

## Beans.

This thesis has already attempted an examination of the possible implications of the adoption of a strict vegetarian diet amongst communities in Graeco-Roman antiquity.<sup>1</sup> The principal proponents of a meat-free diet were the adherents of the Pythagorean school. The avoidance of meat was but one element of a dietary regimen that was conspicuous for its severe austerity. The diet represented not just a flight from meat: other foodstuffs were to be treated with extreme caution. One of the most curious of the Pythagorean dietary rules was the prohibition that was placed upon the broad bean.

Initially, the embargo upon one single food item may seem relatively insignificant. One may assert that the prohibition against the eating of meat would have had a direct impact upon the religious (and, by extension, the political and cultural) existence of the community. If one understands the term 'meat' to encompass both fish and fowl (although this thesis has previously warned against the problems of using the term 'meat' in such an indiscriminate way) as well as the flesh of land animals, be they domestic livestock or wild animals that were hunted, then a sizeable number of potential food items may fall within the boundaries of this imperative.<sup>2</sup> The elimination of meat from the diet could, at least theoretically, have resulted in a considerable reduction in the number of foods available to the populace. However, if, as this thesis has previously argued, meat would have been a relatively scarce commodity, usually unavailable to large sectors of the ancient Mediterranean population and, most probably, typically (although not exclusively) consumed within the context of religious sacrifice, its removal would not have borne significant implications for quotidian diet. By this statement is meant, of course, that a disavowal of meat eating may have given rise to all manner of other issues (social, religious, medical), but unless meat was eaten on a regular basis, and reasonably often, its infrequency in customary diet would perhaps mean that there would have been little difference between the vegetarian and the carnivore. If meat were unavailable, then the vast majority of the community would have been *de facto* vegetarian (for at least part of the year).

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<sup>1</sup> See pages 74-113.

<sup>2</sup> See pages 74-75.

The broad bean is a slightly different matter. Of course, it was not the only item of food that the Pythagoreans or other communities approached with some degree of suspicion. Dietary prohibitions were often enacted upon various fruits and fish, particularly those that were deemed to possess some religious significance. Here, one may think of the association between the pomegranate and Demeter,<sup>3</sup> or the sanctity with which the followers of the Syrian Atargatis viewed fish:

Ἰχθύας χρῆμα ἱρὸν νομίζουσιν καὶ οὐκοτε ἰχθύων ψαύουσιν.<sup>4</sup>

However, within societies in which access to meat is in some way restricted (be it through a paucity of natural or economic resources or through religious or cultural strictures), the predominant source of dietary protein would most likely be some form of legume or pulse. By this term is understood lentils, chickpeas and various *genera* of beans, including the broad bean.<sup>5</sup> As Delwiche notes:

The common recognition of the legume as the “poor man’s meat” emphasises a cultural preference for meat (or fish) as protein supplement to a cereal diet, a preference that is probably for both palatability and nutritional values.<sup>6</sup>

As has been previously noted, it is possible for such items to play a role within elite dietary patterns as well as those of the urban plebeians. The echoes of the *tragemata* of a classical Greek drinking party, attested by Athenaeus or the street ‘fast food’ of a Roman town are still to be found in today’s world.<sup>7</sup> In modern supermarkets and delicatessens, alongside potato crisps and various types of nuts, may be found dried and salted chickpeas and broad beans. It is evident that these items are attempting to fulfil a

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<sup>3</sup> Porph. *Abst.* 4.16.6; Parker (1983), 358.

<sup>4</sup> Lucian *Syr. D.* 14: ‘They believe fish to be sacred things and never touch fish’. See pages 163-164.

<sup>5</sup> Columella *Rust.* II. vii; Garnsey (1998), 243.

<sup>6</sup> Delwiche (1978), 566.

<sup>7</sup> Phaenias of Eresus fr. 43 Wehrli in *Ath. Deip.* 54f; 138a (citing *Pl. Resp.* 372c). Also as part of the Spartan *Kopides* feasts (56a); *Mart. Epig.* 1. 103. See page 59.

function that was perhaps not dissimilar to that of its ancient counterparts: a savoury delicacy designed to stimulate thirst and thus an ideal accompaniment to extended drinking sessions.<sup>8</sup> However, pulses would undoubtedly have formed a central ingredient of the diet of both rural and urban poor.<sup>9</sup> Garnsey notes:

Beans, along with other members of the class of dry legumes, or pulses, are rich in protein. This means they are a possible substitute for meat (and have thus earned the sobriquet ‘the poor man’s meat’), and a useful compliment to cereals, which have considerably less protein and are deficient in the key amino acid lysine. Legumes also supply other nutrients in which cereals are deficient, notably, calcium and Vitamin C.<sup>10</sup>

As this has been examined in a previous chapter, it is not the intention of this chapter to reconsider the subject of pulses at length here.<sup>11</sup> Within that examination of the role of pulses, there was a brief consideration of the use of broad beans and its occasional prohibition within certain communities. This chapter now proposes to consider this phenomenon in greater detail.

Several factors contribute to this particular taboo’s attraction as a subject of investigation. The obscurity of its derivation gave rise to a number of diverse and occasionally contradictory hypotheses concerning its nature and function amongst ancient authors. There was speculation as to why, how and from where it may have originated. The prevalence of this taboo was disputed, as were the different ways in which it may have manifested itself. It is partly this ambiguity that renders it an enticing topic for scrutiny. However, it is relatively recent studies in the field of medicine that may help to cast an entirely new light upon this particular restriction. It is this fresh dimension that may transform what initially appears to be a somewhat obscure, cranky

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<sup>8</sup> Crobylus (fr. 9) in Ath. *Deip.* 54e, for chickpeas eaten while the game of *kottabos* was played. Polemon (cf. fr. 86 Preller) in Ath. *Deip.* 56a. As part of the Spartan feast, these were eaten as dessert.

<sup>9</sup> Flint-Hamilton (1999), 374. Ath. *Deip.* 54a; Arcestratus (fr. 60 Olson-Sens) in *Deip.* 101d.

<sup>10</sup> Garnsey (1998), 219.

<sup>11</sup> See 58-62.

and small-scale dietary prohibition into a phenomenon that may have been literally a matter of life and death for a sizeable section of certain ancient communities.

Grmek, in his study of diseases in Greek communities in antiquity, helpfully offers a précis of the putative genesis of the practice of bean avoidance and the rationalisations that were proffered in its defence. Grmek quite rightly commences with a general statement of the formulation of the dictum: *κυάμων ἀπεχέσθαι*.<sup>12</sup> He also states that it

is included among the Pythagorean *súmbola*, or pithy teachings, whose esoteric meaning escaped the common run of mortal men.<sup>13</sup>

As has been previously observed, the Pythagorean biographical tradition is to some extent confused, habitually veering between pseudo-historicity and blatant myth making.<sup>14</sup> Whether one chooses to consider the figure of Pythagoras as an actual historical entity, whose doctrines have been distorted and embellished by subsequent thinkers, who perhaps may have manipulated this personage and transformed him into a mouthpiece for their own ideologies and concerns, or merely the personification of a number of pre-existing, or co-existent strands of thought, there is little doubt that the foundations of the interdiction are nebulous. Pythagoras may or may not have been the instigator of the practice, or could merely have inherited it. If the latter is the case, it could have been received in an uncorrupted form and then may have undergone some alterations. Grmek is convinced that it may be traced back much further into the past, owing to the obscurity of its genesis,

for a few generations after the death of Pythagoras, the express motivation and original justification for the tabu [sic] were totally lost.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Diog. Laert. *Pythag.* VIII. 23: ‘Abstain from beans’; Grmek (1983), 211. *κυάμων ἀπέχου*; Iambl. *VP* 109

<sup>13</sup> Grmek (1983), 211.

<sup>14</sup> See pages 95-96.

<sup>15</sup> Grmek (1983), 211.

The bean prohibition was frequently singled out as one of the typical emblems of identity of the ‘Pythagorean’, along with unmistakable physical characteristics: untrimmed nails and flowing, unruly locks. The aversion to beans became a significant element of the stock caricature of this philosophical school.<sup>16</sup> Lucian talks of the Pythagorean in two works.<sup>17</sup> He refers to a typical Pythagorean as ‘long-haired’ (κομήτην), educated in Egypt (Ἐν Αἰγύπτῳ παρὰ τοῖς ἐκεῖ σοφοῖσι), skilled in sorcery (γοητεῖαν) and as someone that refrains from eating all living things including beans (Ἐμψυχῆιον μὲν οὐδὲ ἔν σιτέομαι??τὰ δὲ ἄλλα πλὴν κυάμων).<sup>18</sup>

Herodotus recounts the Egyptian prohibition against eating beans.<sup>19</sup> Given the biographical tradition that Pythagoras spent a considerable period of time in Egypt and reputedly embarked upon a prolonged and intense study of Egyptian religious rites, some have supposed the bean regulation to have been transported to the Greek-speaking world by Pythagoras himself.<sup>20</sup> Given the paucity of verifiable data concerning his life, it is difficult to say whether this is true or not. It seems implausible. Gorman asserts that Egyptian sacred ritual was the source for the bean taboo. The tale seems somewhat apocryphal, although many have seen within it some grain of truth and thus feel that it may possess some authenticity. If this proscription did find its origins in Egypt (and Gorman seems to feel that, whilst such a practice may have been in place at the time Herodotus was writing, there is no evidence to support the supposition of it being so in Pharaonic times), it seems rather more probable that knowledge of such a dietary restriction and its subsequent dissemination beyond the shores of Egypt would have occurred through population migration or trade connections, rather than through the actions of one individual in the possession of nuggets of arcane wisdom. Also, one should not discount the possibility that a directive concerning bean usage may have existed over a geographically diverse area (perhaps even within the Greek world) at the same time, or even prior to, the chronological period of the Herodotean account.<sup>21</sup> For

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<sup>16</sup> Burkert (1972), 183.

<sup>17</sup> Lucian *Somn.*; *Vit. auct.*

<sup>18</sup> Lucian *Vit. auct.*. 1;3;2;6.

<sup>19</sup> Hdt. II 37; Plut. *Quaest. conv.* VIII.8.279; Gorman (1979), 22.

<sup>20</sup> Iambl. *VP* 19; Diog. Laert. *Pythag.* 3-4.

<sup>21</sup> For the possible influences of Orphism upon Pythagorean ideology, see Burkert (1972), 125-133. The

example, Pausanias relates the tale that the goddess Demeter presented the Pheneatians with a number of legumes, but specifically excluded the broad bean.<sup>22</sup> Hence, the broad bean was also one of the items of food that were regarded as unacceptable to those who desired to be inducted into the Eleusinian mysteries. This particular religious cult demanded of its prospective initiates a series of temporary fasts and abstinences:

The initiate at Eleusis must fast, avoid baths, abstain from domestic fowl (and the cock is especially named), as well as ἰχθύων καὶ κυάμων ροιᾶς τε καὶ μήλου, καὶ ἐπ' ἴσης μεμΐανται τό τε λεχοῦς ἄψασθαι καὶ τὸ θνησειδίωv.<sup>23</sup>

Burkert also cites examples of other initiatory restrictions for Greek mystery cults. They include dietary restrictions, the wearing (or avoidance) of particular items of clothing, and sexual requirements. In such instances, these restrictions appear to perform some form of purificatory function.<sup>24</sup>

It is extremely difficult to decide whether these prohibitions manifested themselves independently of each other, or whether there was, indeed, some form of cultural cross-contamination at play. Burkert considers the possibility of the widespread occurrence of cultic rituals that happened to share analogous characteristics:

It may be that in a few cases Pythagorean ritual was adopted in late times by various cults but in general the latter are independent of Pythagoreanism and older than it. Some taboos are attested from an earlier date, and a good many are widely spread folk tradition. Above all, the form of such authoritatively prescribed commandments and prohibitions, which are

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issue is far from clear-cut, as Burkert acknowledges: 'Scholars' conceptions of Pythagoreanism and of Orphism are inevitably as interdependent as the pans of a balance. A 'minimalist' attitude to the Orphic tradition rapidly raises the importance of Pythagoreanism'; 125.

<sup>22</sup> Paus. 8.15.3; Flint-Hamilton (1999), 379.

<sup>23</sup> Burkert (1972), 177; Porph. *Abst.* 4. 16: '[to abstain from] fish and beans and pomegranates and apples, and one who has contact with the marriage bed is equally polluted with those who have died'. Also Grmek (1983), 214. Similar restrictions were in place for another festival of Demeter, the Haloa; 358-363.

<sup>24</sup> Burkert (1972), 177-178.

not supposed to be understood but merely obeyed, is primeval; it is entwined in the very roots of religious ritual. In what one does and does not do is manifested the identity of the group, the membership of the members and the exclusion of outsiders. The more selective the society, the more careful are the “taboos”. Fasting, abstention from particular foods, and rules of sexual behaviour play an important role. It is of first importance that the “wise man” -the priest, the hierophant, the shaman-who claims a special position in the social organisation, gain and maintain, through a special ascetic regimen, the special powers that belong to him.<sup>25</sup>

If Burkert’s assertion is correct, the Pythagorean rules were not an innovation, but were of a comparable type to those already in place as a constituent of the rituals of bonding and cohesion that were evident in various mystery cults.<sup>26</sup> They were a codification of elements of a pre-existing folk tradition. Burkert seems to think that such practices supplied not only an instrument for binding together affiliates of the group and emphatically excluding non-members, but may have been utilised by the priestly hierarchy to enforce control and to strengthen the position of the leader(s) within the group dynamic. Perhaps Burkert is also implying that such stringent and precise formulations of behaviour encouraged dependency upon and allegiance to the group, rendering them unable, or unwilling, to function beyond the confines of the group. This is the sort of criticism levelled at modern ‘fringe’ religious sects, who are frequently accused of practising a form of psychological manipulation (the more pejorative term ‘brainwashing’ is used regularly). They are accused of isolating their members from the outside community, exploiting their vulnerability and denying them alternative sources of information, thus ensuring reliance upon the group. This may mean that the group comes to act as a form of substitute family, supplanting the biological one, or as a filter for all forms of information from the outside world. If this model has validity, then the bean prohibition, whether it was based upon fear, reverence or disgust for the legume, may be interpreted as a technique designed to strengthen systems of control and manipulation within the Pythagorean community, encouraging a sense of self-discipline

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<sup>25</sup> Burkert (1972), 178.

<sup>26</sup> See Burkert (1985), 276-304, in particular Eleusis; 285-290. Parker (1983); 358-363.

(perhaps giving rise to an ‘us versus them’ mentality), and marking out Pythagoras, or whoever the leader of the community may have been, as a special individual, worth of reverence and fealty.

At this juncture, it is perhaps worth considering the precise wording of the bean taboo as it has been transmitted to us. It is noticeable that, as cited by Aulus Gellius, Empedocles and Callimachus both seem to have used almost identical phrases for the maxim.<sup>27</sup> The fragment of Callimachus reads as follows:

Καὶ κυάμων ἄπο χεῖρας ἔχειν, ἀνιῶτος ἔδεστού,  
Κἀγώ, Πυθαγόρας ὡς ἐκέλευε, λέγω.<sup>28</sup>

Empedocles, named by Gellius as an adherent of Pythagoras (“qui disciplinas Pythagorae secutus est”), is quoted thus:

Δειλοί, πάνδειλοι, κυάμων ἄπο χεῖρας ἔχεσθαι.<sup>29</sup>

The phrase is striking: the stipulation from the phraseology appears to be specifically not to *touch* the beans. Although the Callimachean epithet acknowledges that beans were regarded as a foodstuff (although, at this stage, it is not obvious in what way they are ‘harmful’), the wording of the exhortation bears the implication that the principal objective of the taboo is the avoidance of contact between the legume and human skin. However, since it is also referred to as something that may be eaten, the assumption must be that the prohibition was intended to extend to its ingestion, unless there was some insinuated acceptance that bean consumption was permissible as long as the beans themselves were not touched. This seems, to say the least, somewhat improbable.

If one is prepared to concede that the restriction that was placed upon the bean was predominantly concerned with its ingestion rather than a mere tactile embargo, one must examine the possible reasons advanced for this kind of directive. Ancient sources

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<sup>27</sup> Gell. *NA*. IV xi, 2; 9.

<sup>28</sup> Fr. 128, Sch; Gell. *NA*. xi,2: ‘And withhold your hands from beans, a harmful food, I say, as Pythagoras ordered’.

<sup>29</sup> Fr. 141, Diehls; Gell. *NA* xi,9: ‘Wretches, utter wretches, withhold your hands from beans’.

generally tended to divide themselves into three camps concerning this issue. The first tended to regard the taboo against beans as a technique that sought to facilitate the achievement of a state of purity.<sup>30</sup> The next saw in the bean prohibition an allegorical message, a code designed to be tacitly understood to prevent some other form of behaviour.<sup>31</sup> The third opinion held the bean as a source of potential physiological and psychic disturbance.<sup>32</sup> As has been previously noted, the sheer number and diversity of posited explanations indicates the obscurity of the origins of the practice. It is often problematic to discern whether an author was seeking to genuinely discover the roots of the institution, or was, in fact, seeking to utilise the framework of the bean restriction in order to promote a different agenda.

Even the Pythagorean biographical tradition is divided upon the matter (as it is, unfortunately, in numerous other areas). Iamblichus, for instance, discussed some of the reasons that Pythagoreans advanced for the elimination of specified foods from their diet. They included foods that possessed unfortunate physical effects upon the body (flatulence, a distended and bloated stomach, drowsiness), and those that were deemed to be in some way ‘sacred’.<sup>33</sup> The Pythagorean school was also reported to have advocated abstention from the flesh of all living things. Iamblichus is less lucid about the bean prohibition:

καὶ “κυάμων ἀπέχου” διὰ πολλὰς ἱεράς τε καὶ φυσικὰς καὶ εἰς  
τὴν ψυχὴν ἀνηκούσας αἰτίας.<sup>34</sup>

The issue is further confused by Iamblichus’ account of the pursuit of the Pythagoreans by the soldiers of Eurymenes. The former refused to traverse a field of beans lest they transgress the prohibition. Instead, they chose to stand and engage in combat with their pursuers, preferring to sacrifice their lives rather than break the taboo. In this context,

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<sup>30</sup> See page 123, note 38.

<sup>31</sup> See page 124, note 39 for the Aristotelian explanation which attempts an explanation of the taboo in allegorical terms.

<sup>32</sup> Iambl. *VP* 24.106; Diog. Laert. *Pythag.* VIII.24; Cic. *Div.* I. xxix. 62-63

<sup>33</sup> Iambl. *VP* 24.106. See Clark (1989), 24 ,note 61.

<sup>34</sup> Iambl. *VP* 24.109: ‘And to ‘abstain from beans’ for many reasons, both sacred and physical, and reasons pertaining to the soul’.

Iamblichus chooses to use the word *θιγγάνειν*, ‘to touch’, rather than vocabulary that is associated with eating.<sup>35</sup> It is entirely possible that the employment of this particular verb is, in this case, intended to be a precise one, and is intended to signify one particular action, that is the process of physically touching.<sup>36</sup> As was stated earlier, there exists some ambiguity as to whether the bean embargo was linked to a taboo of eating or of touching. The account (which, of course, may be entirely fictional, or, at least, only contain some factual elements) may indicate that it was an amalgamation of the two; a potential suggestion that the bean was a forbidden item under every circumstance and should be avoided at all costs.

Diogenes Laertius offers up two possible justifications. His first rationalisation is based upon the physical effects of the bean upon the body:

τῶν δὲ κυάμων ἀπέχεσθαι διὰ τὸ πνευματώδεις ὄντας μάλιστα  
μετέχειν τοῦ ψυχικοῦ· καὶ ἄλλως κοσμιώτερας ἀπεργάζεσθαι  
τὰς γαστέρας, μὴ παραληφθέντας. καὶ διὰ τοῦτο καὶ τὰς  
καθ’ ὕπνου φαντασίας λείας καὶ ἀταράχους ἀποτελεῖν.<sup>37</sup>

A little later, the rationale becomes one of ritual purity. Beans are merely one of a selection of foodstuffs that are rendered taboo by the requirement to achieve a state of purity.<sup>38</sup>

Apparently, he is undecided as to which is the primary explanation. Seeking to achieve clarification, he invokes Aristotle, citing the latter’s numerous reasons for the prohibition. However, far from illuminating the problem, they serve only to muddy the water. They are worth repeating here:

φησὶ δ’ Ἀριστοτέλης ἐν τῷ Περὶ τῶν Πυθαγορείων παραγγέλλειν

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<sup>35</sup> Iambl. *VP* 31.191.

<sup>36</sup> Admittedly, it is difficult to conceive of a situation whereby those pursued by hostile forces would be concerned with eating. This is possibly why no ingestatory verb is used in this instance.

<sup>37</sup> Diog. Laert. *Pythag.* VIII.24: ‘To abstain from beans because, being flatulent, they partake most of the breath of life; and besides, it is more regular for the stomach to keep away from them. And because of this, it will result in our dreams in sleep being smooth and undisturbed’.

<sup>38</sup> Diog. Laert. *Pythag.* VIII.33-34.

αὐτὸν ἀπέχεσθαι τῶν κυάμων ἦτοι ὅτι αἰδοίσις εἰσὶν ὅμοιοι ἢ ὅτι  
 Ἄδου πύλαις. \*\* ἀγόνατον γὰρ μόνον ἢ ὅτι φθείρει ἢ ὅτι τῆ τοῦ  
 ὄλου φύσει ὅμοιον ἢ ὅτι ὀλιγαρχικόν κληροῦνται γούν αὐτοῖς.<sup>39</sup>

It appears that Aristotle had no clear notion as to why this dietary rule exists.<sup>40</sup> He was either offering up his own theories upon the matter, feeling that they were, at least, plausible, or he was collating material from other sources. These Aristotelian hypotheses attempt to cover all areas, and do not sit particularly well together. They are certainly ambiguous: in what way are the beans harmful, and how are they like the nature of the whole? The final linking of beans with oligarchy seems to indicate that Aristotle believed that the bean taboo was, for the Pythagoreans, a symbolic rejection of conventional political systems (the beans being used in elections). Aristotle seems to have been unsure whether the hostility was directed towards the bean *per se*, or at some other entity, of which the bean was a symbolic embodiment.<sup>41</sup>

Plutarch seems to have inclined towards the conjecture that the Pythagorean imperative originated from Egyptian religious customs.<sup>42</sup> It seems that Plutarch was of the opinion that there may have existed other taboos concerning the bean, beyond its Egyptian influence, as elsewhere he asserts that abstention from legumes is a generic characteristic of all those occupying holy office.<sup>43</sup> Pythagoras himself may have learned of the bean prohibition from the Egyptian context, but it is not obvious that Plutarch believed that it was the source of knowledge for the phenomenon as a whole. Cicero, however, was of the opinion that the custom was intimately linked with the physical effects of the bean: flatulence has a disruptive effect upon human sleep patterns and may be the source of neurological disturbance and hence unusual dreams. In this, he is in

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<sup>39</sup> Diog. Laert. *Pythag.* VIII.34: ‘According to Aristotle, in his *On the Pythagoreans*, he recommended abstinence from beans, either because they were like the genitals, or like the gates of Hades...or alone are barren or because they are harmful, or that they are like the nature of the whole or they are oligarchic, as they are used to cast lots’.

<sup>40</sup> See Burkert (1972), 183-184.

<sup>41</sup> For Aristotle on Pythagoreanism, see Philip (1963a), 251-265; (1963b), 185-198.

<sup>42</sup> Plut. *Quaest. conv.* VIII.8.729.

<sup>43</sup> Plut. *Quaest. Rom.* 95.

accord with Diogenes Laertius.<sup>44</sup> As Kingsley notes:

Cicero mentions flatulence specifically because of its detrimental effect on ‘tranquillity of mind’-an important notion in Pythagoreanism, divination, and the mysteries-and he mentions it in the middle of a discussion about impediments to obtaining true and divinatory dreams: precisely the kind of dreams which were held by Pythagoreans to bring them into contact with the world of the dead.<sup>45</sup>

In all probability, it would be a mistake to suppose that the prohibition placed upon beans was a phenomenon that manifested itself as uniform in character across the territories around the ancient Mediterranean. As Garnsey indicates, attitudes to beans were frequently not homogeneous:

The question arises whether suspicion of the bean affected the dietary behaviour of ordinary people, or only a handful of ‘sensitive spirits’ in philosophical or religious circles. The matter is more complicated than this, since much of the ‘publicity’ surrounding the bean was positive. Even philosophers-and gods-were not unanimously hostile. Pythagoras shunned beans, but Epicurus in a food shortage distributed them among his friends. Excluded from the festivals of Demeter, beans were nonetheless accepted by Apollo in the form of the sacred offering of bean soup at the feast of the Pyanepsia at Athens.<sup>46</sup>

The Latin agricultural authors, such as the elder Cato, Varro and Columella all related techniques of planting and harvesting the bean, which initially seems to imply that a bean taboo was not prevalent within Latin culture.<sup>47</sup> Galen, whilst acknowledging the flatulent properties of the bean, nonetheless praised it as a highly nutritious and versatile

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<sup>44</sup> Cic. *Div.* I. xxix. 62-63; Diog. Laert. *VP* VIII.24.

<sup>45</sup> Kingsley (1995), 285.

<sup>46</sup> Garnsey (1998), 215.

<sup>47</sup> Cato *Agr.* XXXV.1; XXXVI.2; Varro *Rust.* XXXII.2; Columella *Rust.* II.vii.

foodstuff, extensively used.<sup>48</sup> He notes that it was a regular feature of the diet of gladiators.<sup>49</sup> The reason that the broad bean was fed to gladiators is because Galen viewed it as having a beneficial effect upon their training regime, rather than regarding it as lowly foodstuff suitable only for the mouths of the most base and degraded elements of society (although its ubiquity and its cheapness must have played a part). It is not unequivocal from the text whether Galen was saying that gladiators in general were fed upon this legume, or whether he was referring to the diet of the gladiators that he would have personally encountered in his capacity as physician at the gladiatorial schools of his native Pergamum. Garnsey is of the opinion that the latter was the case.<sup>50</sup> He also claimed that bean flour was supposed to have acted as an exfoliant and was deemed to have been effective in removing dirt from the skin.<sup>51</sup> He fails to mention any form of prohibition or taboo concerning the bean, and since he would hardly have been unaware of the custom, evidently felt it was of little importance or relevance (certainly from a medical viewpoint).

The elder Pliny was even more unstinting in his praise of this legume, and claimed it was used in the making of bread.<sup>52</sup> It would only be fair to note that the Plinian reference to the use of bean meal (*lomentum*) in bread making to increase the weight of the bread carries the inference that its utilisation in this instance is not for its nutritional value or its taste, but as a means of subterfuge directed against the ancient consumer. Intriguingly, an alternative translation of *lomentum* may read as 'cosmetic skin wash'. Although this reading is not applicable in the context of the Plinian text, such a rendering would connect with Galen's observation about the exfoliant properties of this legume. In Pliny's view, the bean is an exceptionally versatile legume:

fabae multiplex usus omni quadripedum generi, praecipue homini.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>48</sup> Dioscor. *De mat. med.* 2.127, who also commented upon its impact upon the dreaming process.

<sup>49</sup> Gal. *De al. fac.* 6.529 K.

<sup>50</sup> Garnsey (1998), 218.

<sup>51</sup> Gal. *De al. fac.* 6.530 K. For beans and pulses employed as beauty aids in antiquity, see Green (1979), 381-392. This use of the bean tends to reinforce the interpretation of the bean taboo as an ingestatory proscription rather than a tactile one.

<sup>52</sup> Plin. *HN XVIII*.xxx.117.

<sup>53</sup> Plin. *HN XVIII*.xxx.117.

He did address himself to the issue of the Pythagorean rule. He associated it with potential somatic disorders, although he did not associate the bean with disturbed and distorted nocturnal reveries but with insomnia (although it is of course possible that he intended to indicate the same phenomenon):

praevalens pulmentarii cibo set hebetare sensus existimata, insomnia  
quoque facere, ob haec Pythagoricae sententiae damnata.<sup>54</sup>

As with Aristotle, Pliny suggested a variety of other possible reasons for the bean taboo, including the linking of beans with religious custom and its qualities as a talisman that could bring good fortune in the auction place.<sup>55</sup> These Plinian observations are meaningful, as they indicate the cultural significance of the bean in areas that did not relate directly to Pythagorean doctrine. Reverence for, or avoidance of, the bean was present not just within the confines of an esoteric doctrine, but within the annals of folkloric wisdom and popular superstition. Kingsley appears to incline towards the explanation of the bean taboo in terms of the potential effects it may exert upon the process of dreaming.<sup>56</sup> He asserts that

what has not been given the full emphasis it deserves is the fact that the closest similarities of all are between the Pythagorean taboos and the requirements laid down for people using dream oracles...In fact the surviving evidence leaves us in little doubt about how important dreams and dream-divination were considered to be by early Pythagoreans as means of providing them with knowledge, teaching and guidance. What is more, our sources specifically draw attention to the link between the Pythagorean food taboos and this concern with the divinatory power of dreams.<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Plin. *HN* XVIII.xxx.118.

<sup>55</sup> Plin. *HN* XVIII.xxx.119.

<sup>56</sup> Kingsley (1995), 283-286.

<sup>57</sup> Kingsley (1995), 283-284. See also 284, note 22 for ancient sources.

Although the opinions upon the matter are varied, they all seem to largely concur that there existed certain reservations about the broad bean, both at the general level of folk wisdom and within the more restricted environs of quasi-mystical religious and political groups. The most notable of these groups was deemed to be the Pythagoreans. However, there were those who disputed this, and in fact claimed quite the opposite. Aulus Gellius, whilst duly recording the opinions of Callimachus and Empedocles on the matter, goes on to assert that Aristoxenus, a pupil of Aristotle, believed that, far from being excluded from the diet, beans were, in fact, a particular favourite of Pythagoras:

Sed Aristoxenus musicus, vir litterarum veterum diligentissimus,  
Aristoteli philosophi auditor, in libro quem *De Pythagora* reliquit, nullo  
saepius legumento Pythagoram dicit usum quam fabis, quoniam is cibus  
et subduceret sensim alvum et levigaret. Verba ipsa Aristoxeni subscripsi:  
Πυθαγόρας δὲ τῶν ὀσπρίων μάλιστα τὸν κύαμον ἐδοκίμασεν· λειαιτικόν  
τε γὰρ εἶναι καὶ διαχωρητικόν· διὸ καὶ μάλιστα κέχρηται αὐτῷ.<sup>58</sup>

The view of Aristoxenus ran very much against the main current of thought regarding this matter (at least in view of the extant material). Some doubt has been cast on this Aristoxenian explanation.<sup>59</sup> Burkert notes that

the assertion that Pythagoras was fonder of beans than anything else can  
only be veiled polemic against the taboo on beans attested by Aristotle  
and Heraclides.<sup>60</sup>

As well as this, Gellius proceeds to hypothesise that the misunderstanding is one that

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<sup>58</sup> Gell. *NA*. IV.ii.4-5: ‘But Aristoxenus the musician, a man very learned in antique literature, a pupil of the philosopher Aristotle, in the book *On Pythagoras*, which he bequeathed to us, says that Pythagoras used no legume more often than the bean, since this food gradually loosened and purged the bowels. I write down Aristoxenus’ own words: ‘Pythagoras, of the vegetables, very much approved of the bean, thinking it to be softening and loosening, on which account he frequently used it’.

<sup>59</sup> I am grateful to Dr Peter van Nuffelen for pointing out the possible anti-Pythagorean stance of Aristoxenus. See Burkert (1972), 106-108 for Aristoxenus on Pythagoreanism.

was founded upon etymology. He maintained that people have misinterpreted the Empedoclean line, and that κυάμος was in fact a synonym for testicles (the association is derived from the verb κυεῖν, ‘to conceive’, or, ‘to impregnate’). With this linguistic interpretation, the exhortation is to sexual rather than dietary abstinence. What is particularly intriguing about this etymological explanation is that it finds echoes in Plutarch’s discussion of the same subject. His concern was with those who avoided not just beans, but also other legumes. He asserted that there were those who abstained from vetch and chickpeas because their names possessed supernatural connotations: the names of these legumes suggested the subterranean realms of Hades:

τὸν δὲ λάθυρον καὶ τὸν ἐρέβινθον ὡς παρωνύμους τοῦ ἐρέβους  
καὶ τῆς λήθης;<sup>61</sup>

This would seem to indicate that it was not just the bean that was linked with death in the ancient consciousness. Plutarch’s comments also exert fascination because they attempt to combine the flatulent qualities of beans with sexual desire:

Ἡ ὅτι καὶ πρὸς συνουσίαν παρορμᾷ διὰ τὸ φυσῶδες καὶ  
πνευματικόν;<sup>62</sup>

Such a view of this taboo tends to attest that the Pythagorean precepts should be understood as symbolic and allegorical exhortations. Burkert notes that although the Aristotelian term for the behavioural rule was ἄκουσμα, the Pythagorean tradition tended to refer to it as σύμβολον

which carries with it the suggestion of a ‘symbolic’ interpretation.<sup>63</sup>

This may indicate that the rules were not to be understood literally, but were designed

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<sup>60</sup> Burkert (1972), 107.

<sup>61</sup> Plut. *Quaest. Rom.* 95: ‘Is it because vetch and chickpeas are but a small change in word from Erebus and Lethe?’.

<sup>62</sup> Plut. *Quaest. Rom.* 95: ‘Is it because their windy nature urges one on to intercourse?’.

<sup>63</sup> Burkert (1972), 176.

to be viewed through an allegorical prism. Gellius' interpretation of Empedocles seems now perhaps rather more compelling. Burkert also considers that the term has other connotations:

The word is not a late addition, however, but carries another implication as well, prior to any "symbolic" exegesis. In the realm of mystery religion, σύμβολα are "passwords"-specified formulas, sayings, ἐπωδαί, which are given the initiate and which provide him assurance that by his fellows, and especially by the gods, his new, special status will be recognised.<sup>64</sup>

Let us ponder, for a moment, the implications of Burkert's assertions, as they may prove useful in our reflections upon the construction and maintenance of personal and group identity. On one hand, Burkert views Pythagorean precepts not as literal commands, but as carefully coded instructions that point to truths that are only accessible to those who have been taught how to decode them. The comprehension of these truths relies on a shared consensus of meaning within the participatory group. Presumably, these Pythagorean stratagems aimed to conceal this wisdom from outsiders. Such an interpretation would render the Pythagorean σύμβολα as a technique for operating systems of inclusion and exclusion. Dicta that may appear anomalous and arbitrary to outsiders assume cogent meanings for initiates. This leads us to Burkert's second point: that these directives for behaviour were analogous to the rituals undertaken by initiates into mystery cults. Secret rituals, insignia, signs and veiled esoteric wisdom serve to differentiate the cult member from the outsider. The rules of cult membership would have required behaviour and ideologies that would have accentuated both the internal cohesion of the group and its marked differentiation from outside society. The ridicule heaped upon the broad bean prohibition was inevitably linked in the popular imagination with Pythagoras and those who professed adherence to his doctrines. Mockery may not have been the desired reaction, but it did serve to act as a label of demarcation that clearly delineated a specific socio-religious group. Philip's feelings about the matter are unequivocal:

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<sup>64</sup> Burkert (1972), 176.

The conclusion is inescapable that the *symbola* are not Pythagorean in origin but were adopted and systematised by them as congenial and appropriate to their way of life.<sup>65</sup>

The veto on the broad bean was but one way in which the Pythagoreans made explicit their rejection of certain cultural norms. It placed a ubiquitous and inexpensive foodstuff that must have served as a useful dietary alternative to meat for a substantial section of Mediterranean populations into the category of a taboo food: a legume with unpleasant and supernatural connotations. The Pythagoreans saw it as a potential vessel for the souls of the dead, and as a substance akin to human flesh:

According to Porphyry, the Pythagoreans taught that humans and beans sprang from the same original matter. Broad beans in flower, he declares, if they are closed up for some time in a terracotta vase and kept moist, can be transformed into the head of a child or female genitals.<sup>66</sup>

Pliny repeated this assertion that beans acted as a repository for the souls of the dead:

aut ut alii tradidere, quoniam mortuorum animae in ea, qua de causa parentando utique adsumitur.<sup>67</sup>

He proceeds to describe this as one of the reasons why certain priests (at least according to Varro) avoided beans. It is possible here that Varro meant in particular the priest of Jupiter, the *flamen dialis*. Pliny makes an indeterminate reference to *flamen* but fails to indicate the particular deity to which the priestly office was attached.<sup>68</sup> Priests in general may have been obliged to avoid beans, but this high priesthood of Jupiter was subject to

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<sup>65</sup> Philip (1966), 137.

<sup>66</sup> Grmek (1983), 218; Porph. *VP* 44.

<sup>67</sup> Plin. *HN* XVIII.xxx.118.9: ‘or, as others have recounted, because the souls of the dead are in it [the bean], it is for this reason they are especially used in the sacrifices to one’s dead parents’.

<sup>68</sup> Plin. *HN* XVII.xxx.119.

a series of stringent behavioural rules, including avoidance of yeast and raw meat.<sup>69</sup> He was also prohibited from contact with the bean.<sup>70</sup> Clearly, an anxiety (or perhaps one should use the word ‘respect’) existed towards the bean beyond the strictures of the Pythagoreans. Pliny mentions it as having special religious properties.<sup>71</sup> The bean played an important part in the Roman festival of Lemuria, in this context again being linked with the dead (in this case, ancestral spirits).<sup>72</sup> The ritual involved the throwing of beans, which are collected by an unseen ghost. It was meant to redeem the family. It is unclear whether the beans in this case were broad beans. Ovid’s reference to them is that they were black in colour. This seems to indicate that they were of a different type:

cumque manus puras fontana perluit unda,  
vertitur et nigras accipit ante fabas,  
aversusque iacit, sed dum iacit, ‘haec ego mitto,  
his’ inquit ‘redimo meque meosque fabis’.  
hoc novies dicit nec respicit: umbra putatur  
colligere et nullo terga vidente sequi.<sup>73</sup>

At this point, let us return to the reasons advanced for the bean prohibition by Aristotle. One of the more perplexing explanations proffered was that beans were in some way connected with the oligarchic political system. Gorman explains:

The laws and structures of the Pythagorean society were never applied to the government of a city-state in Italy or elsewhere for Pythagoras probably knew its limited applications. Hence only a small number of the society’s members actually practised communism. This Pythagorean

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<sup>69</sup> Plut. *Quaest. Rom.* 109-111.

<sup>70</sup> Gell. *NA.* X.xv.12.

<sup>71</sup> Plin. *HN* XVIII.xxx.119.

<sup>72</sup> Ov. *Fast.* V.435-440.

<sup>73</sup> Ov. *Fast.* V.435-440: ‘After washing his hands in spring water, he turns and first taking some black beans, turning away he throws them, and while throwing them he says : ‘I throw these beans and by doing so I redeem myself and what belongs to me’. He says this nine times without looking back; the ghost is those who supposed to have collected them , and follow from behind, unseen’.

elite influenced events by their example, but did not form a pressure

group within the body politic. It is against all the principles of Pythagoras to assert that the society formed an aristocratic clique which dictated to the city. He himself had fled such a tyranny on Samos. Such an oligarchy in Croton would have been condemned by Pythagoras who did not like beans because, amongst other things, they were used to count votes in oligarchic governments.<sup>74</sup>

Gorman presumes far too much, although it is an intriguing proposition. Gorman is on unsound ground when he claims to know precisely what Pythagoras would or would not have condemned. It is not entirely apparent that, if such a thing as a Pythagorean community ever existed, it moulded itself around a structure that was communist in character. If Pythagoras (or another individual) was regarded as the leader or figurehead, this at least assumes a basic hierarchical composition. Gorman assumes that the community was not aristocratic in character, but the formation of a closed (at least to some) community implies if not a hierarchy of birth, at least a value judgement that not everyone possessed the necessary qualities to join. In this respect, one may perhaps detect a strain of elitism. It is possible that the small (at least in relative terms) community was somehow erecting barricades to protect itself from contamination from the 'less enlightened' mass of mainstream society. However, in the light of the theory that Pythagorean precepts may perhaps be viewed as allegorical statements, the equation of bean eating with the political process makes some sort of sense. Perhaps it was not one particular constitutional system to which the Pythagorean school objected, but to political activity *per se*. If this interpretation has validity, one may speculate that the exhortation is not just to reject political activity, but also to renounce all the commitments and responsibilities that participation in politics implied: the rejection of a full and active involvement in the social and religious life of the city. Just as a refusal to eat meat would have alienated the individual (and group) from civic religious existence, so a refusal to involve oneself in politics further emphasised a separation from the mainstream.

It could be argued that one of the principal functions of food prohibitions was to

simplify diet, eliminating those elements that could be regarded as superfluous to survival. Diogenes Laertius recounts the following:

καὶ τότε μὲν ἦν τὸ πρόσχημα· τὸ δ' ἀληθὲς τῶν ἐμψύχων ἀπηγόρευεν  
ἄπτεσθαι συνασκῶν καὶ συνεθίζων εἰς εὐκολίαν βίου τοὺς ἀνθρώπους,  
ὥστε εὐπορίστους αὐτοῖς εἶναι τὰς τροφάς, ἄπυρα προσφερομένοις  
καὶ λιτὸν ὕδωρ πίνουσιν· ἐντεῦθεν γὰρ καὶ σώματος ὑγίειαν καὶ  
ψυχῆς ὀξύτητα περιγίνεσθαι.<sup>75</sup>

Foods that are viewed as somehow ‘luxurious’ may be discarded as irrelevant to existence for the individual or community committed to a spiritual existence.<sup>76</sup> Learning to exist on the most basic of foods could be interpreted as an act of self-discipline and a rejection of the perceived frivolities of corporeal existence. It could also be seen as a stratagem of survival, enabling one to exist on the simplest of foodstuffs, without the desire for anything more elaborate. However, this surely cannot apply to the broad bean. Its ubiquity and lowly status hardly qualified it as a sybaritic delicacy. Rejection of the broad bean cannot have implied a rejection of luxury. If anything, it seems to demonstrate a spurning of the food of the penurious peasantry. Those who may have viewed the Pythagorean community as some form of hermetically sealed patrician clique would surely have had their worst fears confirmed by the rejection of a staple food of the impoverished majority.

It seems rather too simplistic to dismiss the bean precept as a marker of social identity that was chosen somewhat arbitrarily. It may have been used as a way of forging and maintaining social cohesion; a pivot around which to stabilise the group identity in the face of a hostile or uncomprehending wider world. Yet this may be only half of the story. The evidence points to greater symbolic weight attached to the broad bean by both

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<sup>74</sup> Gorman (1979), 131.

<sup>75</sup> Diog. Laert. *Pythag.* VIII.13: ‘but this was the pretext [eating animals was forbidden because, like humans, they have a soul]; but the real reason for forbidding animal diet was to train men and make them accustomed to a simple life, so they could live on easily procured foods, setting the table with raw foods and drinking plain water, for from this comes a healthy body and a sharp mind’.

<sup>76</sup> Wilkins and Hill (2006), 195; 204-207 for advocates of dietary restriction for the philosopher: for example, Musonius Rufus, Seneca, Plato.

Greeks and Romans (and other cultures, such as the Egyptians). The religious and cultural baggage surrounding this legume appears to have been less apparent within Latin culture. Perhaps this is because we possess Latin texts that tended to assess the agricultural and nutritional value of the bean, rather than focusing upon its symbolic resonances. It may have been a Roman rejection of Greek practices, although this is unlikely. Clearly there existed a reverence for the potential supernatural qualities of the bean in Latin culture. The preponderance of material concerning the bean taboo in Greek texts may simply be an historical accident concerning the survival of texts. However it is not impossible that the imbalance between the two cultures concerning this particular legume may locate its foundation in the manner in which certain sections of ancient populations may have physically reacted to the broad bean.

What both cultures appear to have shared was a sentiment that linked the bean with the souls of the dead. One of the reasons advanced by Plutarch (he offers up several) is that a bean prohibition may have been intimately linked with their use in sepulchral ritual:

Ἡ μᾶλλον ὅτι δεῖ πρὸς τὰ περίδειπνα καὶ τὰς προκλήσεις  
τῶν νεκρῶν μάλιστα χρῶνται τοῖς ὀσπρίοις;<sup>77</sup>

The elder Pliny notes a similar attitude:

Varro et ob haec flaminem ea non vesci tradit et quoniam in flore eius  
litterae lugubres reperiantur.<sup>78</sup>

It is entirely possible that the broad bean had another connection with death. So far, the interpretation has been that beans either possessed a symbolic link with the process of death, or that the bean literally contained the souls of the dead (the Pythagorean belief in *metempsychosis*, the transmigration of souls). If the bean potentially contained life, then

<sup>77</sup> Plut. *Quaest. Rom.* 95: ‘Or is it that pulses are used particularly for funeral feasts and the invocation of the dead?’.

<sup>78</sup> Plin. *HN XVIII.xxx.119*: ‘Varro relates that it is both for this reason that the priest does not eat it and because in its flower are discovered letters of mourning’.

consuming it was as much a transgression for Pythagoreans as the ingestion of animal flesh. It may have, taken to its logical extreme, been assumed to have been the equivalent of cannibalism. The bean was clearly held to possess a supernatural link with death and decay, and this ensured that it was treated with reverence and respect, or fearfully avoided (at least by some).

There may be another explanation for the association between the broad bean and death: the link may well have been a causal one. This suggestion is not as outrageous as it first appears. Legumes are not entirely innocuous: they are known to contain a number of toxins.<sup>79</sup> As Delwiche notes:

These constitute a long roster, including antitryptic factors, hemagglutinins, goiterrogens, cyanogenic glycosides, estrogenic factors, toxic amino acids, vitamin antagonists, and others.<sup>80</sup>

To a certain extent, the dangers from these toxic elements may be minimised or even eliminated by certain preparatory processes, such as soaking or boiling.<sup>81</sup> It would seem likely, given the ubiquity and popularity of the broad bean in antiquity, that such stratagems were well-known and had probably been passed down through the generations.

Some legumes may have unpleasant, occasionally lethal side effects. Neolathyrism, which may result in severe paralysis, is a risk factor in vetch consumption.<sup>82</sup> Ingestion of the broad bean may give rise to the medical condition known as favism in certain sections of the population:

Favism is a haemolytic anaemia, resulting from ingestion of broad beans (*vicia faba*) by susceptible individuals, is also important in some areas and with some ethnic groups. Susceptibility is apparently genetically determined

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<sup>79</sup> Flint-Hamilton (1999), 374; Garnsey (1999), 219; Grmek (1983), 239; Parker (1983), 365.

<sup>80</sup> Delwiche (1978), 566.

<sup>81</sup> Garnsey (1999), 220.

<sup>82</sup> Flint-Hamilton (1999), 374; Garnsey (1999), 219; Grmek (1983), 239; Parker (1983), 365.

at least in part.<sup>83</sup>

Garnsey elaborates upon this:

..beans contain b-glycosides (vicine and convicine) which are responsible for a nutritional disorder known as favism. This afflicts those deficient in the enzyme G6PD (glucose-b-phosphate dehydrogenase). The symptoms are weakness, pallor, jaundice and haemoglobinuria, and, in about 10 cent [sic] of cases, death can result.<sup>84</sup>

Favism is not a phenomenon that affects whole populations, merely those individuals lacking in the G6PD enzyme. It affects some geographical areas more than others. It has been noted as being prevalent in both Sicily and southern Italy.<sup>85</sup> It is also noticeable in territories in Greece and North Africa.<sup>86</sup> The geographical spread of this condition is significant, and seems to indicate a split in the Graeco-Roman world. As Grmek notes:

Before the modern mixing of populations and the massive migrations of southern Europeans, the frequency of favism in northern Italy was minimal, as it was in other countries of northern Europe. The ancient homelands of the Etruscans and the Latins have only very recently been tainted by the disease. By contrast, the B- variant of G6PD deficiency is extremely common in Sicily, the fatherland of Empedocles, in Sardinia, and in the parts of Calabria where the Greek colonies once stood and Pythagoras held forth. There, up to one-third of the autochthonous males have the favic defect.<sup>87</sup>

The phenomenon of favism in these particular areas gives rise to speculation that the

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<sup>83</sup> Flint-Hamilton (1999), 374.

<sup>84</sup> Garnsey (1999), 218.

<sup>85</sup> Parker (1983), 365.

<sup>86</sup> Grmek (1983), 229; 231; 240.

<sup>87</sup> Grmek (1983), 231.

Pythagorean bean taboo was a tacit acknowledgement of an actual condition suffered by Pythagoras or some of his adherents.<sup>88</sup> The ban on their consumption was a mechanism for survival by those whose life was seriously endangered by this legume.

The hypothesis is not unattractive. The prevalence of the enzyme deficiency amongst predominantly Greek-speaking populations may partially explain why the bean never received much hostility or suspicion amongst Latin authors. The fact that favism has been detected in Egypt may lead the scholar to suppose that this was the origin behind the Egyptian taboo on beans reported by Herodotus. However, the argument still does not entirely persuade. If the condition only affected certain people (and to differing degrees), how would one have been able to discern that it was the broad bean that was to blame for favistic symptoms? If many people would have been able to (and indeed did) eat broad beans on a regular basis with few ill effects, any condition arising from them would have been extremely difficult to detect and isolate. As Grmek remarks:

In the past physicians saw acute jaundice, the appearance of blood in the urine and other symptoms of favism, but they refused to see them as causally linked with broad beans. In this instance they were blinded by an absolute demand for deterministic coherence. In the eyes of a Greek physician of the fifth and fourth centuries BC, the harmlessness of broad beans was proven by daily, irrefutable experience; a person who eats broad beans does not fall ill from them; at worst he or she gets bloated and sleeps poorly. If someone does fall ill after a meal of broad beans, that proves nothing.<sup>89</sup>

A modern analogous comparison may be the difficulty experienced by doctors when attempting to cure food allergies. It is necessary for the patient to painstakingly eliminate foods, one by one, from the diet until, finally, the troublesome element is isolated.

It also seems rather odd that if the Pythagoreans were aware of such serious symptoms, they did not refer to the dangers directly, instead choosing to shroud their

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<sup>88</sup> Grmek (1983), 239.

<sup>89</sup> Grmek (1983), 214.

warnings in elusive and allegorical language. The only observed physical effects that are alluded to are the bean's bloating and soporific qualities. There is no warning issued that bean consumption would perhaps directly result in death. It is not an explanation that is offered by later writers who would have been able to see the symptoms of favism for themselves. The obvious mystification experienced by later writers when attempting to justify the taboo makes it abundantly clear that 'death by broad bean' was not an obvious way of explaining the taboo. Favism equally does not provide an adequate explanation for the reverence for the bean among Latin peoples. Their culture held it as religiously symbolic, in similar ways to the Egyptians and Greeks, but favism appears not to have been particularly prevalent among Latin peoples. Beans must have possessed a religious and cultural significance that transcended favistic influences.

It appears, then, that favism, despite its convenient links with the geographical area inhabited by the Pythagoreans, cannot account adequately for feelings of mistrust or awe of the bean in territories that were far distant. If favism did exert an influence, it may have been at a subliminal level, rather than overtly. It was perhaps serendipitous that concerns about the physiological effects of bean consumption (flatulence, bloating, disturbed sleep patterns) may have inadvertently given warning of a more serious medical condition. Evidence for favism in antiquity may have been no more than anecdotal, or the remnants of folk wisdom, that have survived neither to us nor to the extant ancient authors. If favism manifested itself only in some people, and only resulted in death in a smaller percentage, it may have been viewed as a selective phenomenon, resulting from divine will (the wrath of the gods directed at those who had offended them or who had failed to perform the required propitiatory rites). If this is the case, this may provide an explanation for the manner in which they were regarded by ancient peoples, and the religious atmosphere surrounding them, although surely they cannot have been regarded with greater apprehension than plants that were genuinely and more consistently toxic to man.

Ultimately, it may be impossible to discern a cohesive explanation for this rather odd form of dietary restriction. Their ambiguous status in Greek and Roman culture and their associations with death marked them out as an object of avoidance or as a hallowed element of religious ritual. Their principal significance seems to have been that they were the most significant marker of Pythagorean identity, a motif that was immediately associated in one's mind with this particular philosophical school. The

vagaries of its origins elicited a number of responses in antiquity, some convincing, some rather less so. They all contribute to the aura of mystery surrounding the legume. In a sense, its genesis is unimportant. The importance of the bean taboo lies in the way in which it points to dietary restriction as an effective technique for emphasising individual and group identity within a larger demographic. The crucial significance of the Pythagoreans was that they were less renowned for what they ate, as opposed to what they refused to eat.

Latin culture reacted to the bean in a different way. Writings about the bean in this context were largely expunged of the pseudo-mystical connotations, concentrating instead upon its properties as a useful crop, and an excellent source of protein. Writers did investigate the mysteries of the bean taboo, but with an almost antiquarian interest. It was a problem upon which to exert the intellect; it was an enigma to be solved. Nevertheless, in certain contexts (mainly religious) a certain veneration surrounded the bean. This was not always manifested as an avoidance of the legume; sometimes it was seen to act as a charm, or as an integral element of specific rituals and festivals, such as the Lemuria. It was certainly associated with death, and perhaps served as a marker not merely to separate and segregate social groups and individuals, as may have been the case with both the Pythagoreans and some mystery cults, but the boundaries between life and death. Beans may even have been viewed as a form of *memento mori*, a concrete reminder of human mortality.

Perhaps this last assertion is going a little too far. Nonetheless, the bean taboo illustrates a significant point. It demonstrates that food frequently possessed the ability to take on an immense weight of cultural baggage in the Graeco-Roman world. Food represented far more than just a means of physical sustenance. Even with regard to a food that was commonly thought of as being a staple of a sizeable proportion of the population, there was a choice that could be made. Rejection of this ubiquitous legume may have deprived many people of an important part of their diet. Perhaps, ultimately, it was a choice only available to those in a position in which the bean was dispensable and with access to many other alternative foodstuffs. It is likely that the bean prohibition may have been relevant to only a limited number of people. Famine and food shortage may have meant that hunger, not religious and cultural considerations, was the predominant factor in dietary behaviour. Food avoidance may point to a further way of emphasising identity: it divides societies into those who, through wealth or social

position, are able to choose to exclude certain foods from their diet, and those for whom necessity is the master, not free-will. The latter must eat what is available, or perish. The humble bean and the mysteries surrounding it may seem like a trivial footnote in ancient social history. However, it shows how ideological arguments about food choices may far transcend their occurrence as a phenomenon in the real world. This will become obvious when this thesis looks at the way the subject of fish was treated in literature.<sup>90</sup> The bean taboo does provide the scholar with a path to understanding how, in some cases, the conscious and deliberate exclusion of an item from the diet may speak with greater volume and persuasion about issues of group and self-identity than the selection of an item for inclusion. This will be clearly shown when this thesis goes on to examine the group in antiquity that probably exemplifies this assertion *in excelsis*: the Jews in the Diaspora.<sup>91</sup>

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<sup>90</sup> See pages 142-170.

<sup>91</sup> See pages 171-198.