

Unwritten Doctrine of Pythagoras in Hermias of Alexandria

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Among Plato scholars, the critique of writing and the question of unwritten doctrines may have been one of the most debated topics of the 20th century (Cherniss 1944, 1977; Ross 1951; Krämer 1986, 1989; Gaiser 1991, Reale 1997; Szlezák 2005; Rosetti 1992; Höfle 2004).¹ The interpretation of the Tübingen-Milan School, which considers the unwritten doctrines to be the fundamental beginning in the comprehension of the written works of Plato, is founded principally on the *Phaedrus* (*Phdr.* 274b–278e), the *Seventh Letter* (*Ep.* 340–345) and on Aristoteles' *Physics* (*Ph.* IV 2, 209b14–15), among other important documents. Over time, moderate positions also arose, such as that of Trabattoni (1994, 2005), which proposes an interpretation of the written work augmented by some hermeneutic tools originating in unwritten doctrines.²

Our investigation is not at all concerned with referencing, or even touching upon the subject of unwritten doctrines; on the contrary, it was only a survey regarding the presence of Pythagoras in Hermias of Alexandria. But Hermias presents in his interpretation – besides that of an unwritten Pythagoras, which is the principal focus of this study

¹ I am immensely grateful to Professor Galen Barry who kindly reviewed this article.

² See also Ferrari (2012).

– a Plato who writes without omitting the consideration of oral transmission. Contrary to the reading of Tübingen-Milan, which emphasizes the condemnation of the written word, the Plato of Hermias does not reverberate with such conflict, indicating a more accommodating picture.

Hermias shows a Plato who does not refuse the written word and reconciles in a harmonious manner the superiority of the oral tradition in his philosophy with his activity as a writer. Not that this interpretation is something new, as we consider that such an interpretation is exactly what we read in the *Phaedrus*, that is, the oral tradition is superior as it is living and capable of “impressing upon the soul” of disciples, while writing is fixed and dead, able to serve merely, in the best of circumstances, as a record of that which once was learned and passed on via the oral tradition.

This brief contextualization permits us to enter the environment of Hermias, who in his commentary in the *Phaedrus*, presents Pythagoras as gifted with surprising abilities, although for the most part such attributes are already known. We will examine, from this point onward, the passages in which Hermias explains Pythagoras’ connections, some of them incomprehensible, such as between Pythagoras and the *Phaedrus*. We present all the passages which follow in our own translation, especially because the version available in English of the text of Hermias, which translation was made by Baltzly and Share (2018: 47–171), does not reach this point in the commentary.³

Logographers vs. The Unwritten

At one point in Plato’s dialogue (*Phdr.* 257c–258a), logography, or the use of writing, is described by Phaedrus as an activity of great men whose importance could not be attacked. However, Socrates refuses to write and defends orality as the most effective resource of philosophical expression. Plato himself would have agreed, despite having written so much and so well, affirming that the main part of his philosophy would have to be transmitted orally (*Ep.* 7; *Phdr.* 276d–278a).

In Hermias of Alexandria, on the other hand, we find two references to the unwritten character of Pythagorean and Socratic philosophy, in which two distinct attitudes are emphasized in relation to writing: one that accepts it and the other that rejects it. Hermias, when commenting on Plato’s passage, emphasizes this aspect of unwritten philosophy and classifies it as Pythagorean, so that Pythagoras and Socrates are for Hermias illustrious representatives of unwritten philosophy, along with Themistocles and Pericles.

The commentary of Hermias conforms to passage 257c–e of the *Phaedrus*, where the value of logography is questioned, because according to Phaedrus “one of the politicians insulted and censured Lysias, and among the insults uttered he called him logographer (*logográphon*)” (*Phdr.* 257c), with logography being clearly reviled, even when linked

³ We did not have access to the German translation by Hildegund Bernard (1997).

to great and valuable public figures. At this point of transition between the recantation (palinode) and the second part of the dialogue, the moment at which questions of writing and rhetoric are presented, logography, or the fact of speech being written down, is described as something that could harm the reputation (*doxan*) of those writers with the passage of time.

According to Phaedrus, this was the reason by which those authors could be eventually designated not only as logographers, but also as sophists (*Phdr.* 257d). Socrates refutes this statement, remembering that many of those who have left behind written compositions “are the greatest and most notable politicians” (*oi megiston phronountes ton politikon* – *Phdr.* 257e), rejecting the generalization and showing that not all the ancient writers could be censured simply for having left behind their writings.

Hermias presents the first distinction between unwritten and written traditions through some illustrious examples:

< and you know how 257d >

Phaedrus wishes to draw from *éndoxos*, and this *éndoxos* is a rhetorical tool, of multiple origins. Subsequently, men censure the practice of writing down discourse, stating that practical knowledge, by which he also says that the greatest and most able abstained from logography, such as Themistocles and Pericles, finding it sufficient to speak, as well as other civilized men, like Pythagoras and Socrates himself. For that reason, Plato also contrasts the argumentative use of *éndoxos* and written discourse (*Herm. in Phdr.* 210, 19–22 Lucarini & Moreschini [*further* = LM] = [176] Couvreur).⁴

<Καὶ ξύνοισθά που καί 257d >

Ὁ Φαῖδρος ἐνδόξως βούλεται ἐπιχειρῆσαι· ἐνδοξος δὲ ἐστὶν ἐπιχείρησις ἢ ἀπὸ τῶν πολλῶν· ἐπειδὴ οὖν οἱ ἄνθρωποι ἐλοιδοροῦντο τὸ λογογραφεῖν ὡς ἐκ τῆς κατεχούσης συνηθείας, διὰ τοῦτο καὶ αὐτός φησιν ὅτι οἱ μέγα 210.20 <δυναμένοι> ἀπέσχοντο τὸ λογογραφεῖν οἷον Θεμιστοκλῆς, Περικλῆς, ἱκανοὶ ὄντες λέγειν, καὶ ἄλλοι δὲ τῶν ἀστέων ἀνθρώπων οἷον ὁ Πυθαγόρας, καὶ αὐτὸς δὲ ὁ Σωκράτης. Διὸ καὶ αὐτὸς ὁ Πλάτων ἐνδόξως ἐπιχειρῶν ἀντιτίθησι τοὺς συγγραμμένους.

Pythagoras, who was at no point explicitly mentioned in the *Phaedrus*, finds a special place in the interpretation of Hermias. He is counted among those who did not write and, above all, were important to the *polis*. This group includes Themistocles, who was also not cited in the dialogue, and Pericles, who will be cited further on, but in another context.

The term *endoxon* in this neoplatonic environment carries the Aristotelian dialectic lexicon without, however, limiting itself to the Aristotelian concept as we know it today. In the work of Aristotle, the *endoxa*, or the opinion of specialists, belong to dialectic

⁴ Our translation.

opposition (*Top.* I 100a18–103b). However, Hermias does not use the term within the same parameters, but only in the sense of *doxa*, or common opinion.⁵

This mix of Aristotelian and Stoic elements and vocabulary in texts of the neoplatonists is quite common, such that, in a certain passage, Hermias utilizes the Aristotelian categories of potency and act to refer to different relations of love, which, for obvious reasons, could never have been developed by Plato in these terms:

Evidently this is not at the forefront of this scope [regarding love], because [Plato] neither presents a dialogue about its essence (*ousía*) nor its potential (*dynamis*), but only about the act (*energeía*) in the cosmos and in souls, especially as all are led as lovers toward the beautiful. If Plato had offered, in some given speech, a circumscription, we would have these three aspects in dialogue, *about essence (ousía), about potential (dynamis), and about act (energeía)*. (Our translation. Herm. in *Phdr.* 12, 17–22 LM = [64–65] 12.11–22 Couvreur)

“Ὅτι δὲ οὐκ ἔστιν ἐναυθα ὁ προηγούμενος σκοπὸς [περιἔρωτος] δῆλον· οὔτε γὰρ περὶ οὐσίας αὐτοῦ οὔτε περὶ δυνάμεως παραδίδωσιν, ἀλλὰ περὶ τῆς ἐνεργείας αὐτοῦ τῆς εἰς τὸν κόσμον καὶ τὰς ψυχὰς διαλέγεται, ὅτι δὴ πάντα ἀνάγει ἐπὶ τὸ ἐραστὸν καὶ τὸ καλόν· εἰ δέ που ὁ Πλάτων προηγούμενον <περί> τινος λόγον ποιεῖται, περὶ τριῶν τούτων διαλέγεται, περὶ οὐσίας, περὶ δυνάμεως, περὶ ἐνεργείας·

As for the Stoic terms that are modified by Hermias, we highlight *pneuma* as an important example in the double characterization of Eros (*in Phdr.* 34, 2–9 LM) also attributed to the Stoics. In addition to the specific Neoplatonic sense of vehicle of the soul (*pneuma* – *in Phdr.* 67, 14; *pneumatic* – *in Phdr.* 69, 24 LM), it also connotes the intellectual purification (*mollusmòs*) through which *pneuma* passes (*in Phdr.* 73, 26–30 LM). The term “familiar” (*oikeioun*) also appears as a Neoplatonic appropriation of the Stoic terms in two passages by Hermias (*in Phdr.* 54, 26; 81, 17 LM).

The second mention of this unwritten Pythagoras in Hermias is also associated with Socrates. This time, the powerful duo of unwritten philosophers appears opposed to the masters of writing, Orpheus, and Hermes. The passage comments upon *Phaedrus* 275c:

It must be known that **Plato did not reject writing**, being that many of the ancient and most respected wrote, such as Orpheus and Hermes, as opposed to **Pythagoras and Socrates, who did not**. These definitions were given by Socrates in this written composition [by Plato]: to have knowledge (*episteme*) of questions and to have observed the truth through the remembrances of what was lost in ancient times for the benefit of those who learn without effort, but enjoy their childhood training, writing, then, with beauty and correctness; while those without knowledge

⁵ See Longo (2015: 63) on the different uses of the term dialectic in Syrianus and Hermias.

and who make much effort are given to the benefit of opinion (*doxes*), and move toward this inadequacy of the activity of writing, as he says.

In this there is a narrative of not needing to avail oneself of written discourse in order to be exposed to thinking, as a disciple of Plato omits from written records all that was said to him, and so remains apart, drifting, eliminating all, and returning only to the master, because the thoughts resulting from the effort do not need to be revealed in books, but only in the soul (Herm. in *Phdr.* 258, 10–23 LM = [201] Couvreur; our translation).

Εἰδέναι δὲ δεῖ ὅτι *οὐκ ἀναιρεῖ τὸ γράφειν ὁ Πλάτων*. πολλοὶ γὰρ τῶν παλαιῶν καὶ εὐδοκιμωτάτων συνέγραψαν, ὡς Ὀρφεὺς, Ἑρμῆς· **Πυθαγόρας δὲ καὶ Σωκράτης οὐ συνέγραψαν**. Τοιούτους οὖν ὄρους παραδίδωσιν ὁ Σωκράτης τοῦ συγγράφειν ἐνταῦθα, τὸ ἐπιστήμην ἔχειν τῶν πραγμάτων καὶ τὸ ἀληθὲς εἰδότας ἐπὶ ὑπομνήσει τῆς εἰς γῆρας λήθης καὶ ὠφελείας τῶν μανθανόντων μὴ σπουδάζοντας, ἀλλὰ παιδιᾷ χρωμένους, τότε καλῶς καὶ εὐπρεπῶς συγγράφειν, τοὺς δὲ ἀνεπιστήμονας καὶ ὡς ἐπὶ μέγα καὶ περισπούδαστον καὶ δόξης χάριν ἐρχομένους εἰς τοῦτο ἀπρεπῶς συγγράφειν φησί.

Φέρεται δὲ τοιοῦτόν τι διήγημα πρὸς τὸ μὴ δεῖν συγγράμμασιν ἀποτίθεσθαι τὰ νοήματα, ὅτι **μαθητῆς τις τοῦ Πλάτωνος πάντα τὰ λεγόμενα παρ' αὐτοῦ ἀπογραψάμενος ἀπέπλευσε, καὶ ναυαγίᾳ περιπεσὼν ἅπαντα ἀπόλεσε καὶ ὑπέστρεψε πρὸς τὸν διδάσκαλον, ἔργῳ πειραθεὶς ὅτι οὐ δεῖ ἐν βιβλίοις ἀποτίθεσθαι τὰ νοήματα, ἀλλὰ ἐν τῇ ψυχῇ**.

Hermias highlights the question of the possibility of anamnesis associated with the work of philosophical formation in the Platonic environment, a school in which, as we know, writing is rejected as a principal means of the storage and transmission of knowledge. Contrary to what we have often come to understand, the passage makes it clear that, despite this unwritten perspective, Plato does not disparage writing (*Plato did not reject writing*), but merely practiced a teaching method in his school in which books did not play a central role in the transmission nor in the storage of knowledge. It is clear, on one hand, that criticism of writing, even for Hermias, is not absolute, neither as for a thing to be forbidden nor as a practice without importance.

It is evident, however, that the mnemonic work of the Platonic dialectic in capturing learned knowledge was an important step toward anamnesis. In this context, any of the ancient records engraved on souls are more valuable than any effort, regardless of the external written registries that may have been produced, whose value is also not excluded. All navigation of the process of learning has the master as reference, who is requested to come to the aid of the disciple whenever necessary, as no text could ever replace him.⁶

The passage also recalls the feeding of opinion (*doxa*), foodstuff of those souls unable to contemplate the beings on the plane of truth. As Socrates says: “after much

⁶ Cf. Pl. *Tht.* 143b5–c6, when Euclid tells of how he created and corrected the report of a conversation which he had witnessed between Socrates and Theaetetus, consulting personally with Socrates several times regarding the content. Besides the indication of how Plato himself may have created dialogues; the passage also demonstrates the necessity of the master as the personal original source around which such texts must revolve.

toil they all go away without gaining a view of reality, and when they have gone away they feed upon opinion” (*trophei doxastei khrontai* – *Phdr.* 248b, trad. Fowler 2005: 479). Whoever does not have the aid of this master is doomed, obviously, to feed upon opinion, whether obtained apart from the master himself or collected from written material, neither being of any real use.

Unlike many interpreters in the twentieth century who favored an interpretation based on unwritten doctrines, the passage shows orality harmoniously combined with writing. The disciple navigates around the master as an unequivocal reference but without either ceasing to use the writings or overestimating their power or scope. What is learned through orality does not lend itself to the fixity of writings, while what is learned in books does not achieve what only oral transmission provides, namely the writing on the soul. Here there is nothing beyond what we already know from the *Phaedrus*, except the metaphor of navigation, imported from the *Phaedo*. There is, therefore, neither denial of writings, nor exclusivity of oral transmission, but on the contrary, a combination of diverse and naturally complementary spheres.⁷

Dialogues and personages

The third passage in which Pythagoras appears in Hermias discusses the relationship between the dialogues of Plato and great personages, such as Zamolxis in the *Charmides* and Pythagoras in the *Phaedrus*. Even having no explicit mention of Pythagoras in the *Phaedrus*, as we said, Hermias establishes the relationship:

<Listen to what I have to say 274c>

Socrates, having asked Phaedrus, “Do you know the means by which, in the matter of discourse, we should please the gods in our actions?” To which he responds, “Not at all. If you know, tell me.”⁸ Then the philosopher says that “hear what I have to say,” as Socrates had become accustomed to being regarded as an intermediary of the gods, as the bearer of something divine, or above the human assistants of the gods. The divine man does not demean those gods in the *Sophist* dialogue. There is the habit of often offering their own writings to divine men, as it happens with *Pythagoras in *Phaedrus*⁹, with Zamolxis¹⁰, a sort of sage, in the *Charmides*, as well as in the *Timaeus*, where the speech of the Atlantes is attributed to the Egyptians. On this point they are opposed to the invention regarding the speeches of the sovereign Hermes, as it would not be for the sages, but only for the gods, and says that the sovereign Hermes brought

⁷ See Cerri (1992) about the positive role of writing in the *Phaedrus*.

⁸ In this case the transmission of Hermias is a little different from Plato, without affecting interpretation (οὐδαμῶς· οὐδέ);).

⁹ Lucarini and Moreschini (2012: 266) mark this passage as corrupt.

¹⁰ See Hdt, IV, 95-96, PPorph. *VP*, 14; Iamblichus, *lamb. VP*, 173.

the art of writing to many, among other things (Herm. in *Phdr.* 253, 15–28 LM = [198–199] Couvreur; our translation).

<Ἀκοήν γ' ἔχω λέγειν 274c>

Ἐρωτήσαντος τοῦ Σωκράτους τὸν Φαῖδρον ὅτι <«οἶσθα» πῶς λέγων θεοῖς κεχαρισμένα πράξεις;> φησὶν ὅτι <«οὐδαμῶς»· εἰ δὲ σύ γ' οἶδας, εἰπέ.» Ὑπερταύτως ὁ φιλόσοφος ὅτι <«ἀκοήν ἔχω» εἰπεῖν·> εἴωθε γὰρ ὁ Σωκράτης τὰ ὑφ' ἑαυτοῦ γινόμενα πάνυ εὐγνωμόνως εἰς θεοὺς ἀναφέρειν ἢ εἰς ὅπαδους θεῶν ἄνδρας· καὶ γὰρ τοὺς θεοὺς ἄνδρας οὐκ ἀπηξίωσεν ἐν τῷ <Σοφιστῇ> θεοὺς καλέσαι· καὶ γὰρ οἱ σοφοὶ καὶ θεῖοι ἄνδρες θεοὶ εἰσιν ὡς πρὸς ἀνθρώπους· εἴωθεν οὖν θεοὶ ἀνδράσι πολλαίκις ἀνατιθέσθαι τὰ συγγράμματα ἑαυτοῦ· ἐν μὲν τῷ * <Φαῖδρω> τῷ Πυθαγόρᾳ*, ἐν δὲ τῷ <Χαρμίδῃ> Ζαμόλξιδι σοφῶ τι, ἐν δὲ τῷ <Τιμαίῳ> τὸν Ἀτλαντικὸν λόγον ἀνατίθησι 253.25 τοῖς Αἰγυπτίοις· καὶ ἐνταῦθα οὖν τὸ περὶ τῶν λόγων εὔρημα τῷ δεσπότῃ Ἐρμῇ ἀνατίθησιν, οὐκέτι εἰς σοφοὺς ἄνδρας, ἀλλὰ θεοὺς, καὶ φησὶν ὅτι ὁ δεσπότης Ἐρμῆς πρὸς πολλοῖς τοῖς ἄλλοις καὶ τὴν τῶν γραμμάτων τέχνην κατέδειξεν.

The relationship that Hermes establishes between the dialogue and Pythagoras is in the use of writing and in the relationship between the sages and the gods. Outside of this relationship, except for the final saying that “friends have all things in common” (*Phdr.* 279c), a maxim considered Pythagorean, and the content of the dialogue itself, which deals with the immortal nature of the soul and its cycles, there would be nothing effectively “Pythagorean” in the *Phaedrus*.¹¹ But Hermias remarks, in a comparison between sages, that Socrates and Pythagoras would have been wiser than others, since they did not avail themselves of writing and, by the same token, maintained an intimate relationship with the gods. Pythagoras, therefore, would be a philosopher of great importance in the scenario established in the *Phaedrus*.

Zamolxis, the Thracian physician and disciple of Pythagoras, is related in an analogous way to the *Charmides* dialogue, where the Thracian knew that the body should be healed with a holistic approach, without forgetting either its connection with the soul or the power of the *logos* as a necessary enchantment for healing (*Chrm.* 156d–157c; 158b–c). In the case of the *Timaeus*, Hermes uses the same analogy between those who used writing and those who did not, to highlight the Egyptians as bearers of records of past events, including those already completely forgotten even by the Greeks, especially the disappearance of Atlantis, an island of which there would be no record except in Egyptian priestly writings.

In Hermias there is a coalescence between Hermes and Theuth, as well as other authors of the Hellenistic period offer the same opinion, such as Plutarch, Cicero and Diodorus Siculus (Fowder 1993: 18–26; Bull 2018: 38–96; Domaradzki 2021: 371).

¹¹ See Couvreur (1901:199): “nihil de Pythagora in *Phaedro*”. And Lucarini and Moreschini (2012: 266): “In *Phaedro* nihil de Pythagora”.

The identification of Hermes with Theuth, the creator of writing and the disseminator deity of this technical resource, would be exclusively linked to the transmission of knowledge from the deities to men, at least in their application in the human sphere even if not in their communication with the gods:

<If we ourselves should find out 274c>

How would one need to write to please the gods, and <would we still concern ourselves> about men? He disdains the pleasing and conduct of all mankind toward the gods. That said, he then [disdains] many of those who wrote to amaze, or to be praised, or that they might be graced by some pleasure arising from the writings, or even by the memory of themselves that they would leave by doing so, but not desirous of pleasing the gods (Herm. *in Phdr.* 254, 1–7 LM; our translation).

σνε' <Εἰ δὲ τοῦθ' εὔρομεν αὐτοί 274c>

Πῶς, ἂν δέη θεοῖς ἀρέσκοντα γράφειν, <μέλοι ἂν ἡμῖν ἔτι> τῶν ἀνθρώπων; ὁ γὰρ τοῖς θεοῖς ἀρέσκων καὶ ἀνηγμένος πάσης τῆς ἀνθρωπίνης φύσεως καταφρονεῖ. Τοῦτο εἶπεν ἐπειδὴ οἱ πολλοὶ τῶν συγγραφέων ἴνα θαυμάζωνται, ἢ ἐπαιῶνται, ἢ ἴνα τισὶ χαρίζωνται τὰ πρὸς ἡδονὴν γράφοντες, ἢ ἴνα μνήμην ἑαυτῶν καταλιμπάνωσι ταῦτα ποιοῦσιν, οὐχὶ θεοῖς ἀρέσκειν βουλόμενοι.

In this passage, writing, although granted by a deity, in this case Hermes, would have no effective application in communication between men and gods, being effective only among humans. So that communication of men with the gods obviates the craft of writing, which is why sages like Socrates and Pythagoras are presented as non-writers, thus maintaining, once again, their special connection with the divine.¹²

The first mention of Hermes-Theuth is at the beginning of the book of Hermias, when in interpreting Plato's allegory he distinguishes between the visions of Hermes-Theuth and Thamous-Ammon (*in Phdr.* 8, 5–15). The second mention of Hermes bears the epithet of Trismegistus and refers to his prophetic capacity (*in Phdr.* 94, 5–10). The third mention is the predominant and divine capacity of the tripartite soul, as well as its symbolism, at which time Eros, Victory (Nike) and Hermes are designated as winged (*pterôtous* – *in Phdr.* 127, 25–26). The fourth mention of Hermes also bears the epithet of Trismegistus and precedes a quote from Pindar (*in Phdr.* 168, 14–19). The fifth mention of Hermes, perhaps the most important for our study, now towards the end of the book of Hermias, deals with the allegory between Theuth and Thamous, but oscillates between designating him as a god (*in Phdr.* 253, 15–22) and as a *daimon* (*in Phdr.* 255, 1–9).

¹² See Bernabé (1990, 2003), Casadio (1991) and Colli (1975) about orphic poetry and its relation to Pythagoreanism and Platonism.

Regarding the *daimon* Hermes, Hermias explains:

They worship the sovereign Hermes for the invention of speechmaking among the Egyptians as well. Everywhere, including in the *Timaeus*, [Plato] deifies the Egyptians as the most ancient, which is why neither the flood nor destruction by fire were unknown to the Egyptians, although they were unknown to other peoples. Therefore, these inventions were immortal for the Egyptians, which for the Greeks were brought by Palamedes or Prometheus, while the philosopher brings from Egypt that guardian of discourses, the *god* Hermes (Herm. in *Phdr.* 253, 15–22 LM; our translation).

Εἰς τὸν δεσπότην οὖν Ἑρμῆν ἀνατίθησι τὴν τῶν λόγων εὐρεσιν καὶ εἰς Αἰγυπτίους· πανταχοῦ γάρ, καὶ ἐν τῷ <Τιμαίῳ> δὲ, ἐκθειάζει τοὺς Αἰγυπτίους ὡς ἀρχαίους, διὰ τὸ μῆτε κατακλυσμῶ μῆτε ἐκπυρώσει ἀφανίζεσθαι τὴν Αἴγυπτον, τῶν ἄλλων πόλεων οὕτως ἀφανιζομένων· διὸ τὰ παρ' Αἰγυπτίους εὐρέματα ἀθανατώτερα ἔστι· καὶ ἅπερ οἱ Ἕλληνες εἰς Παλαμήδην ἢ Προμηθεᾶ ἀναφέρουσιν, ὁ φιλόσοφος εἰς Αἴγυπτον ἀναφέρει καὶ τὸν ἔφορον τῶν λόγων θεὸν Ἑρμῆν.

Although Hermias himself presents Hermes-Theuth as a god, his exposition immediately discerns Theuth's capacity as an intermediary (*mesothetes*, *metaxù* – in *Phdr.* 255, 4–6) so that he is also called “*daimon* Theuth”, seeking to justify the Plato's expression in 274c, in addition to his epithet Hermes: “Theuth therefore is called Hermes” (in *Phdr.* 255, 8).¹³

Sages and philosophers

In the next passage, in which Hermias will once again undertake to exalt the wisdom of Pythagoras, we will highlight the dichotomy between sages and philosophers. The dichotomy in the *Phaedrus* is marked by the difference between gods and men, an abyss in which, although there had been some transcendence, the designation of “sage” would only be appropriate for gods. For men, to the extent that it's possible, the best designation would be “philosopher” (friend of knowledge). Despite his proximity to the divine, Pythagoras does not distance himself from human knowledge.

Even having no mention of any philosopher in Plato's passage, Hermias extols Pythagoras as the first to reach extraordinary dignity:

“Say wise” exceeds human compass, but of all those who have been called wise in some science, Pythagoras was the first, since Pythagoras was the only one to reach the divine and to be called sage. So also, in the *Symposium* Socrates called Eros a sage, not a philosopher: “Among

¹³ See Pl. *Phlb.* 18b–d in which Theuth appears as the inventor of grammar.

the gods,” he says, “none is a philosopher.” So, who are the philosophers? Only those who seek wisdom (Herm. *in Phdr.* 264, 1–7 LM; our translation).¹⁴

Τὸ γὰρ <σοφὸν καλεῖν> ὑπερβαίνει τὰ ἀνθρώπινα μέτρα· πάντων δὲ τῶν πρὸ Πυθαγόρου καὶ περὶ τι ἐπιστημόνων σοφῶν καλουμένων, ὁ Πυθαγόρας ἐλθὼν τὸ θεῖον μόνον σοφὸν ἐκάλεσεν, ὡς ἐξαίρετον τὸ ὄνομα τῶ θεῶ ἀπονείμας, τοὺς δὲ ὀρεγομένους σοφίας φιλοσόφους ἐκάλεσεν. Οὕτως καὶ ἐν τῶ <Συμποσίῳ> σοφὸν ἐκάλεσε τὸν Ἔρωτα ὁ Σωκράτης, φιλόσοφον δὲ οὐ· <θεῶν> γὰρ, φησὶν, <οὐδεὶς φιλόσοφος·>> τίνες οὖν οἱ φιλόσοφοι; οἱ ὀρεγόμενοι τῆς σοφίας.

Hermias includes Pythagoras when commenting on Plato’s passage, because Pythagoras would have been the one who achieved this divine and extraordinary condition. To justify this interpretation, Hermias mentions the *Symposium* without much precision, since in that dialogue Eros will be interpreted by Diotima as an intermediary *daimon* whose nature would approach that of philosopher. Hermias offers a loose reading of the *Symposium* to exemplify what he intends, disregarding that Eros is defined as an intermediary *daimon* by Diotima, no longer as a god (*Smp.* 202d). However, setting aside this inaccuracy, it is important to note that his focus is on the fact that only gods can be sages. Except for Pythagoras – the only one to surpass the boundaries laid out for me – the most that men can become are philosophers.

Final thoughts

We highlight, in this brief journey, how Hermias characterizes Pythagoras as an unwritten philosopher, and the special connection of this condition with the deities and the Muses. The connection is only implicit in Plato in the dialogue *Phaedrus*, revealed mainly by the supposed affinity between Socrates and Pythagoras. However, the information coming from Hermias suggests a reflection of the unwritten doctrines. Hermias indicates an unwritten tradition not restricted to Pythagoreanism, creating a somewhat different picture, because from this scenario it is possible to consider Plato as a writer who evidently did not reject writing with the vehemence that the interpretation based on the unwritten doctrines sometimes suggests. However, Plato would have indicated elements of his philosophy that were not intended for the written medium, having combined, therefore, unwritten elements to his written philosophy, whose portrayal is apparently more credible.

The disciple navigates around the master, without condemning the writings, nor confusing them in their limited scope. What is learned through orality, as we have seen, does not lend itself to the fixity of writing, to the dead letters of writing, just as what is

¹⁴ See Pl. *Smp.* 204a1.

learned in books never reaches the special places that only oral transmission allows and provides. Writing is not able to accomplish imprinting upon the soul. In Hermias we see that Plato does not deny or dislike the use of writing, nor does he advocate any exclusivity of oral transmission, even though it is admittedly superior. There is, therefore, no strong opposition between orality and writing, but a combination of different spheres of language application.

Hermias makes the scenario less contentious between those who emphatically defended the unwritten doctrines as a fundamental interpretation of Platonism, even if such elements were never fully revealed. They are unwritten, and those who completely, categorically belittled them, diminish their relevance in interpreting Plato's written work.

Even if the dispute over the weight of the unwritten doctrines today has fewer repercussions than in the last decades, Hermias helps us to think of alternatives for the continuity of these assessments of the reception of Plato's written and unwritten work.

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Unwritten Doctrine of Pythagoras in Hermias of Alexandria

In Hermias' commentary on *Phaedrus* (*In Platonis Phaedrum Scholia*), it is possible to identify several direct references to the philosophers and pre-Socratic doctrines, including Pythagoras. We point out to three references to Pythagoras in Hermias: (1) Pythagoras is characterized as an unwritten philosopher, (2) there is a special connection with the divinities and Muses, and (3) there is a special connection with the *Phaedrus* dialogue, revealed by the affinity between Pythagoras and Socrates. We show how the explicit references to Pythagoras in Hermias constitute a certain method of interpreting Platonism: as a philosophy manifested in writing, but which, at the same time, values the unwritten tradition, represented especially by Pythagoras and Socrates. We also demonstrate how the references translated and examined here reveal the image of this Neoplatonic Pythagoras of Hermias, an image which is not necessarily in tune with the oldest doxography, and which permits the reevaluation of Plato's position as a philosopher who sought to combine unwritten doctrines with his explicit activity as a writer.

KEY WORDS

Hermias, unwritten philosophy, written philosophy, Pythagoreanism, Neoplatonism.

