

XIV. The Biographical Tradition—Pythagoras

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In most cases the biographical tradition of the early Greek philosophers ends with Diogenes Laertius. In the case of Pythagoras, however, two major *Lives* have survived, that of Porphyrius and that of Iamblichus. Both are subsequent to Diogenes. Both add to the material—and the confusion—of the biographical tradition. Before they can be exploited for additional source material two questions arise: first, do they represent an independent Pythagorean tradition which rises perhaps with Neopythagoreanism and uses sources of its own, and secondly, are the two *Lives* independent one of the other or did Iamblichus base his *Life* on that of Porphyrius? I propose to discuss the latter question here. The former question answers itself in the course of the discussion.

It was assumed quite naturally by all historians of Greek philosophy down to and including Zeller that Iamblichus used and was in great part dependent on Porphyrius. Then in 1871–72 Rohde published his essay on the sources of Iamblichus¹ in which he maintained that Iamblichus did not use Porphyrius' *Life* but derived his material largely from Neopythagorean writings of the first and second centuries. Rohde's essay, as Lévy remarks,

¹ Following are the principal editions and critical studies of the sources to which reference is made hereinafter by the name of the author: A. Nauck, *Porphyrii philosophi Platonici Opuscula selecta* [Leipzig 1886] containing *Vita Pythagorae*. On page x of the introduction is a list of parallel passages in the two *Lives*; L. Deubner, *Iamblichi de vita Pythagorica Liber* [Leipzig 1937]. Pages xvi–xix contain a useful bibliography; E. Rohde, "Die Quellen des Iamblichus in seiner Biographie des Pythagoras," *Rh. Mus.* 26 (1871) 554 ff.; 27 (1872) 23 ff.; *Kleine Schriften* (Tuebingen-Leipzig 1902) 2. 102–172. Quotations are by page number in the *Kl. Schr.* with the corresponding reference to *Rh. Mus.*; V. Bertermann, *De Iamblichi vitae Pythagoricae fontibus* (Diss. Regimont. 1913); H. Jäger, *Die Quellen des Porphyrios* (Diss. Zurich/Chur 1919); Isidore Lévy, *Recherches sur les sources de la légende de Pythagore* (Paris 1926); A. Delatte, *La vie de Pythagore de Diogène Laërce* (Brussels 1922); A. J. Festugière, "Les 'Mémoires Pythagoriques' cités par Alexandre Polyhistor," *REG* 58 (1945) 1–65.

A consensus showing parallel passages in Porphyrius and Iamblichus appears at page x of the Introduction to Nauck's edition. An analysis shows that though Iamblichus amplifies and sometimes rearranges, the two lives follow a common pattern:

“n’a pas cessé de faire loi.” I have found his authority questioned only once, by Norden in a casual footnote (*Agnostos Theos* 344, note). Otherwise it continues to be quoted as a final pronouncement on the sources of Iamblichus. Corssen (*Rh. Mus.* 67 [1912] 261) and others offered criticism of detail. In 1913 Bertermann in an able dissertation attempted to take account of this criticism in a revision of Rohde’s attributions, but he accepted Rohde’s basic assumptions *in toto*.² In 1926 Isidore Lévy published a study of the sources in which he was concerned to lay the foundations for his book of the following year, a study of Pythagoras the god-man, prototype of the Jewish-Christian ideal. Like Frank in *Plato und die sogenannten Pythagoreer* he dismissed the historical Pythagoras as almost unknowable and of little importance for the more important myth. He accepted Rohde’s thesis, and it continues to be accepted without question.

Rohde made two fundamental assumptions, neither of them justifiable. The first assumption is that both Porphyrius and

	Porphyrius	Iamblichus
1. From birth to landing in Croton	1-17	1-28
2. Landing at Croton	18-22	29-57
3. Mirabilia	23-31	58-63
4. Paideia	32-46	64-89
5. Death of Pythagoras	55 ff.	248 ff.

² Bertermann accepts in principle Rohde’s thesis and uses the same method. Like Rohde he considers Nicomachus and Apollonius of Tyana to be the two main proximate sources, differing only as to the ultimate sources. Following Corssen (*Rh. Mus.* 67 [1912] 261) he assigns a larger role than does Rohde to Andocides and to Timaeus. As against Mewaldt, *De Aristoxeni Pythagoriciis sententiis et vita Pythagorica* (Diss. Berlin 1904) he minimizes the contribution of Aristoxenus. At 75-77 he has a *Tabula Fontium* in which the *Life* is broken down into its component parts. Proximate sources, intermediate sources, ultimate sources are shown in the columns of the Table. The first two chapters of the *Life*, another two chapters and two brief parts of section 267 are given to Iamblichus as being of his authorship. The editorship of some further 23 of the 267 sections is also assigned to him, usually because Bertermann cannot decide on a single proximate source and therefore declares both candidates to be intermediate sources, leaving to Iamblichus the task of editing.

The process is often as ingenious as the arguments are subtle. The fact however that scholars reach conclusions in not even approximate agreement suggests that there must be some basic flaw in the technique. Often, having found a passage in which a source is indicated or can be deduced, they assume that that source is being *quoted* and extend brackets of the quotation until they begin to impinge on another quotation established in the same fashion. Further, they neglect the fact obvious even to the most casual reader that the *Lives* of Porphyrius and of Iamblichus have a unity of form and intention such as Diogenes Laertius clearly does not possess. I would not of course wish by a criticism of his method here to minimize Rohde’s great and original contribution to Greek studies.

Iamblichus wrote their *Lives* with scissors and paste. He confidently divides up all Porphyrius' *Life* and almost all of Iamblichus' into component parts, assigning them to their proper authors. Of Iamblichus he says (157 = *Rh. Mus.* 27 [1872] 48): "Here Iamblichus shows an independence remarkable in such a pitiful patcher. He puts together a colorful ragbag, chiefly from scraps of his reading: the disorder of the sequence and the improvised connective passages are his own contribution," and again (171 = *Rh. Mus.* 27 [1872] 60): "Now that we have come to know the pitiful poverty and indolence of mind of 'the divine Iamblichus' we can affirm that he did not himself make this collection of names." Bertermann (5) is yet more emphatic: ". . . specie novum opus praeclarum, re vero cento nequissimus."

We are still far from conceding to "the divine Iamblichus" the status claimed for him by the Emperor Julian who said that, though he was later in time, he was not inferior in genius to Plato. But we have come to recognize his importance in the history of thought, particularly of Neoplatonism. If he and Porphyrius failed in organizing their biographical material and in evaluating their sources, no other Greek writer succeeded; and their other treatises plainly show that they could organize and present philosophical thought better than any contemporary, probably better than any writer between Posidonius and Proclus. Rohde's contempt has given place nowadays to a better understanding.³

The second assumption which Rohde makes is that "Iamblichus did not use the biography of Porphyrius, and perhaps did not even know it: common passages are readily to be explained by a common use of Nicomachus" (126 = *Rh. Mus.* 26 [1871] 577). Let us first consider the grounds for the latter assumption. The existence of a *Life of Pythagoras* by Nicomachus of Gerasa is confidently assumed. In fact we have only two quotations from Nicomachus in Porphyrius (20 and 59) and one in Iamblichus (251). No reference is made to a *Life*. We have no tradition of a *Life*, and indeed there seems to be no place among Nicomachus' writings⁴ on mathematics, music, astronomy for a biography.

³ The importance of Iamblichus in the history of Neoplatonism is well assessed by Ueberweg—Praechter, *Grundriss* (Berlin 1926) 612 ff.; R. Harder, *Ocellus Lucanus* (Berlin 1926) xv ff.; E. R. Dodds, *The Theology of Proclus* (Oxford 1933) xix ff.

⁴ A list of the writings is given in *Nicomachus of Gerasa, Introduction to Arithmetic*, ed. D'Ooge, Robbins, Karpinski (New York 1926) pp. 79 ff. and also Jan, *Musici scriptores Graeci* 232–33.

The *Life of Apollonios of Tyana* he is sometimes said to have written is almost certainly to be ascribed to a misunderstanding of Sidonius Apollinaris (8.7 = *Mus. script. Gr.* [Jan] 234) who wrote: "Apollonii Pythagorici vitam non ut Nicomachus senior e Philostrati sed ut Tascius Victorianus e Nicomachi schedio exscripserat, quia iusseras, misi." Here the epithet "senior" is not understandable of Nicomachus of Gerasa, and in any case he lived (*fl.* ca. 100 A.D.) before Philostratus, who was born about 170 A.D.

If there was no *Life*, we must surmise that some biographical detail was incorporated in Nicomachus' scientific treatises, even though there is nothing of the kind in the treatises we possess. Jan (*Mus. script. Gr.* 223) suggests that he wrote a larger as well as a smaller *Manual* and if he did, it would seem the likeliest place for reference to incidents of Pythagoras' life. Even so Porphyrius quotes him only twice and Iamblichus only once. In the case of Iamblichus this might be explained by the fact that he only rarely acknowledges his sources; but Porphyrius acknowledges liberally, and two quotations are inadequate mention of a source to which Rohde ascribes about one quarter of Porphyrius' *Life*.

One incident, the story of Damon and Phintias, is common to both *Lives* and may be quoted as an instance of their treatment of sources. As his source Porphyrius (59) quotes Nicomachus who in his turn quotes Aristoxenus; whereas Iamblichus (233-36) quotes Aristoxenus alone and tells a longer and livelier tale. Rohde (116 = *Rh. Mus.* 26 [1871] 567) affirms that both have a single source, namely, Nicomachus. Wehrli (*Die Schule des Aristoteles—Aristoxenos* [Basle 1945] fr. 31 and comment page 57) suggests that Porphyrius has borrowed Nicomachus' account but that Iamblichus has in fact gone back to Aristoxenus, to whom the accomplished narrative form is to be ascribed. The character of Nicomachus' writings makes it seem less probable that he embodied somewhere in them a long anecdote which Porphyrius abbreviated but which Iamblichus copied out. Wehrli's suggestion seems a more probable one. It would show us Iamblichus going back to the original source, Porphyrius contenting himself with Nicomachus.

In any event the proved common ground in Nicomachus is small, and the hypothesis of extensive biographical information in Nicomachus is an improbable one. He belonged to the more sober Neopythagoreanism of the first century. His reputation

was based on his mathematical works and was so great that later Proclus claimed to be a reincarnation (Marinus, *Vita Procli* xxviii—165.36). Iamblichus was familiar with his work. He wrote a commentary on the *Eisagôgê* which we still possess. He quoted (115–21) a long passage from the *Manual* almost word for word. If Nicomachus had written a *Life* and if it had been excerpted so extensively by the writers of both *Lives*, it is probable that their dependence would have been demonstrable not merely from the mention of his name in the one case once, in the other twice.

As to the thesis that Iamblichus did not use, and perhaps did not know, the *Life* of Porphyrius, if it can be shown that the *Lives* follow a common basic pattern and that they have passages of some length and importance in common, unless we have external evidence to the contrary it seems to me we must conclude that Iamblichus knew Porphyrius' work and that for some reason which we will later explore he wished to write a longer biography in which the point of view differed from that of his predecessor.

The *Lives* do indeed follow a common pattern as far as Porphyrius' *Life* goes. Iamblichus has added a long excerpt from Nicomachus on music. He has compiled a section of his own, in length amounting to about half his book, in which he portrays the Pythagorean Sage as the embodiment of all the virtues. In these two added sections he has almost nothing in common with Porphyrius, but in the sections where the subject matter is the same we find that, of the 816 lines in Nauck's edition of Porphyrius' *Life*, 132 lines or approximately one in six reappear in almost the same words in Iamblichus. Even if it could be demonstrated that both writers had used common sources, it would be an extraordinary coincidence that they should have so much common ground in their excerpts. If, as I believe I have shown, we have no grounds for thinking that they have a common source in Nicomachus and we must concede that Porphyrius probably used several sources for common passages, it becomes practically certain that Iamblichus must have had before him the work of Porphyrius.

What grounds, other than internal evidence, have we for believing that Iamblichus would have known the work of Porphyrius and in particular his *Life of Pythagoras*? Even if we dismiss the tradition that Iamblichus was a pupil of Porphyrius—a tradition that appears to be both credible and chronologically

possible⁵—it can be assumed that Iamblichus will have known the writings of a man of Porphyrius' eminence. Porphyrius himself, in the letter from Longinus which he quotes (*Life of Plotinus* 20) and in the subsequent discussion of Plotinus's manuscripts (21), gives us ample evidence for easy communications and, after its means, for well-organized publishing in his day. Even if he never met Porphyrius in the flesh, Iamblichus would have had access to his writings. They were famous enough in their time. It took the Christian church over a century to destroy the book against their sect. Why then should Iamblichus, who used so many sources, have neglected to use the great *History of Philosophy* of his time, that of Porphyrius, of which the *Life of Pythagoras* was a part?

We have direct evidence for a knowledge on Iamblichus' part of other writings of Porphyrius. In his *De mysteriis* he takes up a position radically differing from that of Porphyrius in the *Letter to Anebo*, the previous publication of which is assumed. On the vexed question of the Demiurge of Plato he opposed Porphyrius' thesis and expounded a subtle and elaborate thesis of his own (Proclus in *Tim.* 307 ff.). If in his *Life of Pythagoras* we find him presenting a very different portrait, we may assume that he did so with full knowledge of Porphyrius' work and for purposes of his own.⁶ It seems therefore reasonable to conclude that Iamblichus wrote his *Life of Pythagoras* with the *Life* of Porphyrius before him and that neither of them was dependent on a work of Nicomachus

⁵ The relative chronology of Porphyrius and Iamblichus and the date of their encounter in Rome are uncertain. The principal facts which are relevant are:

1. Iamblichus was a pupil of Anatolius, the mathematical character of whose teaching left a permanent impression on his mind, some time before Anatolius's elevation to a bishopric in 280 A.D. (I. L. Heiberg, *Gesch. der Math. u. Naturwiss. im Altertum* [Munich 1925] 40) and probably, as he was born about 250 A.D., around the middle years of the decade 270–280 A.D.
2. Porphyrius returned to Rome some time after Plotinus's death in 270 A.D. He died in 305 A.D. Iamblichus' son, as Porphyrius tells us (*Life of Plotinus* 9), married Amphicleia, one of the faithful women who looked after Plotinus. Iamblichus is unlikely to have had a son of an age to marry before the decade 280–290 A.D.

It seems therefore a reasonable conjecture that Iamblichus' sojourn in Rome took place in Porphyrius' mature years, and that Iamblichus became acquainted not only with his master's thought but also with his writings. For the chronology of Plotinus which underlies these assumptions see Hans Opperman, *Plotins Leben—Untersuchungen zur Biographie Plotins* (Heidelberg 1929), and Boyd, "The Chronology in Porphyry's *Vita Plotini*," *CP* 32 (1937) 241 ff.).

⁶ For a difference between them on transmigration doctrine see W. Jaeger, *Nemesios von Emesa* (Berlin 1913) 65.

the very existence of which is doubtful. These negative conclusions suggest two other positive problems. Why do the *Lives* differ so greatly from the Pythagoras chapter in Diogenes Laertius if their material derives from the same general tradition and, by and large, from the same literature? And why do the *Lives* differ so greatly in character one from the other?

The sources of Diogenes Laertius 8 have been investigated by Delatte; and even though he may not have made sufficient allowance for the use of secondary sources such as manuals and compendia, he has shown that the materials have been excerpted from a wide field. Of the one long and coherent passage (8. 24–36) Festugière has since shown that Alexander Polyhistor excerpted it from a source of the second century B.C. We cannot expect from such a method unity of presentation. It can only produce, as it does produce, a scrap-book on Pythagoras.

The character of our two *Lives* is very different from the character of Diogenes Laertius. Both are informed by their author's conception of and reverence for Pythagoras. Both have a "protreptic" coloring. And this community of spirit is perhaps as striking as the diversity of their treatment. Porphyrius' *Life* was a part of the first book of his *History of Philosophy* (Nauck, *Porphyrii Platonici Opuscula selecta* [Leipzig 1886] fr. 7). From the notice in Suidas (s.v. "Porphyrius") it is plain that the *History* enjoyed an authority like that of Sotion or, in its different kind, like the *Placita* of Aetius. The *Life* shows no bias or tendency, except a tendency towards limited hagiography such as we might expect from a disciple of Plotinus who used with some circumspection the *Life* of Apollonius of Tyana. Pythagoras in the Platonic-Plotinian tradition was the archetype of the Sage. Porphyrius treats him as such. He is liberal in his quotation of sources. He quotes 31 authors, some of them several times. His effort to achieve a reasonable historical synthesis, in accordance with the lights of his day, is obvious. He was a scholar, as his times understand scholarship, and his life was passed in scholarly, not in original work. His *Life* exhibits the third-century scholar at work on intractable biographical material for the handling of which no techniques had been evolved.

The *Life* of Iamblichus, as is obvious even to the casual reader, is of a very different character. Even in the first part, which is largely patterned after Porphyrius, he imports new material,

usually of an extraordinary or miraculous nature. He introduces two or more variants or contradictory accounts of the same event without attempting to reconcile them. His only concern seems to be to miss nothing which could redound to the honor of Pythagoras. It is however only after he departs from the pattern of Porphyrius to add a section of his own, which amounts to almost half his book, that Iamblichus' purpose becomes plain. That section is divided into subsections on the virtues—piety, wisdom, justice, courage, temperance, friendship; and this, as Rohde remarks (151, note 2 = *Rhein. Mus.* 27 [1872] 43) is a current pattern of *laudationes*. Sometimes these virtues are illustrated in the person of Pythagoras. Sometimes he speaks simply of the Pythagoreans in general and is obviously thinking of "the Sage."

Festugière (*La révélation de Hermès Trismégiste* 2 [Paris 1949] 33, 35, 38, 41–47, with references to his predecessors in the enquiry) has shown that Iamblichus in his *Life* is projecting into the times of Pythagoras the methods of the philosophical schools of the third century, and in particular that chapter 104 of the *Life* is a picture of contemporary teaching methods. His emphasis on secrecy and the arcane derives ultimately from Ammonius Saccas and from the milieu of Plotinus who entered into a pact with Herennius and Origen the Neoplatonist never to disclose what Ammonius taught (Porphyrius, *Life of Plotinus* 3) and who in fact published nothing before his fiftieth year.

The difference of approach in Porphyrius and Iamblichus must not however blind us to their common purpose. "The Neoplatonic school, from Plotinus on, was in intention anti-Christian" (H. Langerbach, "The Philosophy of Ammonios Saccas," *JHS* 77 [1957] 74). This motive was present in the minds of both Porphyrius and Iamblichus. The differing character of the *Lives* they wrote is largely determined not by their choice of objective—the objective is the same—but by the tactics of counter-attack they elected to employ. Both writers were championing Greek philosophy—*Hellenismos*, as Julian was pleased to call it—against the revealed religions of "barbarian audacity." Plotinus had engaged in controversy against the Gnostics, Porphyrius against the Christians and against pseudo-Zoroastrian writings then current, which he had shown to be spurious and recent (*Life of Plotinus* 16). Iamblichus took the more positive course of publishing a *Compendium of Pythagorean Thought*, five of the ten books of

which survive. In this compendium his intention is to provide the candidate for the study of philosophy with a portrait of the sublime exemplar of the Sage, Pythagoras, to incite him and, with a manual of discipline, to guide him. The introductory *Life* serves this main purpose. It is however a purpose with which Porphyrius would have had no quarrel. He too recommends the study of mathematics as a means of liberating the mind from its bondage to sensibles and preparing it, by an appropriate discipline, for the contemplation of the intelligibles which are prefigured in the intermediate mathematica (*Life* 46–52). But his cast of mind is scholarly. He seeks to achieve his ends by the means of controversy and of adequate presentation of his case. Iamblichus on the other hand is fired by an evangelical zeal. In an age of lively religious consciousness—"the rise of Christianity coincides with a revival of ancient religion" (Whittaker, *The Neoplatonists* [Cambridge 1918] 21)—he is seeking to win souls. As an apostle of Hellenism he is preaching the doctrine of the Greek tradition—virtue *and* knowledge, virtue *through* knowledge. The new religions offered the mysteries to all comers as a gift of grace. For the Neoplatonists the way to virtue was still, as in the Greek world it always had been, a long, hard, uphill way of ethical and intellectual discipline. It was largely due to Iamblichus' evangelical zeal that that tradition persisted for another two centuries.⁷

From the character and purpose of the two *Lives* it follows that they cannot be used as sources of biographical information except insofar as they yield fragments of earlier writers. From named sources however and sources which can safely be inferred, it is clear that both writers are not dependent on any special tradition but are drawing on the general literature of their times. The one exception is *theologoumena arithmetica* where they rely on Moderatus of Gades and Nicomachus. This would appear to be a separate tradition deriving from Plato and Speusippus and transmitted through Posidonius (Borghorst, *De Anatolii fontibus* [Diss. Berlin 1915]). It would merit separate inquiry.

The following conclusions would seem to be justified:

1. Rohde's assumptions as to the methods of Porphyrius and Iamblichus are unjustified, and his general conclusions as to their sources are unsound.

⁷ See Zeller's balanced—and laudatory—estimate of Porphyrios, Zeller 3⁵.2. 693.

2. The *Lives* of Porphyrius and Iamblichus are documents of contemporary Neoplatonism (the latter largely dependent on the former) and can be exploited as sources of biographical information only insofar as they yield fragments of established ascription.

3. There is nothing to suggest, and no reason to assume, that either author drew on sources or a tradition apart from the main stream of biographical and philosophical-biographical literature.