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Pythagoreans and Medical Writers on Periods of Human Gestation

Medical writers from the 5th century BC onwards often discuss the theory that children born 7 months after conception are viable while those born at 8 months are not; but there is no reliable evidence that Pythagoreans of the early period said anything about the matter. Although it was pursued by many Pythagorean sources in Roman imperial times, their discussions differ greatly from those of the doctors. The Pythagoreans invariably assume that the theory is universally true, whereas none of the medical writers assert it dogmatically. Pythagorean discussions are almost exclusively arithmetical or numerological, focused especially on number-patterns with musical significance. Some early medical writers also develop numerological theses, but they have little in common with those of the Pythagoreans; and though later authors such as Galen focus closely on numbers in these contexts, they approach the issues from a wholly non-Pythagorean point of view. The remarkable consistency of the Pythagorean explanations in all relevant sources suggests that they have a common origin. I shall suggest that the work on which they depend was composed at the time of the late Hellenistic Pythagorean revival, that its author took the theme from the doctors while abandoning their empirical caution, and that he borrowed the core ingredients of his explanations from earlier Hellenistic writings on Plato, especially on the *Timaeus*. But there appear to be links between these explanations and some of the *akousmata* and ritual injunctions recorded by Iamblichus, which probably originated at a much earlier date. In that case part of the purpose of the Pythagorean reflections on periods of gestation may have been to provide these injunctions and *akousmata* with a theoretical foundation.

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