

PIERCING TRUTHS: PYTHAGORAS, WESTERN CIVILIZATION, AND HOPE

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Western Civilization is in crisis. World Civilization is in crisis.

G.K. Chesterton wrote about this feeling of crisis in 1906:

O God of earth and altar,
Bow down and hear our cry,
Our earthly rulers falter,
Our people drift and die;
The walls of gold entomb us,
The swords of scorn divide,
Take not thy thunder from us,
But take away our pride.¹

William Butler Yeats also expressed similar feelings in 1919:

Turning and turning in the
widening gyre
The falcon cannot hear the
falconer;
Things fall apart; the centre cannot
hold;
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the
world,
The blood-dimmed tide is loosed,
and everywhere
The ceremony of innocence is
drowned;
The best lack all conviction, while
the worst
Are full of passionate intensity.²

These descriptions from the early twentieth century are even more accurately borne out in the barrage of negative news we receive daily from electronic and print media in the twenty-first century.

Hope?

In 2015 the Rosicrucian Order, AMORC launched a powerful new site, <http://www.hope2050.org/>, visualizing that our world in crisis would experience “the passage” in the third decade of

the twenty-first century and enter a new Golden Age. This is consistent with many world traditions about the notion of cycles, including the Vedic Yugas,³ the Greco-Roman Ages of the World,⁴ and Joachim of Fiore’s Age of the Spirit, so central to Simon Studion’s *Naometria*, which had tremendous influence on the Tübingen Circle and the emergence of Rosicrucianism in the 1600s.⁵

We must ask ourselves: How is this breaking through to a new Golden Age – this piercing through what seem like impossible environmental, cultural, economic, and policy issues – going to take place?

It seems impossible.

And for a good reason: it is...

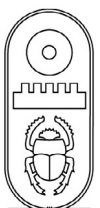
...unless you know what scholar, initiatic storyteller, and spiritual teacher Peter Kingsley knows:

Civilizations do not just happen; they are created by those whose place it is to grow them, and when a civilization comes to an impasse, to pierce through to a new path.

Civilization has been in crisis before, and our crises are often thought of as being cyclical. There is a way to pierce through them though, as an examination of the origins of Western Civilization can reveal. The very thing that helped give rise to today’s civilizations can help see us through their crises.

A Path of Discovery

Lifelong mystic⁶ Peter Kingsley is the author of many books, articles, and lectures.⁷ In particular three of his works are an initiatic journey into the roots of our Western Civilization in Magna Graecia



(what is today most of coastal southern Italy) and beyond.

Through his books *In The Dark Places of Wisdom, Reality*, and *A Story Waiting to Pierce You*,⁸ Kingsley leads readers on a path of discovery to the origins of our civilization in southern Italy, the Mediterranean, and Central Asia. The tale will continue in the Fall of 2018, in Kingsley's upcoming *Catafalque: Carl Jung and the End of Humanity*,⁹ connecting our civilization's origins with the ideas and writings of Carl Jung and his associate, the well-known scholar of Sufism and Islamic mysticism, Henry Corbin.

One of the connections between our origins and Jung is Jung's conception of creativity: "True creation is to give birth to the primordially ancient in a world that is new."¹⁰ This sentiment is shared by many, including the Pythagoreans (as will be explained below), Professor J.R.R. Tolkien,¹¹ and the Rosicrucian Order, AMORC, which recently launched a video, "Ancient Wisdom for a New World."¹²

Reading Kingsley's works is far from simply an intellectual experience, although his scholarship is impeccable, and for those interested, the endnotes provide ample and erudite substantiation of the truths he reveals. He is thoroughly engaged with the sacred tradition at the origins of the West.

This brief introduction is no substitute for reading Kingsley's books for oneself. The Alchemical maxim applies here: *Lege, lege, relege, ora, labora et invenies* (read, read, reread, pray, work, and thou shalt find).¹³

Magna Graecia

Today we think of Italy as Italian; however beginning in the eighth century BCE, Greek colonies were firmly established in the Mediterranean from southern Italy to Spain and even south to Libya and north to the Black Sea.¹⁴ The Romans called southern Italy *Magna Graecia* (Great Greece). Even today, the

Italo-Greek Catholic Church – a Church of Byzantine Tradition – has Eparchies (Dioceses) in southern Italy and Sicily.¹⁵

In Kingsley's books, the story begins in Velia in southern Italy, and with the Pre-Socratic philosopher Parmenides (late sixth – early fifth centuries BCE), a priest of Apollo, and healer.¹⁶ Modern historians consider him the founder of metaphysics, ontology, and logic.¹⁷

The story then proceeds to Akragas in Sicily and encounters Empedocles (around 490 – 430 BCE), whom modern philosophy considers an early scientific thinker.

Behind both men stands Pythagoras of Samos (about 570 – 495 BCE), who founded his school and mystical community in Croton in the southern Italian region of Calabria. Today he is considered the founder of Western math and geometry and all school children learn his "Pythagorean Theorem," concerning a right triangle: the square of the hypotenuse (the side opposite the right angle) is equal to the sum of the squares of the other two sides.¹⁸

Parmenides, Empedocles, and other Pre-Socratic Philosophers such as Zeno of Velia were closely associated by ancient writers with the Pythagoreans, and even said to be Pythagoreans themselves.

Modern historians of philosophy often disregard this association because the approaches of these Pre-Socratics were so original and creative that the historians find this incompatible with belonging to a mystical group like the followers of Pythagoras.¹⁹

Kingsley adroitly leads readers to discover that Parmenides and Empedocles were indeed Pythagorean in their approach, something standard scholarship hesitates to affirm completely, since they do not seem to foreground Pythagorean doctrine as we know it.



Pythagoras Emerging from the Underworld by Salvator Rosa (1662).

He explains why in *The Dark Places of Wisdom*.

Originally, Pythagoreans weren't so concerned with fixed ideas or doctrines as they were with something quite different: something that didn't just tolerate creativity and originality but encouraged them, nurtured them, guided people to their source. This is why the Pythagorean tradition managed to stay so elusive – why it was so open-ended, blending with other traditions, defying our modern ideas of orthodoxy or self-definition.

The evidence is still there to show how highly valued individuality and creative freedom once were in Pythagorean circles. That can sound such a paradox to us; we're so used to thinking of religious groups or sects as made up of brainwashed, mindless men and women. But as a matter of fact this is one of the least paradoxical things about Pythagoreanism.²⁰

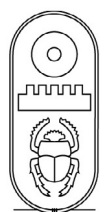
The problem, Kingsley explains, is not with the ancient Pythagoreans, or the Pre-Socratics, but with us. The modern world has such a superficial concept of being creative and original, that it isn't easy for us to think in any other way.²¹

Shamanism at the Foundations

In fact, Parmenides and Empedocles received all of what they taught through shamanic journeying to the Underworld, where the Goddess Persephone taught them. Pythagoreanism is about accessing the source of truth and wisdom, and that source is divine. In a careful reading of their surviving poetry, it becomes patently clear that the origins of Western Civilization are mystical and spiritual.

This naturally has parallels with Egyptian Shamanism and some of the most famous ancient Egyptian texts. As author Jeremy Nadler has argued, the true purpose of the *Pyramid Texts* and *The Book of Coming Forth by Day* (*The Book of the Dead*) involved journeying to the Am Dwat.²²

The most fundamental shamanic project is "To die before you die." It is, through meditative practices, to journey to the Underworld, the realm of death, to gain divine wisdom.²³ It is humanity's oldest spiritual practice. It is present among all ancient peoples and traditional societies. Even modern spiritual exercises such as those of Ignatius of Loyola and the Jesuits have profoundly shamanic elements, such as the deathbed meditation



and visualizing one's self in the events of the Judeo-Christian Scriptures, although they are not usually thought of in this way.²⁴

Our modern arrogance blinds us to the importance of these sacred, foundational practices in what we call “primitive societies.” It would be more accurate to refer to these ancient and aboriginal societies as pristine or primordial, as they contain the seeds of all culture.

True Philosophy and Logic

Today we think of logic as cold and rigid. A modern icon for logic is the stoic Star Trek race of Vulcans. But logic in its original Greek meaning (from λόγος—*logos*) is union with the word, the self-revelation of the Divine, and the pattern of all that is. It is ecstatic, and so was the shamanic work these philosophers accomplished.

For them, philosophy was “the love of wisdom,” a true, spiritual love of Divine Wisdom. This changed when Plato and Aristotle took the stage:

We can still trace out how, well over two thousand years ago, the schools of Plato and Aristotle put the seal on what was to become the most enduring Athenian contribution to intellectual history in the West: instead of the love of wisdom, philosophy turned into the love of talking and arguing about the love of wisdom. Since then the talking and arguing have pushed everything else out of the picture – until now we no longer know of anything else or can even imagine that there could be.²⁵

Thus, one can see that the West has taken a 2,500-year hiatus – perhaps necessary – from its actual origins and purposes. Kingsley shows us that it is time to return to the roots of our civilization once again.

Pythagoras

After these discoveries about Parmenides and Empedocles in *The Dark Places of Wisdom and Reality*, Kingsley then turns to the older figure standing behind these lovers of Divine Wisdom: Pythagoras, in *A Story Waiting to Pierce You*.

It is common in modern scholarship not to take our ancient ancestors at their word. After all, they were less advanced than we are, and were superstitious and credulous, right?

Of course, none of that is true of the ancient authorities we are dealing with, and Kingsley rightly takes ancient sources very seriously.

We are very familiar with the figure of Pythagoras, the mystic, teacher, musician, healer, mathematician, and geometer.²⁷ He was renowned for his travels,²⁸ but it might surprise you to know that there is very good evidence that he travelled even further, to Hyperborea.

Today, many may associate Hyperborea with the Sword and Sorcery fantasies of Robert E. Howard (Conan) and the *Hyperborean Cycle* of Clark Ashton Smith.²⁹ However, Hyperborea was quite real for the ancient Greeks. Meaning “The Land Beyond the North Wind,” it lay far to the east and north.

Pythagoras had several encounters with a very strange figure from afar in the Greek world. He is attested in several places in ancient Greek histories as Abaris the Hyperborean.³⁰ Abaris appeared in the areas of the Greek settlements carrying an arrow. He is consistently described as from Hyperborea, and as an “air walker.” Both Parmenides and Empedocles were also known as wonderworkers.³¹

Hyperborea was the home of that most Greek of deities, Apollo,³² who is consistently “Hyperborean Apollo,” in Greek literature. While in Greece, he yearns to return to his beloved Hyperboreans.³³

As Kingsley explains, we know that the ancient East and West were well connected by what we call today, The Silk Road. Hyperborea, the home of both Apollo and Abaris, is referring to Central Asia and Mongolia.

If anyone has any doubts that Pythagoras also journeyed to Mongolia, Kingsley points out that after the destruction of the Pythagorean community of Croton, there was a last outpost of Pythagoreanism at Tarentum in Apulia in southern Italy. The community and school had a great fascination with Pythagoras's Hyperborean connections, and there was even a Western portrait of a Mongol to be seen there.³⁴

Pythagoras and Abaris

Now in the West, Abaris the Skywalker, a Mongolian shaman, had come in an ecstatic trance to purify the areas of the Greek settlements, including southern Italy, to prepare for what was to come. He was able to do so, because he was possessed by his god, Hyperborean Apollo. In their spiritual journeying, these shamans had learned the paradox that the key to travelling great distances rapidly is not to move quickly: it is to be perfectly still.³⁵

It is this stillness – ἡσυχία (*hēsukhía*, “quiet”) – that Parmenides employs in his healing work in the Temple of Apollo, incubation.³⁶ Empedocles sees this stillness as the state of perfection opening to reality.³⁷ Pythagoras insists on five years of silence – which must have included stillness as part of the discipline – to enter

his inner community. The stillness is paired with the Divine gift of μῆτις (*mētis*, “wisdom,” skill), to perceive the sacred reality around us.³⁹

This same stillness is practiced by Eastern Orthodox and Byzantine Catholic Christian Hesychasts,⁴⁰ and is at the root of the Quakers' and other groups' Quietism.⁴¹ It is practiced in virtually all traditional mysticism, including the Sufis. It is the polar opposite of much of contemporary society, in which there is no stillness, no silence, but a constant cacophony. We cannot get anywhere because we cannot be still.⁴²

Abaris's arrow represented his authority, and also his ability to travel in stillness. When, possessed by his god Apollo as he was, he encountered Pythagoras, he recognized that Pythagoras was an actual incarnation of Hyperborean Apollo himself. He therefore bestowed his arrow



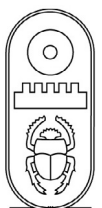
Pythagoreans Celebrate Sunrise, by Fyodor Bronnikov (1869).

on Pythagoras as a sign of the divine authority to plant the seeds of Western Civilization. The commission is sent from the East to the West.⁴³

And plant the seeds of Western Civilization Pythagoras did.

Alfred North Whitehead once quipped that “[t]he safest general characterization of the European philosophical tradition is that it consists of a series of footnotes to Plato.”⁴⁴ If this is true, we can see what went wrong: they didn't go far enough back, to our civilization's actual origins.

It is from Pythagoras that virtually all the fundamental components of Western Civilization flow. It is from this divine



incarnation from Mongolia wielding his arrow of authority that the seed that would grow to be the West was born. Far to the East, to another continent, other messengers had gone almost 40,000 years earlier, to seed civilization there as well.

The heirs of these two civilizations would meet and exchange when the founders of the United States learned from the Iroquois Confederacy, and the arrows came to be grasped in the talons of the American Eagle⁴⁵ on the Great Seal. On its obverse our prophecy is written: *Annuit Coeptis: Novus Order Saeclorum*, “[The Divine] has approved the New Order of the Ages.”

Today, we must learn to be still. We must be ready to receive the gift that will pierce through the impossible barriers that have grown up to block our way.

Virgil foresaw the prophecy on the Great Seal in his Fourth *Eclogue*, from which the text is adapted:

Ultima Cumaei venit iam carminis
aetas;
magnus ab integro saeculorum
nascitur ordo.
Iam redit et Virgo, redeunt
Saturnia regna;
iam nova progenies, caelo
demittitur alto.
Tu modo nascenti puero, quo
ferrea primum
desinet, ac toto surget gens aurea
mundo,
casta fave Lucina; tuus iam regnat
Apollo.⁴⁶

At last the Final Time announced
by the Sibyl will arrive:

The procession of ages turns to its
origin.

The Virgin returns and Saturn
reigns as before;

A new race from heaven on high
descends.

Goddess of Birth, smile on the
new-born baby,

In whose time the Iron Prison will
fall to ruin

And a golden race arises
everywhere.

Apollo, the rightful king, is
restored!⁴⁷

As we come to this place of stillness,
Peter Kingsley encourages us.

At the end of *A Story Waiting to Pierce You*, he concludes that initiatory journey
thusly:

And although we may appear to
have arrived at the end of this little
incantation, there really is no end to
it at all – any more than there is an
end to the joy of being present with
those who watch over and give birth
to worlds.⁴⁸

We too can continue the story that has
no end.

Let us watch. Let us be still. Read, read,
reread, pray, work, and thou shalt find.

Endnotes

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8. Peter Kingsley, *In the Dark Places of Wisdom* (Inverness CA: Golden Sufi Center, 1999); *Reality* (Inverness CA: Golden Sufi Center, 2003); *A Story Waiting to Pierce You* (Point Reyes, CA: Golden Sufi Center, 2010). These are buttressed by his first major work, *Ancient Philosophy, Mystery, and Magic* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995). Also see note 9 below.
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20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.
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23. Peter Kingsley, *In the Dark Places of Wisdom*, 61-76.
24. In the Spiritual Exercises of St. Ignatius Loyola (1522-1524), participants use techniques of visualization to journey to sacred times and places to learn and grow in love and wisdom, as I have personally experienced.
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26. Peter Kingsley, *Reality*, 483.
27. See the special issue *The Pythagoreans—Rosicrucian Digest* 87:1 (2009). Accessed June 29, 2018. <https://www.rosicrucian.org/rosicrucian-digest-pythagoreans>.
28. Peter Kingsley, *In the Dark Places of Wisdom*, 12-18, 237-238.
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33. Ibid.
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35. Ibid, 24-27, 111.
36. Peter Kingsley, *In the Dark Places of Wisdom*, 101-102.
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46. Virgil, *Fourth Eclogue*, lines 5-11.
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