

Pythagoras' Previous Parents: Why Euphorbos?

In a parenthetical remark in one of the appendices to *Psyche*, Erwin Rohde raised the question why Pythagoras picked Euphorbos, of all people, for his Homeric ancestor¹): “(Warum gerade Euphorbos der Erkorene war? Dass er durch seinen Vater Panthus besonders nah mit Apollo zusammenhängt, ähnlich wie Pythagoras [eine wahre ψυχή Ἀπολλωνιακή. Vgl. auch Luc., *Gall.* 16] kann doch kaum [wie Goettling, *Opusc.* 210; Krische, *de soc. Pythag.* 67f. meinen] genügenden Anlass gegeben haben.)” A convincing solution was first proposed, again briefly and in passing, by P. Corsen², and argued more fully by Otto Skutsch³. Etymologically, just as Pythagoras is ‘the mouthpiece of the Pythian’ and his patronymic Mnesarchides ‘[the son of] the man who remembers his origin’, so Euphorbos is ‘he who eats the right food’, the perfect ancestor for someone with as many dietary taboos as Pythagoras⁴.

Although I find Skutsch’s etymological analysis entirely convincing as far as it goes, I believe that it can be taken one step further. Rohde had already mentioned Euphorbos’ father Panthos and his Apollonian connections, on which I have nothing new to contribute. What neither Rohde nor Corsen nor Skutsch mentions is the name of

¹ Homer is quoted from T. W. Allen (ed.), *Homeri Ilias* (Oxford, 2 vols., 1931), Eustathius from M. Van der Valk (ed.), *Eustathii archiepiscopi Thessalonicensis commentarii ad Homeri Iliadem pertinentes* (Leiden, 4 vols., 1971-87). References to ‘Janko’ are to R. Janko (ed.), *The Iliad: A Commentary, Volume IV, Books 13-16* (Cambridge, 1990).

² *Der Abaris des Heraklides Ponticus. Ein Beitrag zu der Geschichte der Pythagoraslegende*, RhM 67 (1912), 20-47, at 22: “. . . vollends unbegreiflich erscheint der Sprung von Aethalides auf Euphorbos, wenn nicht etwa das Etymon des Namens als des wohlgenährten die Veranlassung gegeben hat, den homerischen Helden, durch eine Ausdeutung im pythagoreischen Sinne, mit dem Philosophen zusammenzubringen”. (The reference is to Heraclides Ponticus’ version, in which the series of successive reincarnations runs from Aithalides the Argonaut through Euphorbos, Hermotimos and Pyrrhos the Delian fisherman to Pythagoras.)

³ *Note on Metempsychosis*, CPh 54 (1959), 114-16 = *Studia Enneana* (London 1968), 151-56.

⁴ Skutsch presumes that the claim is fictional, and goes on to doubt whether the name Mnesarchides is any more historical than the connection to Euphorbos. Given the philosopher’s Apollonian associations, we may well wonder whether ‘Pythagoras’ was an assumed name, as ‘Plato’ and ‘Theophrastus’ were thought to be, rather than a happy coincidence.

Euphorbos' mother, which is Φρόντις⁵). The appropriateness of this name needs no emphasis: is there a more blatantly philosophical in Homer? The difference in accentuation between Φρόντις and φροντίς would not have precluded identification: it is clear that the other Homeric instance of the name, Menelaos' steersman Φρόντις Ὀνητορίδης (*Od.* 3.279, 282), is a speaking name⁶). By making Euphorbos his previous self, Pythagoras makes himself a (second-hand) son of Thought, and that would not be possible with any other Homeric hero. Of course, the name Euphorbos is still probably the most important reason⁷).

⁵ Euphorbos, who is Πανθοίδης in *Il.* 16.808 and 17.70, 81, is killed trying to avenge Menelaos' killing of Hyperenor (14.516-19), whose parents are Panthoos and Phrontis (17.40). Both are thus younger brothers (or conceivably half-brothers) of Poulydamas.

⁶ In her note on *Odyssey* 3.282-3, S. West remarks that Φρόντις, unlike Ὀνήτωρ, "seems not to have been current as a personal name in real life" (A. Heubeck, S. West, and J. B. Hainsworth, *A Commentary on Homer's Odyssey*, I [Oxford 1988]). That would have made the occurrence of the name in the *Iliad* all the more striking. Since there is no apparent reason for the mother of Hyperenor and Euphorbos to have such an unusual name, it is most unlikely that the author of *Il.* 17.40 intended his Φρόντις as a speaking name, though it seems to have had something to say to Pythagoras.

⁷ Other connections are conceivable: the second of the similes used to describe Menelaos' killing of Euphorbos, a gruesome depiction of a lion slaughtering and devouring a heifer (*Il.* 17.61-67), might be enough to put a sensitive soul off meat-eating for more than one lifetime.