PYTHAGORAS BYZANTINUS

8th Seminar

Monday 20 May, 2024

ABSTRACTS

The Pythagorean Harmony of the Spheres in Late Antiquity and Early Medieval Thought

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The theory of the Harmony of the Spheres has been part of the history of western thought for over two thousand years. Although Pythagoras is credited with the theory it first emerges in the writings of Plato and continued to be speculated upon in the later philosophical tradition. Among Christian authors it is sometimes dismissed while at other times it is discussed in relation to the Genesis story. For the Neoplatonists it formed part of musical theory, which in turn led it to be included in the quadrivium in western medieval universities. In Byzantium matters were somewhat different with not much being said about it until the renewed interest in harmonics in the Middle Byzantine period. The survey will end by looking briefly at the Jewish and early Muslim discussions of the theory and what it meant in those traditions.

Pythagoras the Byzantine Numerologist

JOEL KALVESMAKI

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Of the many prognostic techniques that circulated in Greek, one in particular shaped the way Byzantine readers imagined Pythagoras. The text in which it is exposed, which lacks a formal title, can be called *Pythagoras to Telauges* or *The Little Pythagorean Plinth*—the former because of a prefatory letter in which Pythagoras describes the technique and the latter because of the tabular apparatus that always accompanied the text. The technique involves taking the proper names of two people, summing the psephic value of the letters in each name, reducing each sum to a digit one through nine, then comparing the two numbers to reach a prediction as to who would defeat whom in combat. The text, relatively well known, has been published partially or completely seven times. None of these editions, however, have fully appreciated the text's presence in the manuscript tradition, or its complex reception in the Byzantine period.

In this seminar I argue that the text has four different parts (the letter, the plinth, situations, and analyses), the first two being of late antique origin and the last two of later Byzantine origin. I will provide an overview of the manuscript tradition (41 Greek manuscripts and translations into Syriac and Latin) and situate it in the context of late antique psephic techniques (i.e., gematria). I will test the tantalizing hypothesis by Harold Tarrant that the work should be credited to the first century savant Thrasyllus. And I will explore the third and fourth parts of the text, as well as the manuscript tradition, to develop some insight into the readers who made this Pythagoras *their* Pythagoras.