



THE UNIVERSITY  
of ADELAIDE

## FACULTY OF ARTS

Adelaide Summer Research Scholarship 2020-2021

### How Does an Embryo Come to Life? Porphyry and the Ancient Greek Views on Ensoulment

**Supervisor: Professor Han Baltussen**

**Department of Classics, Archaeology and Ancient History**

**School of Humanities**

This project involves a new study of the embryological theories of antiquity, focused on the work of the Platonist philosopher Porphyry (ca. 234–ca. 305 CE). Porphyry is mostly known for his advocacy of vegetarianism, a biography of his teacher Plotinus, an edition of his teacher's works, and his anti-Christian polemics. But in the past decade, his treatise entitled *To Gaurus or How Embryos are Ensouled*, has been studied more intensely (e.g. Wilberding 2016). It presents an intriguing look at the scientific interests of the later Platonists and shows how empirical observation can lead to fascinating insights in biology and how scientific speculation was stimulated by the restrictions on access to internal workings of the human body. The project aims to contribute to understanding how Porphyry combines historical, scientific and philosophical considerations to resolve some of the most difficult questions we can ask about living organisms: when and how are embryos ensouled?

The project started at a workshop on ensoulment in antiquity (University of Queensland 2019) and is related to a thesis supervision on early Hippocratic notions of life and the body. Important materials have been collected but not processed. The availability of a modern English translation (Wilberding 2011) will make the analysis easier, but the interpretation of the text leaves us with many questions and puzzling details. Why does Porphyry divide the main positions historically into two camps? What are his arguments regarding the stages of the creation and growth of a human embryo? Is his definition of an embryo very different from ours? How does he defend his own view on the moment of 'ensoulment' in the embryo's development against the various views of earlier thinkers? Thus the paper is very much under development and will allow the student to see it progress from its embryonic state to a fully-grown product.

The work involved for this Scholarship is suitable for a high achieving student at level 2 or 3, ideally possessing experience with Classical scholarship and methods (Classics major) and an interest in ancient philosophy and medicine (optional).

The student will gain the following research skills and experience;

- Keyword searching and analysis
- Compiling bibliographical data
- (Online) scanning and translation of foreign language articles
- Discipline specific skills of comparative analysis of crucial texts (writing summaries)

- Understanding how to structure and execute an academic paper
- Publication in high-quality journal