

# Apollonius of Tyana

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Apollonius of Tyana<sup>[1]</sup>

<b>Born</b>	c. 15 CE
<b>Died</b>	c. 100 CE
<b>Era</b>	Ancient philosophy
<b>Region</b>	Western Philosophy
<b>School</b>	Hellenistic philosophy
<b>Main interests</b>	Pythagoreanism, Occultism

**Apollonius of Tyana** (Ancient Greek: Ἀπολλώνιος ὁ Τυανεύς; c. 15?–c. 100? CE<sup>[2]</sup>) was a Greek Neopythagorean philosopher from the town of Tyana in the Roman province of Cappadocia in Asia Minor. Little is known about him with certainty. Being a 1st-century orator and philosopher around the time of Christ, he was compared with Jesus of Nazareth by Christians in the 4th century<sup>[3]</sup> and by various popular writers in modern times.

## Life dates

Apollonius was born into a respected and wealthy Greek family,<sup>[4]</sup> his dates however are uncertain. His primary biographer, Philostratus the Elder (c.170–247 CE) places him c. 3 BCE to 97 CE.<sup>[4]</sup> Others agree that he was roughly a contemporary of Jesus of Nazareth. Charles P. Eells<sup>[5]</sup> states that his date of birth was three years before Jesus, whose date of birth is also uncertain. However, Philostratus, in his *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, places him staying for a while in the court of King Vardanes I of Parthia, who ruled between c.40–47 CE. Apollonius began a five year silence at about the age of 20, and after the completion of this silence travelled to Mesopotamia and Iran. Philostratus also mentions emperors Nero, Vespasian, Titus, Domitian, and Nerva at various points throughout Apollonius' life. Given this information, a timeline of roughly the years 15–98 CE can be established for his adult life.

## Sources

By far the most detailed source is the *Life of Apollonius of Tyana*, a lengthy, novelistic biography written by the sophist Philostratus at the request of empress Julia Domna. She took her own life in 217 CE,<sup>[6]</sup> and he completed it after her death, probably in the 220s or 230s CE. Philostratus' account shaped the image of Apollonius for posterity and still dominates discussions about him in our times. To some extent it is a valuable source because it contains data from older writings which were available to Philostratus but disappeared later on. Among these works are an excerpt (preserved by Eusebius) from *On sacrifices*, and certain alleged letters of Apollonius. The sage may really have written some of these works, along with the no-longer extant *Biography of Pythagoras*.<sup>[6]</sup> At least two biographical sources that Philostratus used are lost: a book by the imperial secretary Maximus describing Apollonius' activities in Maximus' home-city of Aegaeae in Cilicia, and a biography by a certain Moiragenes. There also survives, separately from the Life by Philostratus, a collection of letters of Apollonius, but at least some of these seem to be spurious.<sup>[7]</sup>

One of the essential sources Philostratus claimed to know are the “memoirs” (or “diary”) of Damis, an acolyte and companion of Apollonius. Some scholars claim the notebooks of Damis were an invention of Philostratus,<sup>[8]</sup> while others think it could have been a real book forged by someone else and naively used by Philostratus.<sup>[9]</sup> Philostratus describes Apollonius as a wandering teacher of philosophy and miracle worker who was mainly active in Greece and Asia Minor but also traveled to Italy, Spain and North Africa and even to Mesopotamia, India, and Ethiopia. In particular, he tells lengthy stories of Apollonius entering the city of Rome in disregard of Emperor Nero’s ban on philosophers, and later on being summoned, as a defendant, to the court of Domitian, where he defied the Emperor in blunt terms. He had allegedly been accused of conspiring against the Emperor, performing human sacrifice, and predicting a plague by means of magic. Philostratus implies that upon his death, Apollonius of Tyana underwent heavenly assumption.<sup>[10]</sup>

How much of this can be accepted as historical truth depends largely on the extent to which modern scholars trust Philostratus, and in particular on whether they believe in the reality of Damis. Some of these scholars contend that he never came to Western Europe and was virtually unknown there until the 3rd century AD when Empress Julia Domna, who was herself from the province of Syria, decided to popularize him and his teachings in Rome.<sup>[11]</sup> For that purpose, so these same scholars believe, she commissioned Philostratus to write the biography, where Apollonius is exalted as a fearless sage with supernatural powers, even greater than Pythagoras. This view of Julia Domna’s role in the making of the Apollonius-legend gets some support from the fact that her son Caracalla worshiped him,<sup>[12]</sup> and her grandnephew emperor Severus Alexander may have done so as well.<sup>[13]</sup>

Apollonius was also a known figure in the medieval Islamic world<sup>[14]</sup> as described later in this article.

## Historical facts

With the exception of the Adana Inscription, little can be derived from sources other than Philostratus. Hence if we dismiss Philostratus’ colorful stories as fiction, the figure of the historical Apollonius appears to be rather shadowy. As James Francis put it, “the most that can be said...is that Apollonius appears to have been a wandering ascetic/philosopher/wonderworker of a type common to the eastern part of the early empire.”<sup>[15]</sup> What we can safely assume is that he was indeed a Pythagorean and as such, in conformity with the Pythagorean tradition, opposed animal sacrifice, and lived on a frugal, strictly vegetarian diet.<sup>[16]</sup> A minimalist view is that he spent his entire life in the cities of his native Asia Minor and of northern Syria, in particular his home town of Tyana, Ephesus, Aegae, and Antioch,<sup>[17]</sup> though the letters suggest wider travels, and there seems no reason to deny that, like many wandering philosophers, he at least visited Rome. As for his philosophical convictions, we have an interesting, probably authentic fragment of one of his writings (*On sacrifices*) where he expresses his view that God, who is the most beautiful being, cannot be influenced by prayers or sacrifices and has no wish to be worshipped by humans, but can be reached by a spiritual procedure involving *nous* (intellect), because he himself is pure *nous* and *nous* is also the greatest faculty of humankind.<sup>[18]</sup>

## Miracles

Philostratus implies on one occasion that Apollonius had extra-sensory perception (Book VIII, Chapter XXVI). When emperor Domitian was murdered on September 18, 96 AD, Apollonius was said to have witnessed the event in Ephesus “about midday” on the day it happened in Rome, and told those present “Take heart, gentlemen, for the tyrant has been slain this day...”. The words that Philostratus attributes to him would make equal sense, however, if Apollonius had been informed that the Emperor would be killed at noon on September 18. Both Philostratus and renowned historian Cassius Dio report this incident, probably on the basis of an oral tradition. Both state that the philosopher welcomed the deed as a praiseworthy tyrannicide.<sup>[19]</sup>

## Journey to India

Philostratus devoted two and a half of the eight books of his *Life of Apollonius* (1.19–3.58) to the description of a journey of his hero to India. According to Philostratus' *Life*, en route to the Far East, Apollonius reached Hierapolis Bambyce (Manbij) in Syria (not Nineveh, as some scholars believed), where he met Damis, a native of that city who became his lifelong companion. Pythagoras, whom the Neo-Pythagoreans regarded as an exemplary sage, was believed to have travelled to India. Hence such a feat made Apollonius look like a good Pythagorean who spared no pains in his efforts to discover the sources of oriental piety and wisdom. As some details in Philostratus' account of the Indian adventure seem incompatible with known facts, modern scholars are inclined to dismiss the whole story as a fanciful fabrication, but not all of them rule out the possibility that the Tyanean actually did visit India.<sup>[20]</sup>

What seemed to be independent evidence showing that Apollonius was known in India has now been proved to be forged. In two Sanskrit texts quoted by Sanskritist Vidhushekhara Bhattacharya in 1943<sup>[21]</sup> he appears as "Apalūnya", in one of them together with Damis (called "Damīśa"), it is claimed that Apollonius and Damis were Western yogis, who later on were converted to the correct Advaita philosophy.<sup>[22]</sup> Some have believed that these Indian sources derived their information from a Sanskrit translation of Philostratus' work (which would have been a most uncommon and amazing occurrence), or even considered the possibility that it was really an independent confirmation of the historicity of the journey to India.<sup>[23]</sup> Only in 1995 were the passages in the Sanskrit texts proven to be interpolations by a modern (late 19th century) forger.<sup>[24]</sup>

## Writings

Several writings and many letters have been ascribed to Apollonius, but some of them are lost; others have only been preserved in parts or fragments of disputed authenticity. Porphyry and Iamblichus refer to a biography of Pythagoras by Apollonius, which has not survived; it is also mentioned in the Suda.<sup>[25]</sup> Apollonius wrote a treatise *On sacrifices*, of which only a short, probably authentic fragment has come down to us.<sup>[26]</sup>

Philostratus' *Life* and the anthology assembled by John Stobaeus contain purported letters of Apollonius. Some of them are cited in full, others only partially. There is also an independently transmitted collection of letters preserved in medieval manuscripts. It is difficult to determine what is authentic and what not. Some of the letters may have been forgeries or literary exercises assembled in collections which were already circulated in the 2nd century AD.<sup>[citation needed]</sup> It has been asserted that Philostratus himself forged a considerable part of the letters he inserted into his work; others were older forgeries available to him.<sup>[27]</sup> But as all those controversies are based on a prejudice against miraculous events and therefore against Philostratus' trustworthiness, we are left with the text of Philostratus and our personal beliefs or dis-beliefs.

## Impact

### Antiquity

In the 2nd century the satirist Lucian of Samosata was a sharp critic of Neo-Pythagoreanism. After 180 AD he wrote a pamphlet where he attacked Alexander of Abonoteichus, a student of one of Apollonius' students, as a charlatan; and suggested that the whole school was based on fraud.<sup>[28]</sup> From this we can infer that Apollonius really had students and that his school survived at least until Lucian's time. One of Philostratus' foremost aims was to oppose this view. Although he related various miraculous feats of Apollonius, he emphasized at the same time that his hero was not a magician, but a serious philosopher and a champion of traditional Greek values.<sup>[29]</sup>

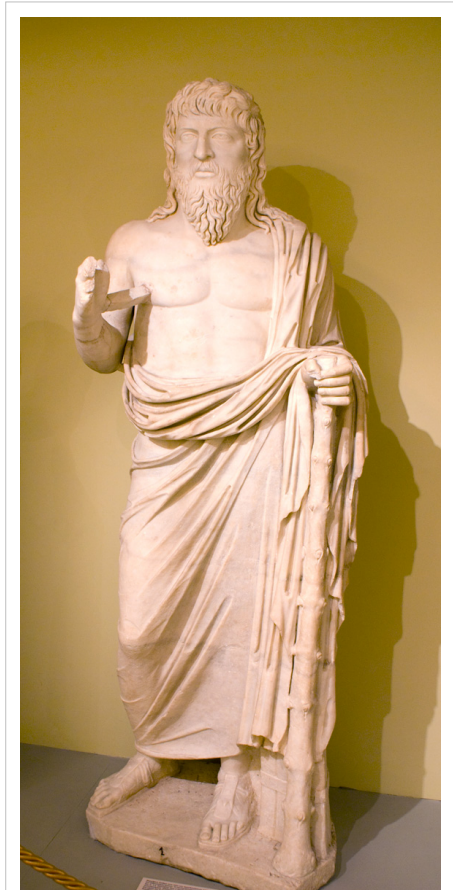
When Emperor Aurelian conducted his military campaign against the Palmyrene Empire, he captured Tyana in 272 AD. According to the *Historia Augusta* he abstained from destroying the city after having a vision of Apollonius admonishing him to spare the innocent citizens.<sup>[30]</sup>

In Philostratus' description of Apollonius' life and deeds there are a number of similarities with the life and especially the claimed miracles of Jesus. Perhaps this parallel was intentional, but the original aim was hardly to present Apollonius as a rival of Jesus. However, in the late 3rd century Porphyry, an anti-Christian Neoplatonic philosopher, claimed in his treatise *Against the Christians* that the miracles of Jesus were not unique, and mentioned Apollonius as a non-Christian who had accomplished similar achievements. Around 300, Roman authorities used the fame of Apollonius in their struggle to wipe out Christianity.

Hierocles, one of the main instigators of the persecution of Christians in 303, wrote a pamphlet where he argued that Apollonius exceeded Christ as a wonder-worker and yet wasn't worshipped as a god, and that the cultured biographers of Apollonius were more trustworthy than the uneducated apostles. This attempt to make Apollonius a hero of the anti-Christian movement provoked sharp replies from bishop Eusebius of Caesarea and from Lactantius.<sup>[31]</sup> Eusebius wrote an extant reply to the pamphlet of Hierocles, where he claimed that Philostratus was a fabulist and that Apollonius was a sorcerer in league with demons. This started a debate on the relative merits of Jesus and Apollonius that has gone on in different forms into modern times.

In Late Antiquity talismans made by Apollonius appeared in several cities of the Eastern Roman Empire, as if they were sent from heaven. They were magical figures and columns erected in public places, meant to protect the cities from afflictions. The great popularity of these talismans was a challenge to the Christians. Some Byzantine authors condemned them as sorcery and the work of demons, others admitted that such magic was beneficial; none of them claimed that it didn't work.<sup>[32]</sup>

In the Western Roman Empire, Sidonius Apollinaris was a Christian admirer of Apollonius in the 5th century. He produced a Latin translation of Philostratus' *Life*, which is lost.<sup>[33]</sup>



A wandering philosopher, probably represented Apollonius of Tyana who lived a part of his life in Crete and died there. Found in Gortyn (late 2nd c. AD), now in Heraklion Archaeological Museum, Crete.

## Islamic world and Baha'i

Apollonius was a known figure in the medieval Islamic world. In the Arabic literature he appears as Balīnūs (or Balīnās or Abūlūniyūs). Arabic-speaking occultists dubbed him "Lord of the talismans" (Ṣāhib aṭ-ṭilasmāt) and related stories about his achievements as a talisman-maker. They appreciated him as a master of alchemy and a transmitter of Hermetic knowledge. Some occult writings circulated under his name; among them were:<sup>[14]</sup>

- the Kitāb Sirr al-ḥalīqa (*Book on the Secret of Creation*), also named Kitāb al-'ilal (*Book of the Causes*)
- the Risāla fī ta'īr ar-rūḥānīyāt fī l-murakkabāt (*Treatise on the influence of the spiritual beings on the composite things*)
- al-Mudḥal al-kabīr ilā risālati aṭ-ṭalāsīm (*Great introduction to the treatise on the talismans*)
- the Kitāb ṭalāsīm Balīnās al-akbar (*Great book of Balinas' talismans*)
- the Kitāb Ablūs al-ḥakīm (*Book of the sage Ablus*)

Medieval alchemist Jabir ibn Hayyan's *Book of Stones According to the Opinion of Balīnās* contains an exposition and analysis of views expressed in Arabic occult works attributed to Apollonius.<sup>[34]</sup>

There were also medieval Latin and vernacular translations of Arabic books attributed to "Balinus".<sup>[35]</sup>

The *Tablet of Wisdom* written by Bahá'u'lláh, the founder of the Bahá'í Faith, names "Balinus" (Apollonius) as a great philosopher, who "surpassed everyone else in the diffusion of arts and sciences and soared unto the loftiest heights of humility and supplication."<sup>[36]</sup>

## Modern era

In Europe, there has been great interest in Apollonius since the beginning of the 16th century, but the traditional ecclesiastical viewpoint still prevailed. Until the Age of Enlightenment the Tyanean was usually treated as a demonic magician and a great enemy of the Church who collaborated with the devil and tried to overthrow Christianity.<sup>[37]</sup> On the other hand, several advocates of Enlightenment, deism and anti-Church positions saw him as an early forerunner of their own ethical and religious ideas, a proponent of a universal, non-denominational religion compatible with Reason. In 1680, Charles Blount, a radical English deist, published the first English translation of the first two books of Philostratus' *Life* with an anti-Church introduction. Voltaire praised Apollonius.

As in Late Antiquity, comparisons between Apollonius and Jesus became commonplace in the 17th and 18th centuries in the context of polemic about Christianity.<sup>[38]</sup> In the Marquis de Sade's "Dialogue Between a Priest and a Dying Man", the Dying Man compares Jesus to Apollonius as a false prophet. Some Theosophists, notably C.W. Leadbeater, Alice A. Bailey, and Benjamin Creme, have maintained that Apollonius of Tyana was the reincarnation of the being they call the Master Jesus. In the 20th century, Ezra Pound evoked Apollonius in his later *Cantos* as a figure associated with sun-worship and a messianic rival to Christ. Pound identifies him as Aryan within an anti-semitic mythology, and celebrates his solar worship and aversion to ancient Jewish animal sacrifice. In Gerald Messadié's "The man who became god", Apollonius appears as a wandering philosopher and magician of about the same age as Jesus. The two of them supposedly met. French author Maurice Magre also wrote about Apollonius in his little known book *Magicians, Seers, and Mystics*.

## In fiction

- Apollonius appears as a fictional character in the 1935 novel *The Circus of Dr. Lao* and its 1964 film adaptation, *7 Faces of Dr. Lao*. In these, Apollonius works in the circus as a fortune-teller, who is under a curse — he sees the future, but can only speak the exact truth, thus seeming to be cruel and hateful. In the film version, he is blind and weary after many years of predicting disappointment for his clients.
- The plot of L. Sprague de Camp and Fletcher Pratt's 1948 fantasy novel *The Carnelian Cube* hinges on a magical artifact passed down by Apollonius.
- In the 1975 work *The Illuminatus! Trilogy*, Apollonius appears in discussion with Abbie Hoffman.
- Apollonius appears as a fictional character in the 1977 television series *The Fantastic Journey* in the seventh episode named *Funhouse*. In this episode, Apollonius attempts to take possession of the scientist Willaway in a funhouse but is thwarted by Varian, "a man from the future possessing awesome powers".
- Apollonius appears as a fictional character in the 1996 short story "The Garden of Tantalus" by Brian Stableford, which combines two of the accounts from *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* and removes the mystical aspects, turning it into a detective story. The narrator, Menippus from the account of Apollonius and the lamia, blames Damis for making Apollonius a magician by elaborating on what little of the story he knew. The story was published in *Classical Whodunnits* (1996).
- Apollonius serves as mentor to a main character in Steven Saylor's historical novel *Empire* for much of the work.
- In Keats' poem about the lamia myth, he mentions Apollonius' intervention, revealing Lamia's true form to her lover Lycius (commonly called Menippus in the myth).
- in Friedrich Schiller's gothic novel "The Ghost-Seer", the Sicilian trickster suggests Apollonius as one of the possible identities of the Incomprehensible.
- Apollonius of Tyana has a major role in the background to Richard Cowper's story "The Custodians". The story assumes that Apollonius discovered a scientific way of "seeing" the future and that his method was re-discovered by a Medieval sage. A succession of "Custodians" at a monastery in South France, using an "Apolloniän Nexus" then saw and wrote down events fifty years in their future, until a final one in the 20th Century saw in advance - but could not prevent - a destructive nuclear war.

## Editions

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- [2] For the chronology see Maria Dzielska: *Apollonius of Tyana in Legend and History*, Rome 1986, pp. 30–38.
- [3] Eusebius of Caesarea, *Contra Hieroclem* discusses the claim.
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- [6] Dzielska pp. 138–146.
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- [10] Philostratus, *Life of Apollonius* 8.30-31.
- [11] Dzielska pp. 83–85, 186–192.
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- [19] Cassius Dio 67.18; Philostratus, *Vita Apollonii* 8.26–27. See also Dzielska pp. 30–32, 41.
- [20] Graham Anderson: *Philostratus*, London 1986, pp. 199–215; Flinterman pp. 86–87, 101–106.
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- [30] *Historia Augusta, Vita Aureliani* 24.2-9; 25.1.
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  - Apollonius article at Livius.org (<http://www.livius.org/ap-ark/apollonius/apollonius01.html>)
  - Philostratus' *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* ([http://www.livius.org/ap-ark/apollonius/life/va\\_00.html](http://www.livius.org/ap-ark/apollonius/life/va_00.html))
  - A collation of resources on Apollonius of Tyana (including the Adana inscription) ([http://www.mountainman.com.au/apollonius\\_of\\_tyana.htm](http://www.mountainman.com.au/apollonius_of_tyana.htm))
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