

Mystics from Antiquity to the Renaissance

PLATONIC SPIRITUAL PRACTICES

— Bruce MacLennan

REVIEW OF ELEUSINIAN MYSTERIES

- ✘ “They cause sympathy of the souls in a way that is unintelligible to us, and divine, so that some of the initiands are stricken with panic being filled with divine awe; others assimilate themselves to the holy symbols, leave their own identity, become at home with the gods, and experience divine possession.” — Proclus

CYCLE OF LIFE

- ✘ “One buries children, one gains new children, one dies oneself; and this men take heavily, carrying earth to earth. But it is necessary to harvest life like a fruit-bearing ear of corn, and that the one be, the other not.” — Euripides
- ✘ Around Athens, burial grounds sown with grain to purify them and return them to the living
- ✘ Plant shoots = *korai*

MOTHER AND DAUGHTER



MOTHER AND DAUGHTER

- ✘ Daughter becomes Mother
- ✘ The Two are cyclically One
- ✘ Separation and Reunion
- ✘ But Persephone is eternally:
 - + Queen of Dead
 - + Daughter/Mother



THE SACRIFICED GOD

- ✘ Many myths in which a divine being dies
- ✘ The death is only an apparent death
- ✘ Henceforth mortal's deaths are only apparent, if they recapitulate the divinity's death
- ✘ A dual continuation (not entirely distinct):
 - + divine
 - + plant-like (unindividualized life)
- ✘ After human suffering & death, a divine/plant life without suffering & death
- ✘ Persephone reveals the way to reach her

THE POMEGRANATE







ARCHETYPAL REBIRTH AND EVOLUTION

- ✘ Depth psychology: the gods (archetypes) are unconscious structures, shared by all people, regulating perception, motivation, and behavior.
- ✘ Rooted in the human genome.
- ✘ By surrendering the ordinary consciousness to these archetypes we experience ourselves as part of the human species
- ✘ Through your individual life (*bios*) you allow life (zôê) to continue and evolve.

PRIMARY KINDS OF MYSTERIES

- ✘ Mystery proper
 - + e.g., Eleusinian Mysteries
- ✘ Mystic cult
 - + e.g., Dionysian Mysteries
- ✘ Mysteriosophic cult
 - + e.g., Orphic Mysteries
- ✘ (“cult” here means “a system of religious veneration and devotion directed toward a particular figure or object” — *Am. Her. Dict.*)



THE DIONYSIAN OR BACCHIC MYSTERIES

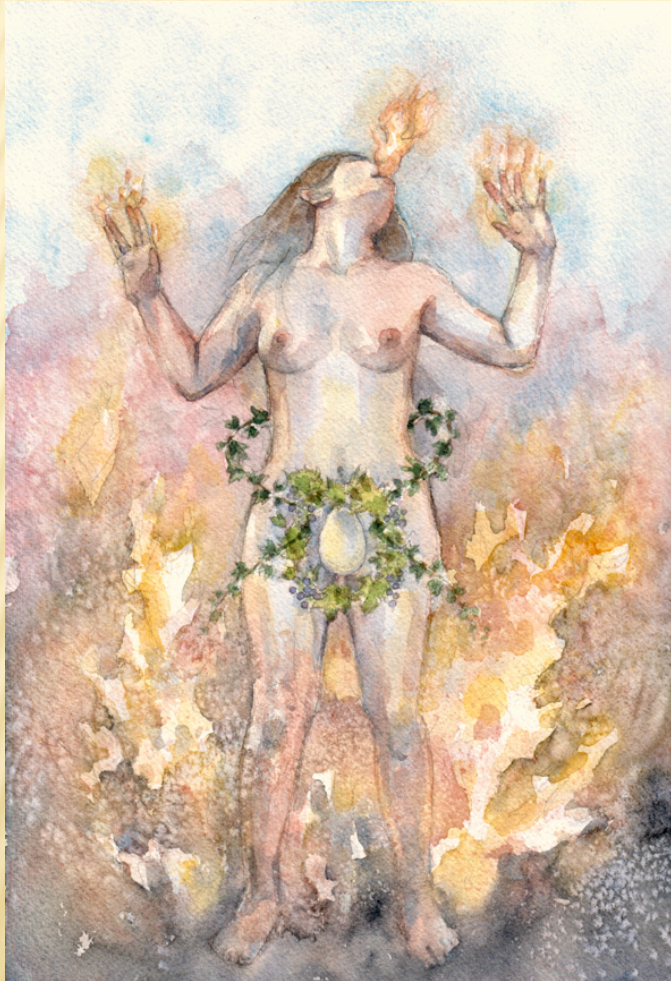
HISTORY

- ✘ Clear evidence by mid 7th cent. BCE
- ✘ Athenian festivals instituted in Age of Tyrants (6th cent. BCE)
- ✘ Movement of middle & lower classes
- ✘ Societies of raving women (maenads) rave during specific festivals
- ✘ Bacchanalia brutally suppressed in Italy in 186 BCE, afterwards strictly regulated
- ✘ Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii (79 CE)
- ✘ Mysteries still held in Crete as late as 4th cent. CE

THE MYTH

- ✘ Rhea bore Demeter to Zeus
- ✘ Demeter bore Persephone to Zeus
- ✘ Persephone bore Dionysos to Zeus
- ✘ Dionysos is enthroned and tempted by the Titans' toys
- ✘ Cut into seven pieces and eaten
- ✘ Zeus blasts them
- ✘ Athena rescues heart
- ✘ From it and Zeus, Semele becomes pregnant
- ✘ Consumed by divine fire
- ✘ Dionysos rescued & sewed in Zeus' thigh
- ✘ Born from it
- ✘ Goes to Underworld to bring Semele to Olympus

SEMELE



ZEUS AND SEMELE





THIRD BIRTH OF DIONYSOS

OUTER RITES

- ✘ Celebrations of indestructible life (*zôê*)
- ✘ Seasonal festivals connected with wine harvest and fermentation
- ✘ Ritual drinking
- ✘ Costumes and masks
- ✘ Dancing and acrobatics
- ✘ Satyr plays
- ✘ Revels (*comoi*)
- ✘ Comedy < *com-oidia* (revel songs)
- ✘ Tragedy < *trag-oidia* (goat songs) < *tragos* (goat)
- ✘ Dithyrambs
- ✘ Sacred Marriage / Union
- ✘ Sexual freedom

A REVEL



MAENADS IN DIONYSIAN FESTIVAL



INNER RITES

- ✘ Bacchic Mysteries were most influential as a private spiritual practice
- ✘ Required (1) application for admission, (2) preparatory period, (3) purifications, (4) sacred rites, (5) integration into the group
- ✘ *Orgia*: secret initiation rites taught by the god
- ✘ Take place at night in grotto or cave
- ✘ Procession to mountain
- ✘ Raving through the town

BACCHANALIA (HENRYK SIEMIRADZKI)



BACCHANALIA (NICOLAS POUSSIN)



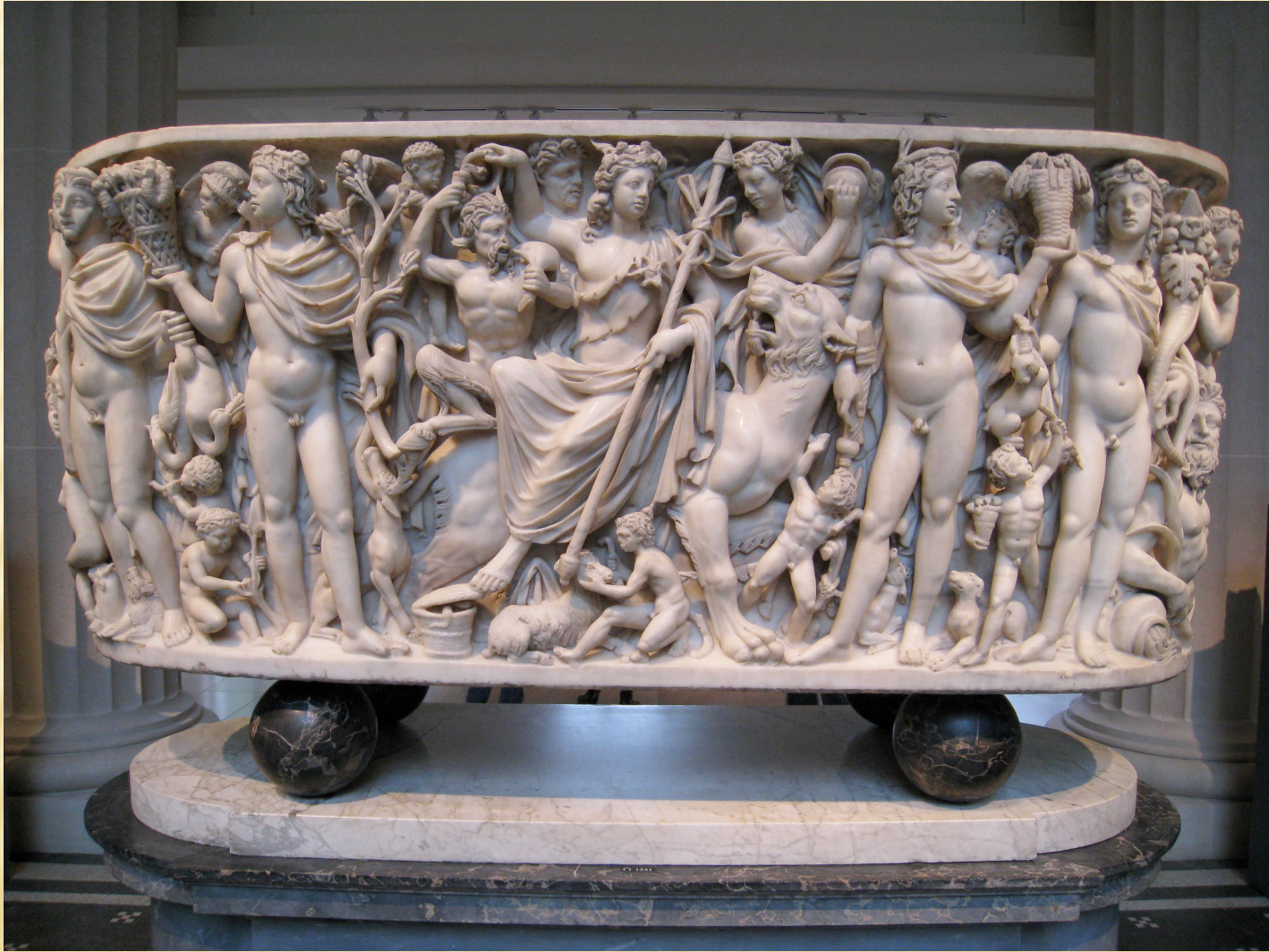
ECSTATIC DANCE AND POSSESSION

- ✘ Son of Heaven and Earth
- ✘ God of vegetable and animal life
- ✘ The vine
- ✘ Unmixed wine
- ✘ Sacred dance
- ✘ Omophagy
- ✘ Sexual elements
- ✘ Adaptive regression / embracing the shadow
- ✘ Ecstasy and possession
- ✘ Blessed afterlife

ENTHEOS / ENTHUSIASM

- ✘ Wine
- ✘ Omophagy
- ✘ Animal-skin cloak
- ✘ Dance and music
- ✘ Ivy chewing
- ✘ Maenads and thyiads
- ✘ Bacchi and Bacchae





THE THYRSUS-BEARERS ARE MANY...

- ✘ “The thyrsus-bearers are many, but the Bacchi are few.” — Plato
- ✘ That is, many participate in the wild party, but relatively few are in genuine identification with the god

REBIRTH

- ✘ Emotion
- ✘ Immoderation
- ✘ Divine madness
- ✘ Return to nature
- ✘ Self-forgetfulness
- ✘ Deification
- ✘ Miraculous power
- ✘ Prophecy

AFTERLIFE

- ✘ As a nature god, Dionysos dies and rises again
- ✘ Dionysos is immolated by proxy in the sacrificial victim, but always arises again
 - + for he is the Indestructible Life behind nature
- ✘ The Bacchi had received the undying substance into their bodies
- ✘ Mystically united with the god in life, they could not be separated in death

PARADOX: UNION OF OPPOSITES

- ✘ Dionysos called “Born of Fire” and “Lord of Moist Nature”
- ✘ Vine (warm) and Ivy (cool)
- ✘ Wine and Water (spirit and matter)
- ✘ Blood and tears
- ✘ Comedy and tragedy
- ✘ Birth (new life) and death
 - + Indestructible life (zôê) requires birth and death of individual lives (*bioi*)



THE ORPHIC MYSTERIES

HISTORY

- ✘ By late 6th cent. BCE: stories of the singer Orpheus to retrieve his dead bride
- ✘ Thus he has specialized knowledge of Underworld and afterlife
- ✘ A large body of Orphic writings survives in fragments
 - + theogonies (births of the gods)
 - + eschatology and theology
 - + hymns



ORPHIC THEOGONY



“Invocation” by Lesley Keen, ©1984
<http://veekspace.com/vegasqueen/invocation.htm>

PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERPRETATION

- ✘ Enthronement
- ✘ Distraction by toys
- ✘ Dismemberment
- ✘ Humans made from ash
- ✘ Athena saves the heart
- ✘ Nurtured by Zeus
- ✘ Redescent and implantation in matter
- ✘ Consumed in illumination
- ✘ Rebirth out of fire
- ✘ Descent into underworld to redeem mother
- ✘ A model for initiates

PHILOSOPHY AS A WAY OF LIFE

ENDS — GOALS

- ✘ Wisdom (*Sophia*) and the sage (*sophos*)
- ✘ The *philo-sophos* (philosopher) as lover of Wisdom
- ✘ Unending pursuit of Wisdom
- ✘ Pythagoras coined the term *philosophia* (philosophy)
- ✘ “Empty are the words of the philosopher who has cured no one’s soul” — Epicurus

MEANS – SPIRITUAL EXERCISES

- ✘ “Spiritual” because involve entire spirit
 - + intellect
 - + imagination
 - + sensibility
 - + will
- ✘ “Exercises” because:
 - + requires effort and training
 - + has to be lived

OUTER PRACTICES

- ✘ Self-mastery
- ✘ Fulfillment of duties
- ✘ Need for rules to be ready to hand
- ✘ Example: Epicurus' Fourfold Medicine:
“God presents no fear, death no worries; and while the good is readily attainable, evil is readily endurable.”

INNER PRACTICES

- ✘ Memorization
- ✘ “View from above”
- ✘ Meditation on death
- ✘ Inner discourse
- ✘ Examination of conscience
- ✘ Examination of dreams
- ✘ Reading, research, investigation, listening

ROLE OF DOCTRINE

- ✘ Theories are intellectual exercises in service to spiritual exercises
- ✘ Cures intended for students in a particular spiritual state
- ✘ “Therapy of the word”
- ✘ A treatise is a progressive therapeutic treatment
- ✘ Purpose is “to *form* rather than to *inform*”



ASCENT TO THE ONE

Plato's Cave

NEOPLATONIC THEURGY

DEFINITION

- ✘ Spiritual practice involving congress with gods and daemons for:
 - + communication
 - + liaisons
 - + deification
- ✘ Contrast:
 - + theology = “god talk”
 - + theurgy = “god work”

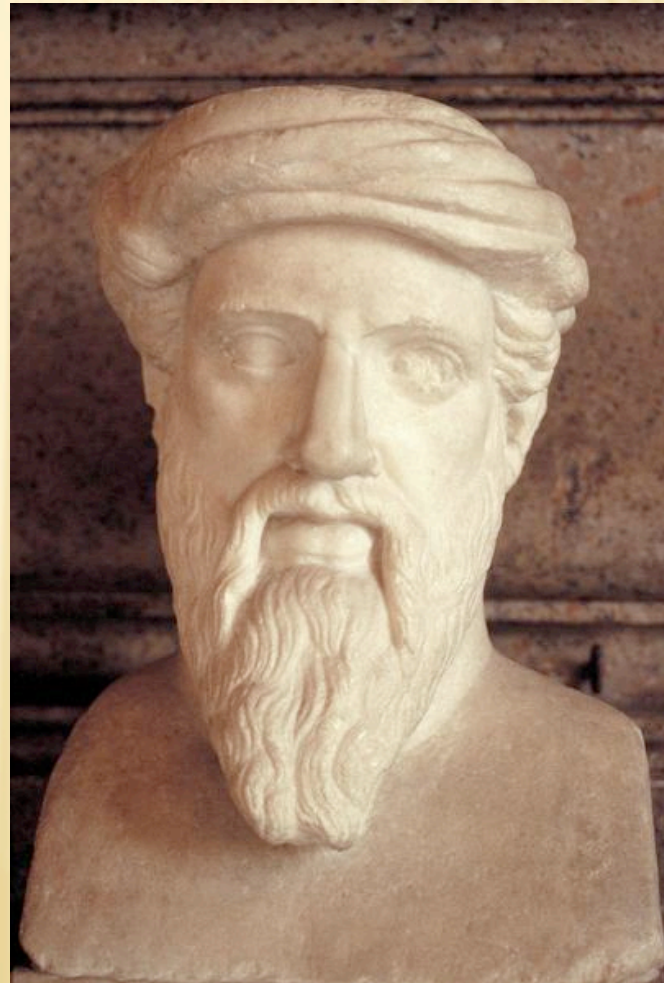
HISTORY

- ✘ Shamanism
- ✘ Pythagoreanism
- ✘ Platonism
- ✘ Neoplatonism
 - + Pagan
 - + Jewish
 - + Christian
 - + Islamic
 - + Renaissance

PYTHAGOREANISM

PYTHAGORAS

- ✘ Born in Samos, mid 6th cent. BCE
- ✘ Traveled and studied widely
- ✘ Emigrated to Croton about 530
- ✘ Founded Pythagorean Order
- ✘ Considered an incarnation of Hyperborean Apollo



MUSIC



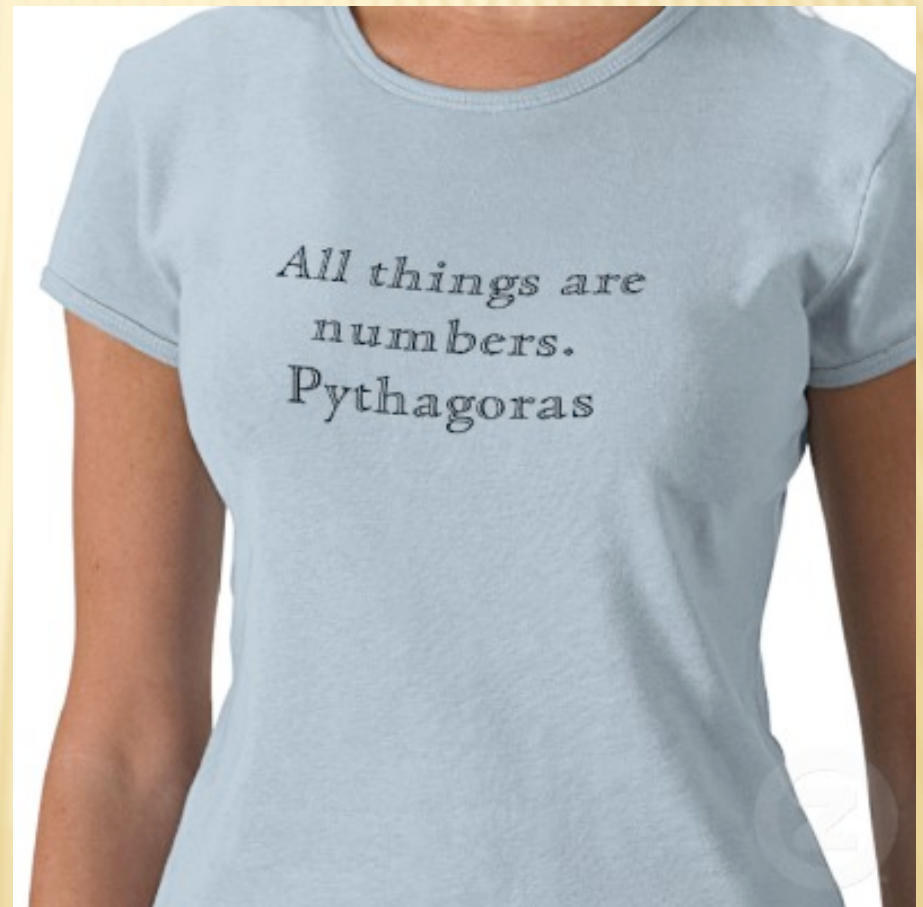
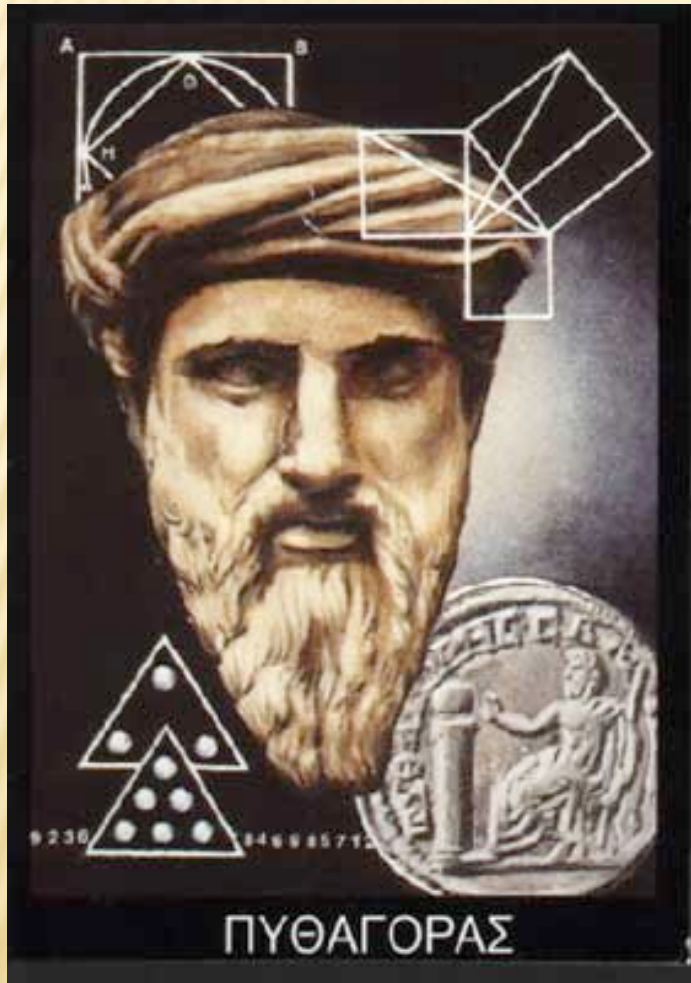
- ✘ Discovered musical intervals correspond to simple ratios
- ✘ Reduction of an “irrational” phenomenon to “rational” explanation
- ✘ A model for mathematical explanations in science

MATHEMATICS AND SCIENCE

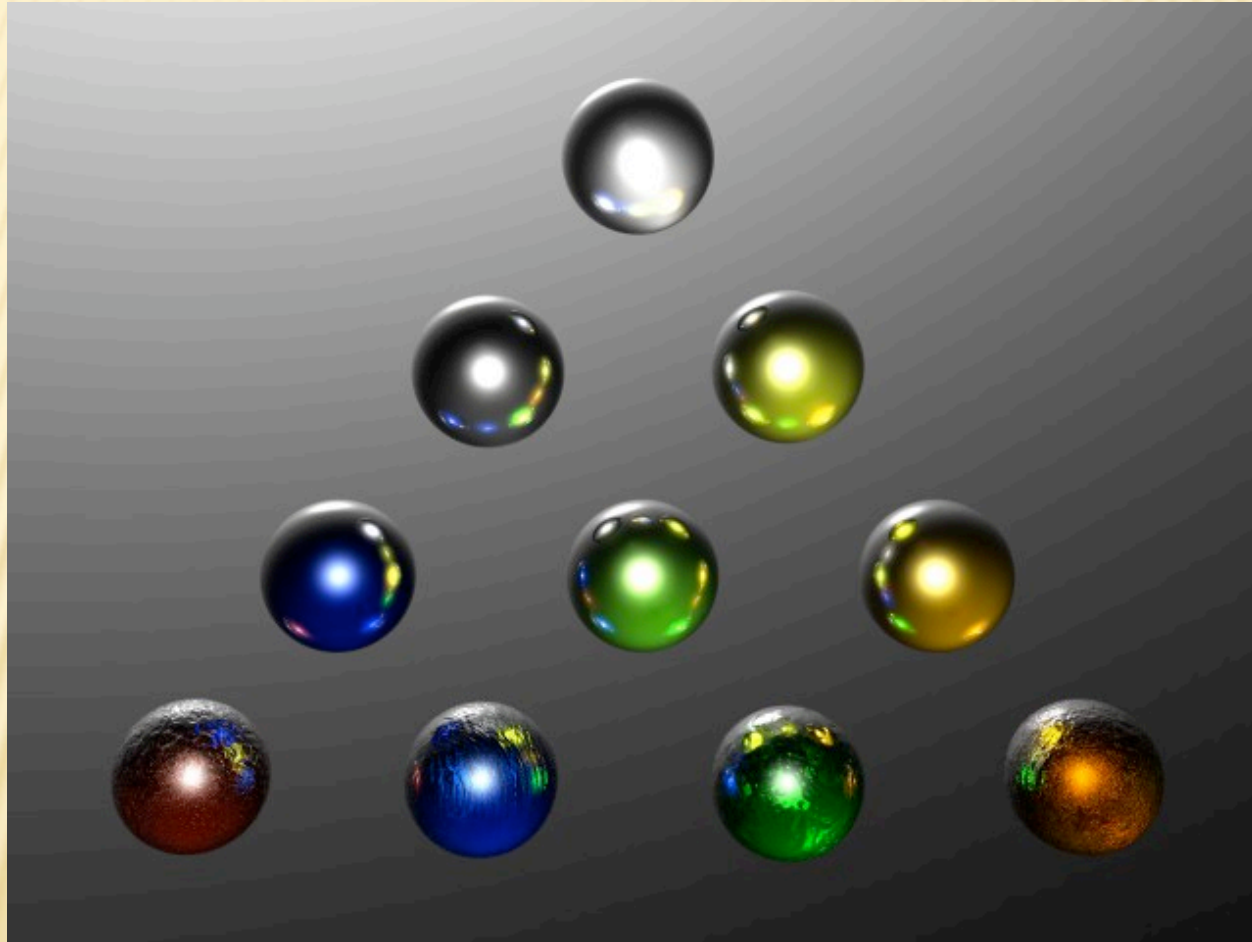
- ✘ The Music of the Spheres
- ✘ “There is geometry in the humming of the strings, and there is music in the spacing of the spheres.”
- ✘ The universe as an ordered structure — a cosmos — obeying harmonic principles
- ✘ Cf. modern super-string theory



CONTINUING INFLUENCE...



NUMBER MYSTICISM



THE PYTHAGOREAN ORDER



- ✘ Closely related to Orphism
- ✘ Communal property
- ✘ Vegetarianism (?)
- ✘ 5 years of silence
- ✘ Moral & political precepts
- ✘ Abolished in Croton about 450 BCE
- ✘ Continually revived / resurrected



PYTHAGORAS TEACHING

Theano, his wife, is shown in foreground



PYTHAGORAS ADVOCATING VEGETARIANISM

— Rubens

PYTHAGOREANS WORSHIP SUNRISE



— Bronnikov

WERE THERE TWO PYTHAGOREAN TRADITIONS?

- ✘ Scholars have commonly believed there were two Pythagorean traditions:
 - + mathematical/scientific
 - + spiritual
- ✘ There is little actual evidence for this
- ✘ More a reflection of modern inability to comprehend a unified spiritual-scientific viewpoint

PLATONISM AND NEOPLATONISM

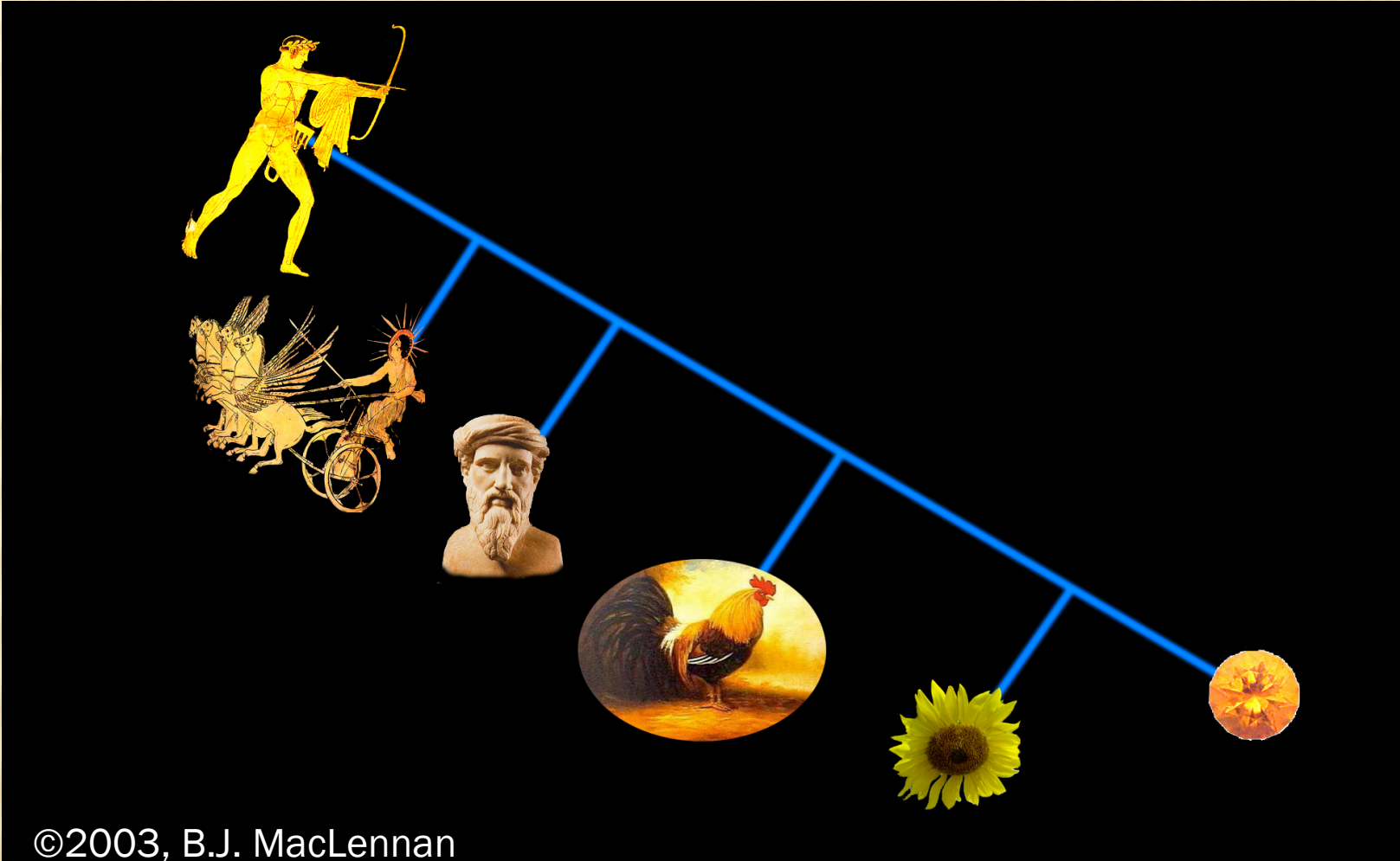
- ✘ Plato (427–437 BCE)
- ✘ Philo Judaeus (fl. c.40 CE)
- ✘ Plotinus (205–270 CE)
- ✘ Hypatia (365–415)
- ✘ Proclus (c.411–486)
- ✘ Damascius (fl. 529)
- ✘ pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite (6th cent.)
 - + Mystical Theology
 - + Divine Names
- ✘ Pselus (1018–c.1081)
- ✘ Suhrawardi (1152/3–1190/1)
- ✘ Ishrâqî Sufis (13th cent.)
- ✘ Qabalah (13th cent.)
- ✘ George Gemistos “Plethon” (c.1360–1452)
- ✘ Cosimo de’ Medici (1389–1464)
- ✘ Ficino (1433–99)
- ✘ Thomas Taylor (1758–1835)

SIGNS AND SYMBOLS

- ✘ Releasing-stimuli that activate archetype & cause it to manifest
- ✘ “Unconditioned”: part of lineage of a god
- ✘ “Conditioned”: mediated by a daemon
- ✘ Invoke gods & daemons and invite them to possess or project



THE LINE OF APOLLO



DREAM INCUBATION

- ✘ Seeker goes to cave to sleep and dream
- ✘ For information, healing, etc.
- ✘ Prior purification and prayers
- ✘ Guidance and interpretation from priests



“ENSOULING” DIVINE IMAGE



OPERATION OF *TELESTIKÊ*

- ✘ Ensouling a sacred image
- ✘ Material tokens
- ✘ Immaterial tokens
- ✘ Does not compel god or daemon
- ✘ Preparation of suitable receptacle to receive projection of god or daemon
- ✘ Creates archetypal relation

BINDING AND RELEASE



© 2004 BJ MacLennan

BINDING AND RELEASE

- ✘ God or daemon invited to possess a human receiver
- ✘ Like *telestikê*, but human receiver can embody a personified archetype better
- ✘ Best receivers have easily pacified personal daemons

THEURGIC LIAISON



©2004 B.J. MacLennan

THEURGIC LIAISON

- ✘ “Active imagination” in Jungian analysis
- ✘ Establish a liaison with a god or daemon
- ✘ They may not be truthful
- ✘ For learning about archetypal realm
- ✘ For actualizing energy of a god
- ✘ For acquiring a familiar spirit

THEURGIC ASCENT



- ✘ Ascent to union with a god, Demiurge, or Ineffable One
- ✘ “Like knows like”
- ✘ Separation as symbolic voluntary death
- ✘ Actualizing the energy of Death-and-Resurrection archetype

THE PROTHESIS



THEURGY AND ACTIVE IMAGINATION

- ✘ Active imagination: a process developed by Jung for engaging in dialog with unconscious archetypes and complexes
- ✘ Archetypes are universal and correspond to gods
- ✘ Complexes are personal and correspond to daemons (mediators)
- ✘ Good introduction: Robert Johnson, *Inner Work*



CONCLUSIONS

- ✘ Mind and matter are two sides of same Ineffable One
- ✘ Jungian psychology & evolutionary neuroethology are mutually informing
- ✘ Both compatible with & explain Neoplatonic theurgy
- ✘ Theurgy can be an efficacious tool for “care of the soul”

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ✘ Hadot, *Philosophy as a Way of Life*
- ✘ Hadot, *What is Ancient Philosophy?*
- ✘ Burkert, *Greek Religion*
- ✘ Ferguson, *The Music of Pythagoras*
- ✘ Willoughby, *Pagan Regeneration*
 - + www.sacred-texts.com/cla/pr
- ✘ Taylor, *The Eleusinian and Bacchic Mysteries*
 - + www.archive.org/details/eleusinianbacch00tayluoft