

STUDIES IN HERMETIC TRADITION

The Dream of Scipio

The cosmological and mystical doctrines
of Neoplatonism and the Hellenic
Mystery Schools — also includes
the Golden Verses of Pythagoras.



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INTRODUCTION

Both of the main works published here were the subjects of extensive commentaries in antiquity, and both works were preserved only because those commentaries survived, the original texts being lost. 'The Dream of Scipio' formed the final portion of an immensely long work in six books by Cicero, *De Republica* (*On the Republic*). But until 1820, the 'Dream' was the only substantial portion of *On the Republic* that was known. In that year, Cardinal Angelo Mai discovered in the Vatican Library a palimpsest of St Augustine's commentary on the Psalms under the text of which was preserved between a quarter and a third of Cicero's *On the Republic*. Apart from scattered fragments preserved previously as quotations in the works of other authors, and the 'Dream' itself, Mai's discovery gave us all that we have today of this great work of Cicero. But the Vatican manuscript preserved none of Book VI whatever, and only three brief passages of Book V. Since the 'Dream of Scipio' concludes Book VI, even the Cardinal's late discovery would not have rescued the 'Dream' for posterity. For its preservation we are entirely dependent upon the philosopher Macrobius, whose commentary was written four and a half centuries after Cicero's death.

People often wrongly assume that because a classical work survives today that it must have done so continuously from antiquity until the present. But as we have seen, this was not the case with *On the Republic*. The most extraordinary example of the 'resurrection' of a work thought to be lost for two thousand years was the discovery,

on four rolls of papyrus which had been buried under the sands of Egypt, of Aristotle's *On the Constitution of Athens*. It was found towards the end of the nineteenth century. Scholars of many disciplines who are not classicists often remain unaware of matters of this sort. The historian Zera Fink wrote an important book in the 1940s, *The Classical Republicans*, which was sadly marred at the very beginning by her well-intentioned but totally erroneous contention that the political theorists of seventeenth-century England had been deeply influenced by Cicero's *On the Republic*. Imagine how embarrassed she would be if she were alive today and were to be told that *On the Republic* had been unknown at the time!

There is no doubt whatsoever that this volume of ours owes its existence entirely to two Neoplatonist philosophers, Macrobius (flourished AD400), Hierocles (flourished AD485), and to Aristotle. Ambrosius Theodosius Macrobius is more interesting and profound than Hierocles. He was not Roman by birth (he is thought to have been a Greek), but he held the highest offices under the Roman Empire. Although Macrobius may have been a nominal Christian (required of a man who seems to have been the Emperor's Grand Chamberlain), he does not mention Christianity once anywhere in his surviving works, and his enthusiasm for pagan philosophy is overwhelmingly obvious. He and other cultured men of his day attempted to preserve as much as possible of the classical heritage which they could already see fading and being lost. It was to such conservators of ancient Greece and Rome that we owe not only the 'Dream of Scipio' but the survival of nearly the whole of what remains of classical literature. Few people realize today that the copying of classical works by Christian monks was the result of the cultural conservationist movement led by people like Macrobius, and carried most fully into effect by the Roman statesman of a slightly later generation, Cassiodorus. These men looked upon themselves as the custodians of a flickering fire which was in danger of being extinguished. They preserved many glowing embers for posterity. The 'Dream of Scipio' is one of those embers, and not the least of them.

Cicero wrote his *On the Republic* in direct emulation of Plato's

earlier *Republic*. And like Plato, he wished to end his work with a vision. Plato's *Republic* ends with the famous section, 'The Vision of Er'. It purports to be the tale of a man who awoke on his funeral pyre and described the visions he had had during the several days between his death and his soul's re-entering his body. The Epicureans attacked Plato so viciously about the unlikelihood of this tale that Cicero opted for a safer mode of presenting his vision: he merely has Scipio awake from a dream and describe the things he has seen while asleep. But Plato's original approach is one which raises more interesting questions. It may well have been inspired by an actual experience. On those rare occasions when people do 'come back from the dead' after accidents or operations, they do often describe fantastic visions of the 'world beyond'. The fullest and most enthralling — and, it must be said, horrifying — such vision was recorded by the Austrian novelist of this century, Franz Werfel. He died on the operating table, was pronounced clinically dead, but about forty-five minutes later was brought back to life after heart massage. He lived long enough to write a full account of his after-death experiences in the form of a novel, *Star of the Unborn*, which is one the most interesting works of fiction of this century and, perhaps because of that fact, totally unknown!

In *On the Republic*, the famous statesman and general, Scipio Africanus the Younger, is the main speaker. In Book I he makes remarks which are similar to those which he repeats in the 'Dream' about the futility of believing that fame can last or be any reward for public service: 'How can any man conceive that anything to do with mankind's affairs . . . has any glory? Does he not see how small is the Earth, and far smaller still that portion of it which is inhabited by man? And yet will he see how we Romans, though restricted to a tiny part, and totally unknown to whole races of men, nevertheless have hopes of our names being borne aloft on wings, spreading to the ends of the earth.' (I, xvii, 26-8) The 'Dream' itself is thus not to be seen in isolation. It is best understood by reading what remains of the work of which it was the culmination. It is also best seen in comparison to Plato's 'Vision of Er', and the

'Dream's' contents are only properly appreciated by comparing them with Plato's *Timaeus*, *Phaedrus*, and *Phaedo*, and what is known of the Pythagorean traditions. This is quite a tall order. And hence it is that the best way to understand the 'Dream of Scipio' is to read the entire work that preserved it, Macrobius's *Commentary on the Dream of Scipio*, which was translated into English for the first time in 1955 and published by Columbia University Press, New York (translation, introduction and extensive notes by William Harris Stahl). It is unfortunate that this is now out of print and extremely difficult to find; nor has it found its way into many public libraries.

Although we know he was trying to imitate Plato, it still comes as something of a surprise to find the hard-headed and practical Cicero writing a visionary description of a Pythagorean view of the cosmos in the form of a prophetic dream. This poses several intriguing questions, which deserve to be considered. First of all, what was Cicero's own philosophical position? He was profusely explicit about this; all of his philosophical works abound with accounts of exactly where he stood. He was an adherent of what was called the New Academy. This traced its origin to Plato (founder of the 'Old Academy'); Cicero was therefore in the strict sense an avowed Platonist. However, having said that, we must immediately take note that the New Academy was very different from the Old, and it was essentially a sceptical philosophical movement which evolved, from Socratic roots, in opposition to the Stoics. Arcesilaus (315-241 BC) founded the New Academy, and the most distinguished of all New Academic philosophers, and Cicero's idol, was Carneades, who died aged ninety in 128 BC, only twenty-two years before Cicero was born. Nearly all that we know of the philosophy of the New Academy is found in the works of Cicero, all of the original texts having been lost. Cicero's *Academica* deals in great detail with the history and rival schools of Platonism, and more on the subject is to be found also in his *On the Nature of the Gods* and his *Tusculan Disputations*. These are philosophical works of the utmost importance, — witty, scintillating, entertaining, and profound. And yet they are scarcely known even

to classically educated people today. Anyone interested in the 'Dream of Scipio' would do well to consult them. The *Tusculan Disputations* has material in Book I relating to the 'Dream of Scipio', for there Cicero deals with the fear of death. We find once again the familiar theme, which was a favourite with Cicero, that the Earth was mostly uninhabited, and that there were people living in the *antichthon* or counter-earth of the Southern Hemisphere, with whom the Romans could never hope to communicate. Again we find descriptions of the soul's quitting the body at death in order to enter the heavens 'as if returning home'. Cicero even makes an explicit mention of the 'Dream of Scipio' at I, xxii, 53, where he speaks of the ideas which 'gave rise to Plato's well-known argument . . . [from] the *Phaedrus* which I placed in the sixth book of my work *On the Republic*'.

Other questions that arise concern Cicero's attitude towards prophecy. Did he really believe that the future could be foretold? He wrote a lengthy work in two books, *On Divination*, in which he concluded that foretelling the future was impossible. This is therefore held to have been Cicero's personal opinion. However, he seems to have recanted (a point apparently missed until now). For in his later work, *On the Laws (De Legibus)*, which appears to have been left unfinished at his death, Cicero explicitly says: 'I believe that an art of divination, which the Greeks called *mantikē*, really exists . . . For if we admit the existence of the gods, and that they rule the Universe . . . they have the power to indicate to us what will come to pass, and I see no reason for denying that divination exists.' (II, xiii, 32-3.)

One further question arises, and here again we encounter a possibility which has never been raised before. What was Cicero's attitude towards visions of the cosmos and the afterlife, and encounters with departed spirits? It must be mentioned in this connection that Cicero's seaside villa at Baia, on the coast near present-day Naples, was within easy walking distance of the site of the awesome Oracle of the Dead. Until the Oracle cavern complex was discovered in the 1960s no one was quite sure whether this extraordinary place was simply a figment of some fevered ancient

imaginings, or whether such an incredible place really existed. There are only two popular accounts of this Oracle in existence, the first written by the man who discovered it, Robert F. Paget (*In the Footsteps of Orpheus*, Robert Hale, London, 1967, remaindered and long out of print), and the second my own *Conversations with Eternity* (Hutchinson, London, 1983). Anyone interested in the 'Dream of Scipio' should familiarize himself with the mystery ceremonies carried out at this amazing Oracle, where consultations with departed spirits were staged, and Pythagorean cosmogonies were expounded in very much the form of the 'Dream of Scipio'. It would seem that both Plato and Cicero wrote their 'visions' with something more than mere imagination as their source of inspiration. Encounters such as the ones described in the 'Dream of Scipio' actually took place in a physical location with real people, a short walk from Cicero's villa. But the curious reader is invited to pursue this intriguing subject at his leisure in the more extensive and detailed accounts mentioned above.

The 'Dream of Scipio' raises so many issues that many volumes could be written about only some of them. We are faced with the mysterious sources of Plato's doctrines, with the origins of Pythagoreanism, with the enigma of the Pythagorean philosopher Philolaus (whose treatises were purchased by Plato and apparently inserted into the *Timaeus* verbatim), with ancient astronomy, musical theory, geography, geometry and mathematics. We encounter the ancient theories of dreams (expounded at length by Macrobius in his *Commentary*), theories of psychology, knowledge, epistemology, ontology, cosmology, and countless other -ologies. There are more questions to do with ancient religion, the gods, the heroes, the *daimons* of the air, spirits, and the like. There is no end to it. The 'Dream of Scipio' manages to sprawl across all of these issues like a ball of yarn that has been unwound and stretched from chair to chair, and table to table, covering an entire room in a web. Anyone who cares to penetrate into such a thicket had better be prepared to use scissors! And hence it is that we draw up and cut short our brief attempts here. For we must cast an eye upon the 'Golden Verses of Pythagoras', as they are called.

The first thing that must be said about the 'Golden Verses' is that they were not written by Pythagoras. They were compiled by a disciple or disciples, and may or may not represent the views of Pythagoras himself. But there is no question that they represent the views of the *Pythagoreans*. The first person to try and unravel the knots and get to the bottom of the origins of Pythagoreanism was Aristotle. He wrote two treatises on the subject (unfortunately lost, though substantial fragments survive), and he constantly recurred to the problem in most of his works. And he had good reason to. For all of his friends in Plato's Academy had become wild-eyed enthusiasts for what they called 'Pythagoreanism'; Aristotle was alone in resisting the fad, and single-handedly acted as the opponent of these ideas within the Academy. There seems little doubt that this was one significant reason for Aristotle's eventual departure from the Academy. But the main fact for our purposes is that Aristotle, in trying to rebut Pythagoreanism, according to his usual method, first felt that he had to *define the problem*. And that meant that he had to discover exactly *what Pythagoreanism really was*. Thus he became the first researcher into Pythagorean ideas on a systematic basis.

Nowhere in his surviving works does Aristotle once mention the name of Pythagoras. He always speaks of 'the Pythagoreans'. This has been a cause of exasperation amongst all scholars who have dealt with the subject in modern times. Why is it that Aristotle, the earliest investigator of the Pythagoreans, did not mention Pythagoras? The question is not a simple one, and the answer is whatever you like it to be. But there is no question that a historical Pythagoras existed (unlike Orpheus, who did *not*, according to Aristotle). Heraclitus, a near contemporary, railed at Pythagoras for being pompous, but he had at least heard of him! What we can be less sure about is what ideas, theories, and discoveries, were Pythagoras's own, and which were those of his successors. A few definite things can be said. In fact, it is time classical scholars realized, which they have rarely done to date, that the so-called Pythagorean theorem was *not* discovered by Pythagoras, but antedated him by well over a thousand years. Historians of science

(whom classical scholars rarely read, apparently) are fond of showing that Babylonian tablets survive that clearly show the determination of the diagonal of a square from its side; evidence from the Near East right through to Seleucid times, long after Pythagoras was dead, show a continuous use of the theorem. Pythagoras did not discover the Pythagorean Theorem at all, but he may well have introduced it into Greek culture. He must have obtained it from the 'Chaldeans' (as the Babylonians were called by the Greeks). What else did he obtain in like manner? That is a question not simply answered. What Pythagoras did seem to do, in his enormous impact on the Greeks, was to introduce a variety of words which we now take for granted: 'mathematics' (*mathēmata*), 'philosophy', and even 'cosmos' (a word meaning 'order' in Greek before his time). Pythagoras was undoubtedly a cultural Founding-Father. His specific doctrines are more difficult to ascertain, however. For as is the case with all Founding-Fathers of whatever kind, succeeding generations have a vested interest in drawing veils over the subject and smothering it in hopeless confusion. The truth must never be known about a Founding-Father. He must remain all things to all men; he must be imagined to be more than human by being stripped of all specific attributes. He must become an object of the pure play of fantasy of his 'followers'. All concrete details about him will eventually be ruthlessly suppressed.

The 'Golden Verses' were preserved by the Neoplatonist philosopher Hierocles, who lived at Alexandria. He had been a student of the famous Plutarch (author of Plutarch's *Lives*, who lived in mainland Greece). Hierocles's *Commentary on the Golden Verses of Pythagoras* was translated into English in 1707 by the poet Nicholas Rowe, and reprinted in this century (Theosophical Publishing House Ltd., London, 1971). An elaborate commentary on the 'Golden Verses' was also written in French in the early nineteenth century by Fabre d'Olivet, which has been made available in English (*The Golden Verses of Pythagoras Explained*, Samuel Weiser Inc., New York, 1975).

The Golden Verses have always held a particular fascination for followers of occult and esoteric lore. In antiquity, we have evidence

that they were recited every morning by Pythagoreans, who meditated upon their meaning and attempted to absorb their teachings into their daily lives. They are short and simple. Certain of them must sound peculiar to modern readers because we are told, for instance, to supplicate the good terrestrial demons with offerings. Some people may reasonably ask, 'Who are the good terrestrial demons?' They are nothing to do with what we are accustomed in the Christian tradition to think of as 'demons'; it would be less confusing therefore if the Greek spelling of *daimon* were retained. Socrates used the word to describe the 'wee small voice' which whispered in his ear, or in other words, the source of his hunches and intuitions. *Daimon* represents an elongation of the original vowel into a diphthong, and comes from a proto-Indo-European word which survived in Vedic Sanskrit as *dēva* (becoming in India also *daiva*), meaning simply 'heavenly, divine'; it was often specifically applied to lower things which partook of the heavenly or divine nature, without actually being proper gods. The *daimons* of the Pythagoreans and Neoplatonists were highly evolved good spirits who were, as Iamblichus would say, 'essentially incorporeal', and kept a watchful eye on mortals, helping them when possible. There is an entire treatise about them by the Neoplatonist Calcidius (*On Demons*, trans. by J. den Boeft, E. J. Brill, Leiden, 1977) in which he says that they are 'an ethereal class of beings . . . which the Hebrews call the holy angels' (p. 28).

The authentic portions of the 'Symbols of Pythagoras' printed here, as opposed to the 'Golden Verses', took their name from the Neoplatonist philosopher Porphyry, who preserved them in his *Life of Pythagoras* (Chapters 41 and 42). It seems incredible that this seminal work has never been translated into English, as it is earlier and far more important than the one written by Iamblichus. The latter was translated in the last century by Thomas Taylor, and has been reprinted in this century. Taylor admits in his Introduction that Iamblichus's writings 'were not so elegant and graceful as those of Porphyry'; but Taylor evidently did not live long enough to translate Porphyry's *Life of Pythagoras*, which he must surely have considered doing. Taylor discusses some of

the Verses and Symbols of the Pythagoreans in the Iamblichus volume just mentioned, and draws attention there to Aristotle's role, and to similar sentiments which appear in Aristotle's own *Nichomachean Ethics*. It was in fact Aristotle who meticulously collected and preserved what came to be called the 'Symbols' of the Pythagoreans. To Aristotle they had the designation of riddles. Aristotle was so fascinated by the subject of riddles in general, and their relation to the oracle centres, that he specially discussed the theory of riddles in his *Rhetoric*. I have dealt with this in my book *Conversations with Eternity*, where I show the central role that mystical riddles played in the entire culture of ancient Greece, and discuss their psychological implications. These matters relate directly to the 'Symbols' in this volume, and the curious reader is referred to that discussion for his further information.

Aristotle's assiduous compilation of Pythagorean riddles is the sole cause that these 'Symbols' have survived. They were included in Aristotle's lost works on the Pythagoreans, but so striking were they that they were quoted by two authors whose works have survived. They were quoted by Porphyry, as already noted, and also by Saint Jerome, who calls them 'those riddles which Aristotle recounts with care in his books', and which agrees with Porphyry's own statement: 'Pythagoras said certain things in a mystical and symbolic way, and Aristotle has recorded most of these' (Chapter 41). One of the riddles, 'Eat not heart', led later to the mistaken notion that the Pythagoreans did not eat heart; in fact, the riddle means 'Vex not yourself with grief', and is the origin of that common saying today, 'Don't eat your heart out'. Aristotle was at pains to point out, also, as we know from Plutarch and Aulus Gellius, that the Pythagoreans were not vegetarians: 'They did not abstain from eating animals, except for a few kinds of flesh . . . Aristotle says the Pythagoreans abstain from eating womb and heart, the sea anemone, and certain other such things . . .' Even not eating heart is, we have seen, probably a confusion by Plutarch or Gellius with the 'Symbol' which said 'Eat not heart'. Porphyry avoids this error in his *Life of Pythagoras*, where he says (without giving Aristotle the attribution): 'Pythagoras advised his followers to

abstain from . . . womb, the red mullet, the sea anemone . . . ' (Chapter 45). Symbol LX in this volume, 'Eat not the cuttlefish', is one of several which has purely symbolic significance (see the notes to it). Symbol XXII is wholly erroneous and non-Pythagorean, but Symbol XX is thoroughly Pythagorean, though an observance rather than a riddle. The Symbols must therefore be approached with judicious care not only for their symbolic intent, rather than their literal statement, but with the caution that only those quoted by Porphyry and Jerome are certainly genuine, amounting to a mere eleven, whereas eighty-seven are printed here! In this volume's selection only Symbols I through X are definitely authentic; an eleventh authentic Pythagorean riddle from Aristotle's collection is omitted, so I give it here: 'Make your libations to the gods at the handle of the cup', meaning 'Honour the gods with music (for this rings through the handle)'.

There is much original source material relating to these matters remaining to be published. Let us hope that some philanthropic spirit will make it possible for something to be done about this soon. What better work with which to start than a translation of Porphyry's *Life of Pythagoras*? And a modern version of Iamblichus's *Life of Pythagoras* in English is also very much needed.

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