

# *Pherecydes, an early Western Philosopher*



## Pherecydes was the first writer in Greece to explain high philosophical subjects in prose

From *Blavatsky Collected Writings*, (PHERECYDES) XIII pp. 283-85.

Frontispiece: a hollow out in Syros where Pherecydes was thought to have sheltered from cold.

The original MS. of this brief account in H.P. Blavatsky's own handwriting was among the papers of her old and trusted friend, John M. Watkins of London. It is now in the hands of his son, Geoffrey Watkins. Because of the way the text starts, this item may have been intended for a Glossary. — *Boris de Zirkoff*.

### Like Plato and Thales, Pherecydes obtained his knowledge from the secret books of the Phoenicians.

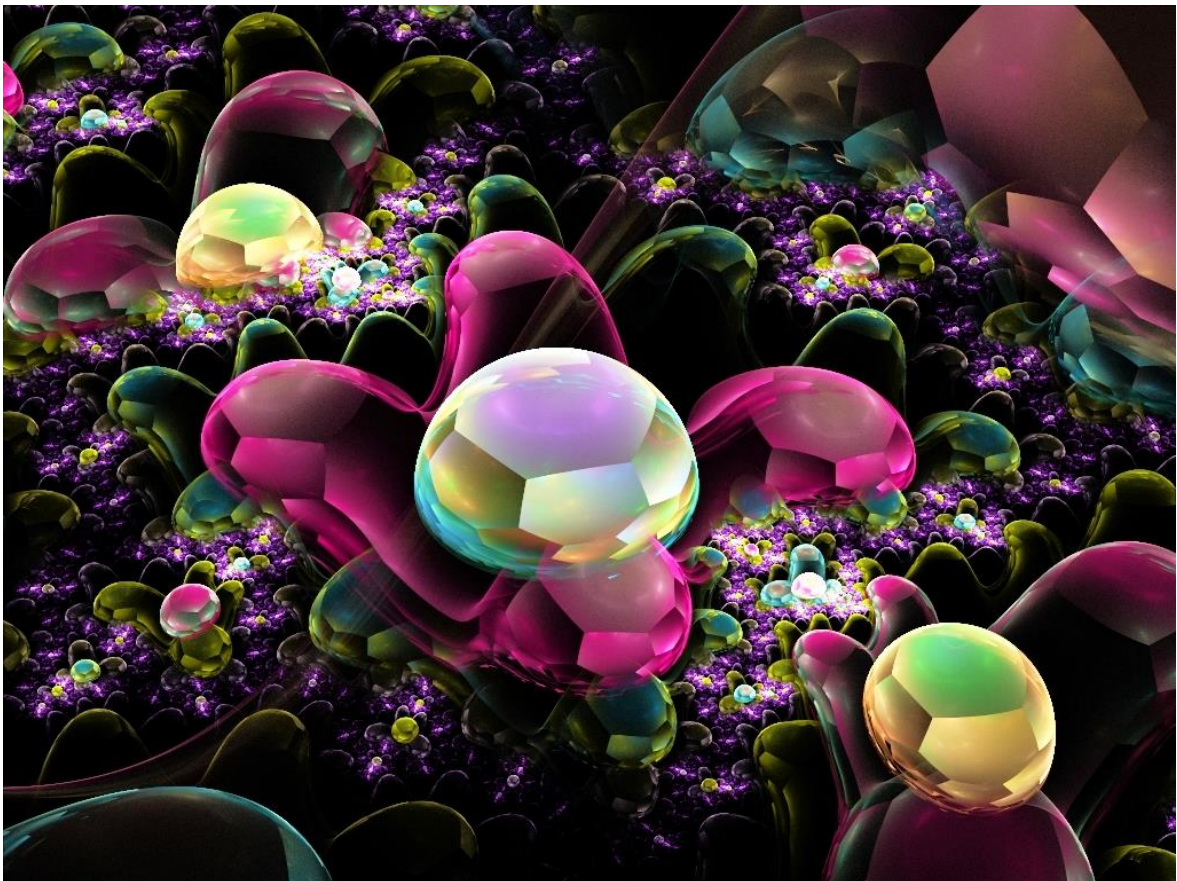
PHERECYDES (*Gr.*). A Greek philosopher from Syros, the teacher of Pythagoras. Like the latter he is credited on the concurrent testimony of antiquity, to have travelled many years in the East, to have visited India and Chaldea, and lived in Egypt, where he was the disciple of the initiated priests of the two latter countries. On the other hand, such writers as Clemens Alexandrinus and Philo Biblius, assert that "Pherecydes did not receive instruction in philosophy from any master, but *obtained his knowledge from the secret books of the Phoenicians.*"<sup>1</sup> The latter assertion cannot, however, interfere in any way with the former statement, that which is most interesting in it being the fact that the Phoenicians like all other ancient races had secret books, *i.e.*, an exoteric religion for the profane and masses, and an esoteric system for those who aspired to initiation into the mysteries. Pherecydes is denied by modern Encyclopaedists the title of philosopher, because, as alleged, "he lived at the time at which men began to speculate on cosmogony and the nature of the gods, but had hardly yet commenced the study of true philosophy."<sup>2</sup> This is an error as great as so many others. Real philosophy dates from Pythagoras only in Greece, but was pursued millenniums earlier in other countries; nor would Pythagoras, the "lover of truth" . . . that which he called philosophy, in the insanely materialistic albeit scientific speculations and theories of our modern philosophy, so-called. However it may be, Theosophists may well look up to Pherecydes as one of their earliest Western teachers and authorities, since his work *Eptanuchos* (Ἐπτάνυχος) — which others call *Theocracia* and others again *Theologia* — is the first in classical literature which speaks of reincarnation, or metempsychosis, now so falsely understood; but which was synonymous with the ancients, with rebirth or the *immortality of the soul*. It is by the latter name that Suidas calls the doctrine taught by Pherecydes, and says that it was contained in two books, in which moreover, the septenary principle was plainly taught, though, of course, in more or less symbolical and allegorical languages. Thus he states in Kosmos there are three high principles, which he designates as Chthona (Chaos), Aether (Zeus) and Chronos (Time), and four lower *principles*, the elements of *fire, water, air* and the *earth*. Of these everything visible and invisible in the Universe was formed. He was a great collector of Orphic writings, and

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<sup>1</sup> F.W. Sturtz, *Pherecydis Fragmenta*, Lips., 1824, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed.

<sup>2</sup> Wm. Smith, *Dictionary of Greek and Roman Biography and Mythology*, London, 1849, *s.v.* Pherecydes.

his own were extant in the days of the Alexandrian Neo-Platonists. He is referred to by Aristotle as a mythological, and by Plutarch as a theological writer; and mentioned in a great number of classics. Diogenes Laertius<sup>1</sup> calls him a rival of Thales, and some credit him with having been the first writer in Greece in prose, which he used to explain philosophical subjects. There was another Pherecydes of Athens, often confused with Pherecydes of Syros. But while the latter was a contemporary of Servius Tullius,<sup>2</sup> the sixth King of Rome, and must have lived, therefore, according to the Olympiads, in the sixth century B.C., Pherecydes the Athenian lived a century later being a contemporary of Herodotus. He was a logographer, and has done nothing to merit a place in this work. It is curious that Democritus hints at, and Cicero denounces, the philosophy of Pherecydes and Pythagoras as being “cribbed” wholly from the Eastern systems. The charge is strange since both Pherecydes and Pythagoras never made a secret of the Eastern origin of their doctrines.



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<sup>1</sup> [Diogenes Laertius, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*, Bk. I, ch. 11, §116-18, p. 123, in *Loeb Classical Library*, London, Heinemann, 1950 ed.]

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Cicero and Diogenes Laertius.

## Blavatsky defends Pherecydes

First published in *Lucifer*, Vol. X, No. 58, June 1893, pp. 273-83; republished in *Blavatsky Collected Writings*, (THE DENIALS AND MISTAKES OF THE NINETEENTH CENTURY) XIII pp. 224-42; this excerpt is from pp. 237-38.

There have been use and abuse of Magic in all ages, as there are use and abuse of Mesmerism and Hypnotism in our own. The ancient world had its Apolloniuses and its Pherecydeses, and intellectual people could discriminate between them, as they can now. While not one classic or pagan writer has ever found one word of blame for Apollonius of Tyana, for instance, it is not so with regard to Pherecydes. Hesychius of Miletus, Philo of Byblos and Eustathius charge him unstintingly with having built his philosophy and science on demoniacal traditions. Cicero declares that Pherecydes is *potius divinus quam physicus*, “rather a soothsayer than a physicist”;<sup>1</sup> and Diogenes Laertius gives a vast number of stories relating to his predictions. One day Pherecydes of Syros prophesies the shipwreck of a vessel hundreds of miles away from him; another time he predicts the capture of the Lacedaemonians by the Acadians; finally, he foresees his own wretched end.<sup>2</sup>

Such imputations as these prove very little, except, perhaps, the presence of clairvoyance and prevision in every age. Had it not been for the evidence brought forward by his own co-religionists, that Pherecydes abused his powers, there would have been no proof at all against him, either of sorcery or of any other malpractice. Such evidence as is given by Christian writers is of no value. Baronius, for instance, and de Mirville find an unanswerable proof of demonology in the belief of a philosopher in the co-eternity of matter and spirit. Says de Mirville:

Pherecydes . . . postulating in principle the primordality of Zeus or Aether, and then admitting on the same plane another principle, *co-eternal* and *co-working* with the first one, which he calls the fifth element or *ogenos*.<sup>3</sup> For some time people have wondered just exactly what he meant by that term; however, in the last analysis, the following translation seems correct: “something that constrains, retains,” in one word, *hadēs* or hell.<sup>4</sup>

The first statement is “known to every school-boy” without de Mirville going to the trouble of explaining it; as to the deduction, every Occultist will deny it point-blank, and only smile at the folly.



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<sup>1</sup> *De divinatione*, Bk. 1, 50, 112

<sup>2</sup> Diogenes Laertius, *Lives*, Bk. 1, ch. xi, 116

<sup>3</sup> [Ὠγενός, viz., Okeanos]

<sup>4</sup> *Pneumatologie*, *Des Esprits*, Vol. III, p. 209