

**Trinity JACKMAN**

**Pythagoreans and Political Communities in Sixth and Fifth Century Magna Graecia**

Despite the late and often contradictory nature of the ancient sources, scholars of the history of philosophy frequently attempt to disentangle the teachings of Pythagoras from later Pythagorean tradition. Such scholarship on the early Pythagoreans has focused on their place in the Presocratic tradition, rather than on their involvement in the political affairs of the Greek colonies of sixth and fifth century Magna Graecia. Instead of viewing the political activities of early Pythagoreans as a historical oddity, I argue that the Pythagoreans fit into wider pattern of the emergence of new status groups in the Archaic and Classical colonial West. No longer do most scholars believe that the colonies replicated the social structures of their "mother-cities." Rather, we see a different political landscape where ascendant elites attempted to create new types of socio-political authority.

Why did so many western elites become Pythagoreans? I suggest the answer lies in the socio-political dynamics of the Greek colonies in the West, where populations were more dynamic and social identities were more fluid. While elites throughout the ancient world constantly had to define and legitimate their "eliteness," strategies that were successful in the Aegean motherland, centering on ancestral claims to territory and cult places and long-term economic relations to non-elite members of the community, were not strategies that could be employed by the first few generations of colonial settlers. Colonies became spaces of experimentation where new types of authority and social control were created and at times rejected.

There are two ways that Pythagorean *hetairiai* could have advanced elite interests. First, they helped create a new elite status group. Our earliest sources tell of the Pythagoreans forming a distinct community that had specific social practices (Herodotus II.81) and a Pythagorean "way of life" (Plato Republic X, 600a). The sources present Pythagorean initiation as extensive and secretive, and anecdotal evidence suggests bitterness on the part of those who were rejected as initiates (Iamb. 248ff; Diod. X.II.1). While undoubtedly individual members of the elites were drawn to Pythagorean philosophy and notions of reincarnation, the arcane knowledge of Pythagorean doctrine as well as its dietary restrictions and other prohibitions would have clearly distinguished members from the general populace. Secondly, membership in the Pythagorean cult created bonds of solidarity among the elite not only within the local community but throughout Magna Graecia. Their membership created political stability within an elite often composed of recent immigrants who had not yet created social relationships forged through the more traditional bonds of intermarriage and *xenia*.