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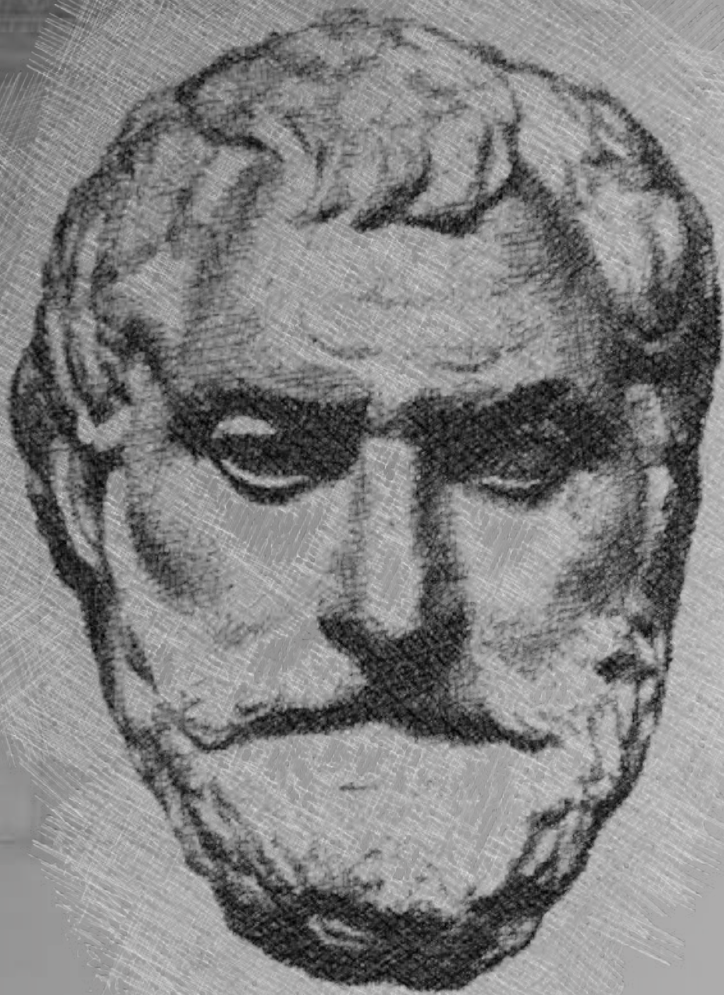
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THE PRE-SOCRATICS

“Pursuing the scientific knowledge
he often had discovered himself,
the [pre-Socratic] philosopher
condemned the unilateralism of
empirical science, which lacks the
integrity of true wisdom and, at the
same time, turned to myth in order
to fill the gaps in his understanding
and form a complete picture of the
universe.”

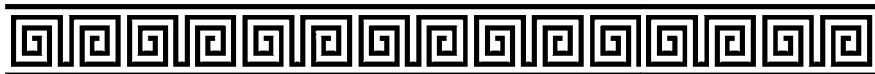
A.S. Bogomolov,
History of Ancient Philosophy



Thales, the father of philosophy

Aristotle described Thales (625-547 BC) as the father of natural philosophy. Bertrand Russell, who argued that “Western philosophy begins with Thales,” shared the same view. His accomplishments in astronomy, geometry and meteorology, as well as his political acumen, render him the first among the seven sages of antiquity.

Thales was born in Miletus, in Asia Minor. The offspring of a noble family, he could afford to travel extensively and was exposed to Egyptian mathematics and Babylonian astronomy.



What did he introduce to philosophy? According to Aristotle, Thales was the first to associate the existence and the origin of all things not to some deity, but to a natural substance. That substance was water. He arrived at that conclusion after observing that “the nutriment of all things is moist, and heat is generated and sustained by moisture (and that from which all things are generated is, of course, their first principle)”; he also observed that “the seeds of all things have a moist nature; therefore water is the first principle of moist things.” Thales is also credited with the idea (one found in Egyptian mythology as well) that the Earth floats on water.



Thales postulated that everything in nature has a soul, and that all things are replete with deity. The soul, or deity, is the inner driving force of everything in nature. Indeed, even the magnet has a soul, since it moves iron.

Ignoring the myths of his era, Thales related everything around him to nature as a unity, and not to some god. He went beyond myth, attempting rational explanation and scientific interpretation of the world.



The usefulness of philosophy

At one point, there were those who mocked Thales for his poverty and argued that philosophy had no practical use. In response, Thales acted on astronomical observations that predicted a rich olive harvest for the coming year and reserved all the olive mills in the area in advance and at a low price. When his prediction proved accurate, the local producers had no choice but to turn to Thales. The sage rented out the mills at a high price, earning a tidy sum and proving that philosophers can make fortunes if they want to – they don't simply because they're interested in other things.



Thales to Neiloxenus

“What is the oldest thing? God, for God has no beginning. What is the greatest thing? Space, for while the universe contains all else within it, space contains the universe. What is the most beautiful? The universe, for everything that is ordered as it should be is a part of it. What is the wisest? Time, for it has discovered some things already, and shall discover all the rest. What is most common? Hope, for those who have nothing else have that ever with them. What is most helpful? Virtue, for it makes everything else helpful by putting it to a good use. What is most harmful? Vice, for it harms the greatest number of things by its presence. What is strongest? Necessity, for that alone is insuperable. What is easiest? To follow Nature’s course; because people often weary of pleasures.”

Plutarch, *The Dinner of the Seven Wise Men*

Thales, a man of many talents

The first foundations of ancient Greek philosophy and the maxim “know thyself”, among other things, are attributed to Thales.

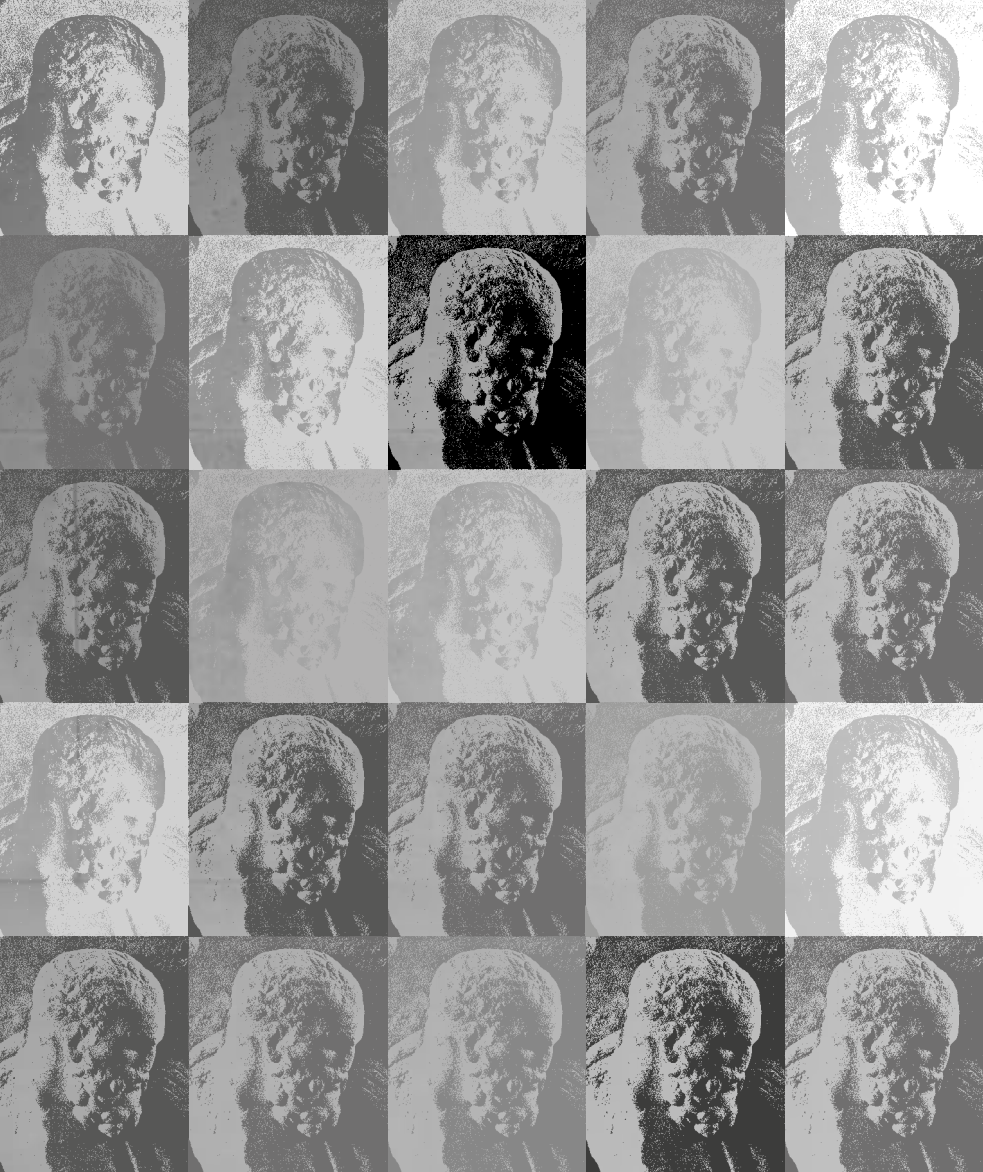
An empirical astronomer, Thales predicted, possibly based on Babylonian charts, a solar eclipse that took place on May 28, 585 BC. He also attempted to explain certain natural phenomena, like the flooding of the Nile, which he attributed to summer winds blowing upstream.

Thales made significant contributions to geometry: the “Thales’ Theorem” and four more discoveries, as well as a method for measuring the height of the pyramids.




According to Herodotus, Thales persuaded the Milesians to ally with the other Ionian cities against the Persian threat, with the city of Teos as their capital. According to Diogenes Laërtius, he also persuaded the Milesians not to ally with Croesus against the Persians. His advice proved invaluable when Cyrus, the king of the Persians, defeated Croesus and subjugated his kingdom, Lydia. The Milesians believed their city was saved thanks to Thales' insight.





Anaximander, the philosopher of the infinite

anaximander (c. 611-547 BC) was born of Greek parents in Miletus, where he spent his whole life. An associate of Thales, Anaximander was influenced by him, but produced theories of his own as well and, in turn, influenced Anaximenes.

Not much is known about Anaximander's life. He wrote the philosophical treatise *On Nature* at a relatively young age, invented the gnomon and constructed a sundial in Sparta, as well as a celestial sphere.

