

APOLLONIUS OF TYANA: HISTORY OR FABLE?

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One of the most controversial figures in the history of antiquity was Apollonius of Tyana. Long derided by sectarians as a “rival of Christianity,” we discover here that he was a leading figure in the emergence of the Neopythagorean movement in the first century CE, and a Magus in his own right, one of our links to the ancient Pythagorean Mysteries.

In the first century of our era, there appeared at Tyana in Cappadocia one of the chief representatives of Neopythagoreanism. Pupil of the Indian Brahmans, he related the Mysteries of Pythagoras to the wisdom of the East and preached to the educated classes of his time a pagan, but sincerely humanitarian, religion.



The Wandering Philosopher, probably Apollonius of Tyana, Second Century CE. Roman Marble copy of a Greek original. The Archaeological Museum of Herakleion. Photo © 2008 by George Groutas/Wikimedia Commons.

The name of this challenging Greek was Apollonius of Tyana. Born an aristocrat, he

had given his patrimony to his relatives and traveled about like a poor monk. He brought knowledge of spiritual and moral truth to the courts of princes, for although the masses were seldom satisfied with philosophic subtleties, a philosophic religion appealed to the more intelligent.

Apollonius has been characterized as “a figure combining holiness with civilized behavior, humor with wisdom, fortitude with urbanity, and humaneness under extreme provocation.”¹

Associating with the mighty of his time, this teacher tried to persuade them that “the bad live badly, even if they are prosperous.”² The true religious life, as he saw it, was to acquire wisdom, and, so far as one can, do good to those who deserve it.

Equating moral with social law, he hated the mere outward show of piety, which characterized the ceremonial religions of his time. Beneath the hypocritical veneer, he saw appalling materialism and bigotry. He had no patience with self-righteousness. He dismissed what we would call today “dogmatic theology” as a subject which transcends the power of humans.

He visited the temples of many creeds, but above all the gods he revered a supreme and unfathomable Intelligence. His contemporaries tried to bribe the gods with bloody sacrifices, but he was content to receive with gratitude only what he really needed and deserved.

Apollonius taught a Yogic communion with the All, a Buddhist message of the conquest of desire, and a Christ-like doctrine that people should live together



Constantine Manasses, Miniature 28 from his *Chronicle*, 14th century: Roman Emperors Septimius Severus and Caracalla.

without hatred and help one another. He was acclaimed the son of a god, but he never set himself above his companion Initiates. The superstitious praised or feared him and called him a magician because he manifested extrasensory perception and healed stubborn illnesses; but he never claimed to be able to violate nature's laws.

The evidence for parapsychology has convinced many today who are not supernaturalists. The effectiveness of Apollonius's therapy was the result of his thorough training as a physician and his sympathetic understanding of human character. Kindness and insight made him particularly successful as a psychiatrist, or "exorcist of demons" (to use the language of his age).

Historical Figure or Archetype?

Apollonius of Tyana, like many other ancient figures, is often written off as unhistorical because so many metaphors, mythic concepts, and allegories have been associated with his story. Although there is much plausible material which might very well be factual, it is without supporting evidence in contemporaneous literature.

Those not versed in the symbolism of the Mysteries are tempted to write off the whole biography of Apollonius as fictional: They misread the intent of the Annunciation; his divine origin; his exorcism of demons; his raising of the girl believed to be dead; his conversation with the dead; his power to make himself invisible and to walk through closed doors; his understanding

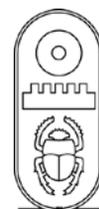
of all languages without learning them; and his Ascension.

The memoirs of Apollonius, we are told, were written by his disciple, Damis, who accompanied him on his journeys. The original memoirs are no longer extant: They remained suspiciously unnoticed from the first to the third centuries, even though Apollonius had dramatic relationships with the Emperors Nero and Domitian and was prominent in important places.

Early in the third century, the memoirs were reportedly given by the Empress Julia Domna, a patron of the arts, to an urbane literary man named Flavius Philostratus. Her husband, Septimius Severus, adorned his private chapel with busts of Apollonius, Jesus, Jupiter, Orpheus, and Abraham. In that eclectic atmosphere, Julia Domna is said to have persuaded Philostratus to translate the memoirs of Damis, and to use them as his source in writing *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana*. An English translation of this work has been published in three volumes by Harvard University Press.³

Some scholars hold that Damis left no memoirs and that Philostratus merely invented a naive religious romance to while away the tedium of Julia Domna. Others concede the existence of the original source material, but feel that it was adorned by Philostratus to provide "a pagan counterblast to the New Testament."⁴ Philostratus, certainly, was not inventing idle fiction for the sheer diversion of a sentimental reader when he dramatized the inner verities by way of parables and symbols.

The present writer agrees with those who see an historical individual behind the mythic archetypes. In *The Life of Apollonius* a real character is unmistakably discerned, who must have been described in the first place by a contemporary who knew him intimately. If the mythic elements in his biography parallel the archetypes attached to other Avatars (divine teachers) and apostles, it is



because both have a common source in the Mysteries. There is no reason to postulate borrowing with an ulterior purpose.

Biography Interpreted

In reading Philostratus's *The Life of Apollonius*, we must distinguish between the facts of his external career and the symbols and allegories pertaining to his inner life. The miraculous marvels of antiquity, some impossible in a literal sense, symbolize inner spiritual experience. Vital stages in the life of the Magus correspond to our own trials and triumphs in the ascent to universal consciousness.

The lives of Avatars display significant parallels. Apollonius, Buddha, Pythagoras, Krishna, Chaitanya, all were similar, not only in their visible services to humanity, but especially in their world view, integration of character, pursuit of understanding, struggle with temptation, dedication, and sacrifice. They all brought the same divine Ideal to their followers in the times and places allotted to them.

Just before Apollonius was born, we read, his mother had a vision of the prophetic god, Proteus, who informed her that he would incarnate in the child she would bear. Likewise, Plato's father and mother were reportedly notified by Apollo in a dream that their child would be virgin born. In the mystic inner lives of Adepts and Avatars, all are "divinely begotten" saviors. This symbolizes their "mystic birth" during the Mystery of Initiation: The day of one's real birth is that on which one is "born again" into the world spiritually.

All Avatars have been, in the tradition of Hermetic philosophy, inspired by a way of life based upon Cosmic Consciousness rather than upon the petty strife of narrow, unaware egos. It is not surprising that the legend of "raising the dead" is a stock feature of "the



Birth of Buddha at Lumbini, from a Laotian Temple. Photo © 2006 by Sacca/Wikimedia Commons.

Myth of the Magus."⁵ We are always dead to those truths of which we are not aware.

Another traditional part of such Mythic structures is that all Avatars are threatened by an opposing power, the matter-centered world of glamour or illusion. This power is personified in the story of Apollonius by the figures of Nero, Domitian, and his "Judas," Euphrates.

The protagonist must pass through the trials of Initiation. He is tempted, but triumphs over the kingdom of darkness. Accused of sedition and witchcraft, Apollonius was tempted to hide, but he came to Rome *voluntarily* to answer these charges before Domitian.

He was imprisoned and persecuted, but he could not be cowed. This sophisticated Avatar was fortunate enough to die a natural death (surrender of physical personality) at an advanced age, but his followers said he returned to them glorified by spiritual birth, and then ascended into Heaven (the invisible brotherhood of the Masters).

The inner states are symbolized in the various dramatizations of the Mysteries the world over as the degrees and trials of Initiation. Apollonius, it is obvious, derived his name from the Sun god, Apollo, and the allegorical Solar saga identified his trials with the twelve Zodiacal signs. Even his travels, mystically described, personify a journey through the signs.

When both the noumenal and empirical life of the Avatar conform to a universal pattern prefigured in the heavens, the quest for his individual traits of personality and the facts of his objective career require careful study. *The Life of Apollonius* by Philostratus not only outlines one life but also elaborates it to symbolize the entire Hermetic philosophy.

Study and Travels

At the age of fourteen Apollonius of Tyana was educated by Euthydemus in the world's leading university at Tarsus. He then studied in the peaceful neighboring town of Aegæ where he was privileged to dwell and study in the Temple of Asclepius. At sixteen, he embraced the austere rule of the Pythagorean Community, accepting the life of contemplation, self-examination, holiness, sobriety, and service.

He adopted the vegetarian diet to honor the fact of universal kinship. He recognized reincarnation as a reality. For five years, he went through the Pythagorean discipline of silence, which our present age might profitably restore. When this discipline was completed, Philostratus notes, "his words had a ring about them as of the dooms delivered by a sceptered king."⁶



The Seven Liberal Arts: Pythagoras as a symbol for Arithmetic.
14th-15th centuries. Venice, Doge's Palace: capital # 17
in the porch. Photo © 2008 by Giovanni Dall'Orto/
Wikimedia Commons.

The Tyanean seeker gave up his patrimony in order to travel lightly through life, but he traveled far and long. The description of his travels is allegorical. He went through a great part of Asia Minor to find his way to India

in order to familiarize himself with the secret doctrines of the Brahmins. *Ex Oriente lux.*

Journey to the East

The journey to India symbolically represents the trials of a neophyte. Even though preternaturally wise, Apollonius had to journey widely to gain the arcane wisdom of the world. On the journey, he stayed for a time in Babylon where he was introduced to the Magi. He found them "wise, but not in all respects."⁷ The Chaldean way station on the journey to India represents a definite state of every aspirant's interior development.

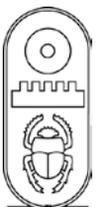
At length, Apollonius reached the Court of King Phraortes in India, who recommended him to Iarchus, the oldest of the sages. The simplicity of the Indian palace, contrasting with the pomp of Babylon, was emblematic of a more austere philosophy.

The Indian sages knew self-understanding to be the beginning of philosophy: Iarchus told Apollonius many details about his life and character which could have been known only by intuition. The rites of Initiation were symbolized by the Well of Testing, the Fire of Pardon, the Jar of the Rains, the Jar of the Winds, and the Icons of the Gods, the last symbolizing apotheosis through identification with the eternal Archetypes.

The Indian sages expressed profound doctrines of animism, reincarnation, divination, and therapy of the body and soul. A sound interpretation of his discourses with the Brahmins and their advice, together with his later dialogues with Menippus, yields the whole esoteric catechism.

Return to the West

Apollonius's visit to the Empire of the Sages and his interview with their leader symbolize some of the deepest occult doctrines of our Hermetic heritage. When Apollonius returned from this pilgrimage, the wise respected his wisdom more than ever, and princes honored him as a superior when



they entertained him at their courts.

At Ephesus, the center of Greco-Roman worship, the Adept reproved the people for their ignorance, idleness, arrogance, and noise. He advised the Smyrneans to take more pride in *worthy people* than in fine architecture. He rebuked the Athenians

for their gory gladiatorial shows. The lamia or vampire from whom Apollonius saved young Menippus is a symbol which relates to those concerned only with getting, never with giving.

In Rome, the Adept was arrested on the charge of impiety against Nero, but after questioning was released as a being too powerful to be controlled. His aid to Vindex in the western half of the Empire was indeed a redoubt raised against Nero.

We are told that Apollonius met the funeral procession of an aristocratic virgin, the daughter of a Consul, apparently dead on her wedding day. He touched her; whereupon she arose and returned home. For this, notes the symbolic story, he was expelled from Rome.

Predicting that Vespasian would be the sovereign of Rome, Apollonius gave him this good counsel: "Gold lacks lustre and is mere dross if it be wrung from human tears."⁸

When Apollonius visited an academy of sages near the bank of the Nile, he reminded the Egyptians of their debt to their Indian mentors, and examined ancient institutions in a critical spirit.

Continuing his journeys, the Adept took a firm stand against the cruelty of the Emperor Domitian. His words were reported to that tyrant by his mortal enemy, Euphrates. Apollonius was accused of having participated in an insurrection against Domitian, but he appeared before the tribunal and was acquitted.

Ultimately, he settled in Ephesus and there opened a Pythagorean school. He con-



Ruins of the Temple of Artemis, 6th century BCE. Ephesus. Photo © 2004 by Adam Cart/Wikimedia Commons.

tinued his philosophic teaching there until he died, at about a hundred years of age. He had traveled in Nineveh, Babylon, India, Spain, Africa, Greece, Italy, Egypt, and Persia. At last, having mastered the lore of the Magi, the Brahmans, and the Egyptian ascetics, he settled in Ephesus as a

humble teacher.

He was credited with unparalleled thaumaturgical powers, but he claimed nothing beyond the natural magic of sincere seeking and constructive effort. The ancient world long distinguished between the Apollonii (white magicians) and the Pherecydæ (black magicians). Perhaps the "white magic" of holiness and selfless service opened for Apollonius windows of insight which were closed to grosser natures.

ENDNOTES

¹ Eliza Marian Butler, *The Myth of the Magus* (Cambridge, UK; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 55.

² Apollonius of Tyana, Epistle 91 "To His Brothers," in Flavius Philostratus, *The Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, trans. F.C. Conybeare, (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1912), vol. 2, 479.

³ Flavius Philostratus, *The Life of Apollonius, 3 vols., 1-2 tr. F.C. Conybeare* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1912). Available at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/aot/laot/index.htm>.

⁴ Ferdinand Christian Baur, *Apollonius von Tyana und Christus* (Leipzig: Ed. Zeller, 1876).

⁵ See the discussion of common archetypes in Butler.

⁶ Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius*, chap. 17, trans. Conybeare, 1:48-49. Available at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/aot/laot/laot04.htm>.

⁷ *Ibid.*, chap. 26, 1:79.

⁸ Apollonius of Tyana, Sermon 5:36, fragment in G.R.S. Mead, *Apollonius of Tyana* (London and Benares: Theosophical Publishing Society, 1901), 139. Available at <http://www.sacred-texts.com/cla/aot/aot/aot16.htm>.