

BIOGRAPHY FROM  
**ANCIENT CIVILIZATIONS**  
LEGENDS, FOLKLORE, AND STORIES OF ANCIENT WORLDS

*The Life and Times of*

**PYTHAGORAS**



*Susan Sales Harkins and  
William H. Harkins*



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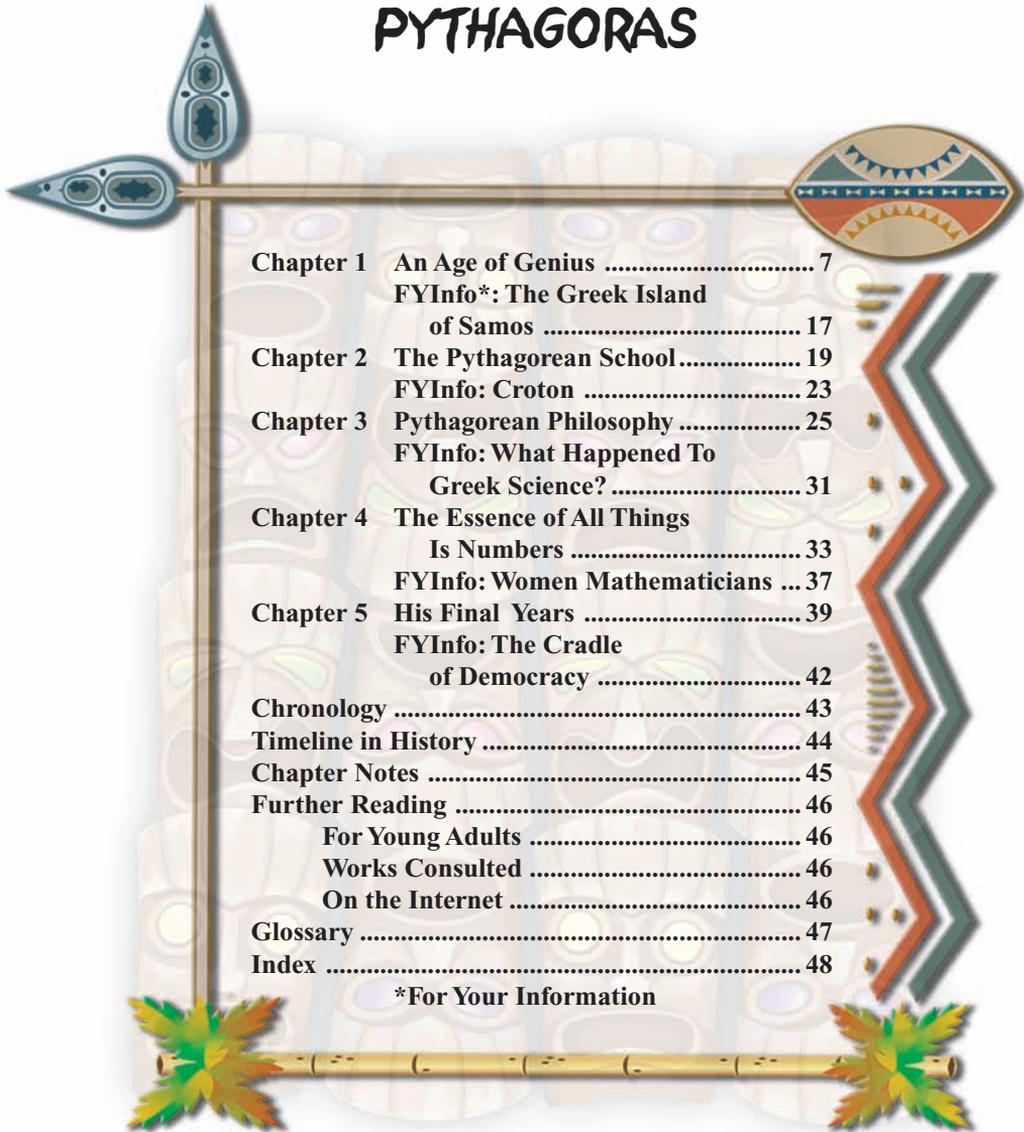
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\*For Your Information



CHAPTER  
**ONE**

## AN AGE OF GENIUS

*Mnesarchus dropped from his horse and handed the reins to a servant. He took a moment to wipe the beads of sweat from his brow. Shielding his eyes from the sun, he saw a long line waiting outside the temple. The line to see the Pythian oracle was always long. It is good to be rich, he thought. A bag of coins would buy his way to the front of the line.*

*Far down the mountainside, bright dots of sun sprinkled the blue sea. Overhead loomed the snow-topped peaks of Mount Parnassus. He never tired of standing between mortals and the gods in this holy place. Suddenly, he remembered his mission and headed straight for the temple. He had a date with an oracle.*

*Moments later, he started down the stone staircase that led to the oracle's chamber. Sweet, refreshing air wafted up and cooled his face. In the torchlit room, he waited quietly on a bench. Behind a thin curtain, the shadow of the oracle sat motionless. She murmured quietly, but he couldn't understand her. One never knew what to expect from the oracle.*

*It wasn't often that he had time to just sit, and his mind wandered. He was far from his childhood home in Phoenicia. The citizens of Samos had rewarded him with citizenship after he provided food during a drought.*

*His eyelids began to droop and suddenly, his mind was full of the soft, lovely face of Parthenis. He loved his Greek wife and their home on Samos.*

## Chapter ONE

*Time and again, business carried him far from home, and he was often lonely. What would his Phoenician family think if they could see him sitting in the dark waiting for a Greek oracle to reveal his future? he wondered.*

*A movement in the room brought him back to the present. There, by his side, stood a slender priestess. It was time to tell the oracle why he'd come. Just as he opened his mouth to speak, the oracle thrust out her hand and spoke, "Your voyage will be satisfying and profitable. Your wife is pregnant and will give birth to a child surpassing all others in beauty and wisdom, who will be of the greatest benefit to the human race in all aspects of life."<sup>1</sup>*

*Mnesarchus was stunned. Before he could speak, the priestess was gone. He never did ask a question of the oracle that day.*

*This child must be exceptional indeed, he thought. The gods obviously thought so because they sent the message unasked.*

*From that day forward, to honor the oracle Pythia, Mnesarchus called his wife Pythias. When the child the oracle foretold was born, they named him Pythagoras.*

Pythagoras (puh-THAH-guh-rus) entered the world at an exciting time. Dictators ruled rival city-states, and gods plagued the common man. However, just a few decades before Pythagoras was born, the world shifted. It was as if the earth had tilted on its axis, pouring logic and wisdom from the skies. The truth was, a few men were turning the world upside down. Not literally, of course—a few brilliant thinkers were changing the way people thought about themselves and the world in which they lived. The change was nothing short of historic. Mankind was claiming the right to control its destiny, and the world would never be the same.

Greeks began to view their gods as more than just immortal humans with huge egos and bad habits. The superhuman brats who meddled in their lives were now seen as supernatural beings of goodness and compassion. Later, Pythagoras would live to see the birth of the first Western democracy, in Athens.



*Some historians believe that Mnesarchus and Parthenis were in Sidon, Phoenicia, when Pythagoras was born. Most claim the Greek island of Samos is his birthplace. Regardless of where he was born, he was raised as a Greek in Samos.*

Although we don't know the exact date, Pythagoras was probably born around 560 BCE (many sources say 580 BCE). Traditional stories claim he was born on the small Greek island of Samos. Some historians believe Pythagoras was born in Sidon in Phoenicia.<sup>2</sup>

His Phoenician father, Mnesarchus, was a wealthy merchant. His Greek mother, Parthenis, was a descendant of the gods, according to Apollonius of Tyana. This first-century Greek teacher and philosopher was the first to write of Parthenis' claim to the gods. In fact, he was the first to mention Parthenis at all. We don't know who she was or what her real name was. Most likely, Apollonius invented her.<sup>3</sup>

If Pythagoras was born in Samos, Mnesarchus may have kept Greek tradition by hanging a huge wreath of olives over the main door. (When the new child was a girl, the parents hung a wreath of wool.) It's likely that Mnesarchus danced around the house naked, carrying



*The Rosicrucian Order, a modern philosophical organization with origins in ancient Egypt, uses a likeness of Pythagoras in its official symbol.*

the newborn baby, as was the Greek custom. Friends and family sent gifts to welcome the new child.

Pythagoras had a privileged childhood. According to tradition, his mother came from the island's most aristocratic family—its founders. Most Samians believed the founders were gods, so that made Pythagoras and his mother the descendants of gods.

Like most Greek children, Pythagoras spent his early years at home with his mother. Their courtyard was a lively place where he played, ate, learned his first lessons, and listened to his mother tell stories. He grew up on fables of Greek gods and heroes such as Odysseus. In this inner sanctuary, Pythagoras was safe and well cared for. During his first years, his mother was the most influential person in his life.

Parthenis probably spent most of her time at home tending her children and running her household. Because Mnesarchus was wealthy, his wife had the best of everything. She wore the finest linen tunics. Her house was filled with luxurious furniture. Her family ate off silver (and possibly even gold) plates. Each morning, a personal slave curled or braided her long hair, using silver bands and combs to keep it in place.

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