* 54. *Diod. Sic.* 10.11.1.

85 *Iambl. VP* 258.

specifically them.⁸⁶ Moreover, we know that some Pythagoreans played a prominent role in the public life of Tarentum, that was ruled by a democracy.⁸⁷ Leonid Zhmud, too, advocates the theory that the first attack against the Pythagoreans was not motivated by democratic ideals, but was rather a conflict within the oligarchy: after some aristocrats, having entered the Pythagorean brotherhood, started controlling the whole political life of Croton, the other aristocrats fought against them.⁸⁸ However, Zhmud thinks that this first attack should also be considered an internal split of the brotherhood, because – according to Zhmud – Cylon was a follower of Pythagoras that turned against his master in order to take his place in the political scene.⁸⁹ The main reason to think that Cylon was a Pythagorean is that Iamblichus tells that he was an administrator of Sybaris, and it is likely that all the officials in the cities that, like Sybaris, were under the authority of Croton were part of the Pythagorean brotherhood. Rowett has proposed an alternative interpretation of the sources, which puts together the report that Cylon had been rejected by the Pythagoreans with the possibility that he held a position of power because he was part of the brotherhood. According to Rowett, it is possible that Cylon asked to join the group only in order to have the chance to destroy it and was temporarily accepted by the Pythagoreans, but when they saw that he did not really agree with their ideals and expelled him, he attacked them no more from within, but rather from without.⁹⁰ In any case, Zhmud's interpretation of the fires as a conflict between fellow Pythagoreans only applies to the facts at the end of the sixth century, which he sharply differentiates from the end of the Pythagorean influence on Magna Graecia in the mid-fifth century.⁹¹

What all the traditional tales and scholarly theories have in common is that the hostility towards the Pythagorean school is due to the philosophers' elitism. Of course this does not apply to the attack against Pythagoras himself if Zhmud is right and this attack was led by members of the brotherhood. However, even Zhmud sees the attack against Pythagoras not just as a conflict within the brotherhood, but also as the outcome of the hostility of that part of aristocracy that wanted to regain power, and, as we have seen, such hostility is caused by Pythagorean elitism, so the hypothesis that such elitism is the main cause of the external attacks against the brotherhood is consistent with Zhmud's interpretation of the sources.

The sense of their superiority over other people permeates the Pythagorean conception of philosophy.⁹² The Pythagoreans thought that knowledge should belong exclusively to the

86 Rowett, 2014, p. 129. As both Iamblichus and Stobaeus tell us, Aristoxenus wrote in his *Pythagorean maxims* that existing laws should be preserved, even when they are worse than the ones found in nearby cities (Iambl. *VP* 176; Stob. 4.25.45).

87 Rowett, 2014, p. 130. It must be noted that this explanation applies not just to the fires of the Pythagoreans' meeting rooms, but also to Cleinias' rise to power, which, as we have seen, could be the reason Pythagoras had to leave Croton.

88 Zhmud, 2012, p. 101-102.

89 *Ibid.*, p. 97-102.

90 Rowett, 2014, p. 128-129.

91 Zhmud, 2012, p. 99-102.

92 On Pythagorean philosophy, see, among others, Centrone, 1996; Casertano, 2009, p. 55-78; Bonazzi, 2016.

members of their brotherhood. They did not divulge the oral precepts of the schools, which were mentioned only to the people who, having been initiated into the brotherhood, knew the passwords that allowed members to recognize each other.⁹³

The Pythagoreans did not only keep their doctrines secret from other people. They also lived in a different way, which was morally better according to them. The difference between the ways of life of the Pythagoreans and the way of life of ordinary people was probably made noticeable by a visible separation between the two communities, because it looks like the Pythagoreans lived together. The Pythagorean way of life has been studied, among others, by Pierre Hadot, according to whom it is not possible to set apart the thought of ancient philosophers from their daily life as individuals as well as a community.⁹⁴

The way the Pythagoreans directed public affairs was also elitist. According to some scholars the Pythagoreans preferred an aristocratic regime, and in any case the network of relationships among the philosophers living in different cities helped them to obtain and keep power in the *poleis*. According to Edwin Minar, the Pythagoreans favoured aristocracy over the other forms of government. Minar thinks that the Pythagoreans fought against democracy, and generally against the new political ideas of the sixth and fifth centuries. One reason to support this thesis is that Croton was governed by few people, although it must be noted that the city was already an oligarchy before Pythagoras arrived, so it was more a matter of keeping the existing regime than a decision to actively limit the circle of power.

Even if the Pythagoreans did not support aristocracy *per se*, their way to get and keep authority was based on their behaviour as an exclusive elite. As a matter of fact, the Pythagoreans were able to rise to power in a city because they could count on the support of the same-minded clubs that influenced the policies of the neighbouring cities. The Pythagorean communities of different *poleis* were loyal to each other, and this explains why a federation of cities which had common policies and a common currency formed around Croton, the city where the Pythagoreans gained power first. These cities were allies because each of them was under the influence of a Pythagorean group, and these groups were close to each other. Croton led the league because it was the centre of Pythagoreanism. Moreover, since the members of a Pythagorean *hetaireia* always helped each other, if one of them had any power, he would use it to favour the other associates, allowing them to get power themselves.

It is also a form of elitism that the message addressed to ordinary citizens was different from the esoteric doctrine taught to fellow philosophers. As a matter of fact Iamblichus describes Pythagoras' speech to Crotonians and his teachings to his close followers in very different terms. Pythagoras only talked about moral behaviour to the people of Croton, and only in traditional terms.

93 A different approach to divulgation was in some cases had in the cases of the results of scientific investigations. This is one of the reasons that have led some scholars to accept the traditional division of the Pythagorean schools in *acusmatici* (who followed the *acusmata*, i.e. the symbolic oral precepts on how to behave, especially in a religious setting) and *mathematici* (who devoted themselves to the study of mathematics and the mathematical aspects of reality).

94 Hadot, 1995.

If Rowett is right and the ideal city ruled by philosophers described in Plato's *Republic* is heavily influenced by the way the Pythagoreans governed,⁹⁵ this dialogue can be considered more evidence that the Pythagoreans ran the *poleis* as an enlightened elite.

To conclude, the Pythagoreans had to seek refuge in other cities because of their elitism. From this point of view, Olympiodorus' tale (assuming he really meant Hipparchus, and not Archippus) has a particularly significant symbolic meaning: only those Pythagoreans who were not elitist – only the ones who chose to divulge the secrets of the brotherhood – could survive.

Once again, one should be aware that elitism alone cannot explain why Pythagoreans were expelled from the cities on which they had earlier obtained a great influence. The causes of any historical phenomenon are complex, more the so in the case of a phenomenon like the anti-Pythagorean revolts, which span different decades and cities. The snobbery of the Pythagorean brotherhood is not enough to explain why its members were killed or caused to flee after detaining some form of power. Any complete attempt at an explanation of these facts must consider the variegated facets of the Pythagorean way of life, the sociological customs of the different cities of Magna Graecia, the economic evolution of this region, the political ideals supported by the Pythagoreans and by their opponents, and several other factors. Once this is clear, it is possible to appreciate the fact that virtually every account, ancient or modern, of the anti-Pythagorean revolts mentions the elitist approach of the Pythagoreans as one of the direct or indirect causes of the revolts. This is, I think, a fact that has not been adequately highlighted by the literature so far, even though of course all scholars agree on the elitist nature of Pythagoreanism.

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95 Rowett, 2014, p. 115.

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