

Pythagoras and the Origins of the Name *Philosophos*

Every extant tale of the birth of the name *philosophos*, most sourced to Heraclidus of Pontus and his contemporaries, sets Pythagoras near the beginning. These stories are problematic, however, because they report inconsistent accounts; fit a suspicious pattern attributing word-coinages to Pythagoras (Vogel 1966); assume anachronistic meanings of *sophia*; presume Socratic and Platonic themes (Burkert 1960); have biased lineages; and ascribe to Pythagoras a modesty or worldly curiosity inconsistent with other testimony about him (Kahn 2001). It is common, therefore, to dismiss the stories as apocryphal, mere vaunting of an intellectual hero or the easiest-available myth of creation. Many scholars have come to suggest that *philosophos*, having no special relation to Pythagoras, simply meant “intellectually-curious person” (Chroust 1947, 1964; Nightingale 1995; Cooper 2007)

This paper argues that we can keep Pythagoras near the beginning of the word’s birth while acknowledging that the stories about Pythagoras’ connection are largely fiction. Several reasons predominate. First, the name had to be coined at some point, and no stories suggest an alternative figure. Second, the earliest recorded uses of *philosophos*, and the history of other *phil-* prefixed names, most often used as bemused name-calling names, make the blandly descriptive “intellectually-curious person” gloss unconvincing. Third, the stories—that because the name *sophos* is fit only for gods, *philosophos* is a humble alternative; or that *philosophoi*, unlike the athletes and merchants of the world, care for understanding rather than honor or money—are not actually inconsistent.

Most importantly, none of the reliable versions of the Pythagoras story say that he himself coined the name. Hence my conjecture. Pythagoreans gathered in Croton to study novel topics, hoping to become able to advise their hometowns (Riedweg 2004, 2005; Dunbabin 1948).

They wanted to join the elite cultural ranks of *sophoi*, “sages,” but apparently aimed to skip the traditional lifetime experience necessary for induction. They could be called, ironically, *philosophoi*, “people wanting to become *sophoi*.” They were a common-enough sight for the name to stick. Shortly thereafter, they recovered and redeemed the name for themselves (as Quakers and Queers did millennia later), with or without Pythagoras’ direct self-application of the name. So Pythagoras, perhaps indirectly and unintentionally, probably *caused* the name to come to be, and his school helped popularize it. The history of *philosophos* then is wrapped up both in the specific Pythagorean study-practices and in the stories of traditional *sophoi*.

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