

## Compton's Encyclopedia

## Pythagoras

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Pythagoras, coloured woodcut from Gafurius, *Theorica Musicae*, Milan, 1492. *The Granger Collection, New York*

(580? BC-500? BC). The man who played a crucial role in formulating principles that influenced Plato and Aristotle was the Greek philosopher and mathematician Pythagoras. He founded the Pythagorean brotherhood, a group of his followers whose beliefs and ideas were rediscovered during the Renaissance and contributed to the development of mathematics and Western rational philosophy.

Pythagoras was born in about 580 BC on the island of Samos, in the Aegean Sea. It is said he spent his early years traveling widely in search of wisdom. He settled in Crotona, a Greek colony in southern Italy, about 530 BC.

A brotherhood of disciples soon gathered around him, inspired by his teachings. The group was strongly religious and devoted to reformation of political, moral, and social life. The order was influential in the region, but eventually its involvement in politics resulted in suppression of the brotherhood. Pythagoras was forced to retire and leave the area. He went to Metapontum, a Greek city in southern Italy. He died there in about 500 BC.

Because none of the writings of Pythagoras have survived, it is difficult to distinguish his teachings from those of his disciples. Among the basic tenets of the Pythagoreans are the beliefs that reality, at its deepest level, is mathematical in nature; that philosophy can be used for spiritual purification; that the soul can rise to union with the divine; and that certain symbols have a mystical significance. Pythagoras is generally credited with the theory of the functional significance of numbers in the objective world and in music. His followers are credited with the development of the Pythagorean theorem in geometry and the application of number relationships to music theory, acoustics, and astronomy.

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