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### **Pythagoreanism as Esoteric Tradition**

It is widely recognized that Pythagorean tradition embraces, right from the beginning, a broad range of very different personalities. Most of the Pythagoreans mentioned in ancient sources have nothing to do with philosophy, while others developed teachings whose scope and nature seem to vary considerably. Similarly, doubts have often been raised about the survival of Pythagoreanism into the Hellenistic age because the large number of pseudo-Pythagorean writings which date from that time are viewed as literary forgeries devoid of any real connection with a genuine Pythagorean background.

The problem of definition reaches back to the very roots of Pythagoreanism because Pythagoras himself is a wise man with many faces. He draws on material from the most disparate sources in order to 'construct' his 'wisdom'. But his *sophia* is not only theoretical knowledge. It also is a practical ability — just as it was for archaic craftsmen, physicians, diviners and religious specialists. He is not only a polymath but also a wonderworker and charismatic, as well as the founder of a special way of life which required a lengthy period of learning and practical training at the hands of a teacher and involved every aspect of a person's existence.

The same versatility and complexity have characterized Pythagoreanism throughout its history up until late antiquity. The reason for this lies in the fact that Pythagorean teaching is neither dogmatic nor focused simply on the transmission of a set of doctrines, but aims at transforming people. This has come to be regarded in the most recent studies of esotericism as one of the most typical characteristics of esoteric traditions.

Approaching Pythagoreanism as an esoteric tradition together with everything this implies — openness to new insights, adaptability to varied circumstances and individuals, special forms of transmission, communication through coded language and symbols — will help to highlight common features shared by the very different personalities mentioned in the lists of ancient Pythagoreans. And comparisons with other esoteric traditions will make it possible to situate Hellenistic Pythagoreanism, especially as this is presented in writings on herbal lore and magic, against the background of a particular kind of transmission which goes beyond individuals and time.

#### Biography:

M. Laura Gemelli Marciano, geboren 1952, ist Titularprofessorin für Klassische Philologie an der Universität Zürich. Studium der klassischen Philologie, der Indogermanistik, der antiken Philosophie und der italienischen Literatur an der Universität Genua (1971 bis 1975). 1996 Habilitation an der Philosophischen Fakultät der Universität Zürich für das Gebiet der Klassischen Philologie.