In the course of a more extensive research about the Indian theories of rebirths it was necessary to confront the argument of the classical Indian perception, regarding the formation of the embryo, parting from the conception through to the birth. It is known that the Garbha Upanisad is a brief treatise dedicated exclusively to this argument. Certainly the importance that this text plays in the study of the scientific knowledge attained in this field in ancient India, has been until now somewhat neglected. In particular, the third khandā is characterised by a chronological description of the fetus’ development that, with due caution, coincides surprisingly with modern concepts of embryology. To be sure, the value of this Upanisad is not limited to this, indeed, from an indological point of view, the focus of attention is centred on the speculative outlook of Vedantic inspiration. Here, in fact, the emphasis is on the analysis of an argument hardly metaphysical: that of the formation of individuality, understood solely on a gross level; yet, at the end of a careful reading, one cannot deny that the Garbha Upanisad appears as what it intends to be, namely, a wise text that invites the reader to interrupt the indefinite chain of rebirths, rather than a study of Ayurvedic obstetrics.

The Garbha Upanisad belongs to the Atharvaveda and together with two other minor Upanisads, the Prāṇāṇiḥbota and the Pinda, forms, in content, an harmonic trilogy. It describes the formation of the human body in the mother’s womb as if it was dealing with a sequence of sacrificial

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1 J. Filloza, La Doctrine classique de la médecine indienne, ses origines et ses parallèles grecs, Paris 1949.
2 We have made use of the recent edition of the Upanisads edited by Prof. J.L. Sastri, Upanisads Saṅgraha, Motilal Banarsidass, Delhi 1970. Through a comparison of various anthologies already published and a careful philological study, this pandit has offered us an edition of the Upanisads, scientifically more accurate. This observation does not, however, include the major Upanisads, for which he refers directly to earlier critical editions, but it is in the sphere of the above mentioned minor Upanisads that his endeavour is shown to be extremely useful. Regarding the Garbha Upanisad in particular, we are able to observe a somewhat fragmented text, that is clearer and less incomplete than the historical one, to which Paul Deussen referred to. ("Biblioteca Indica", Calcutta 1849-50, supplemented by Jacob’s Eleven Atharvama Upanisad, Bombay 1891; P. Deussen, Sechzig Upanisad’s des Veda, Leipzig 1897).
elements, displayed with an gnostic objective. The Prāṇāgnihotra Upaniṣad teaches the ritual use of the gross or psychic elements that constitute human individuality. Here, the different individual components are considered like actors or offerings of an oblation in the inner fire of man. Finally, the Prāṇāgnihotra Upaniṣad concludes the analysis, explaining the doctrine that permits the ritual transformation of the elements, that constitute the body of the defunct, into the subtle body of the preta. As was already mentioned, the closeness of the inspiration of these three Upaniṣads, which are rightly considered Vedantic, becomes evident. In them is demonstrated the interiorisation of rituals characteristic of the Pūrva Mīmāṃsā, as well as a reference to the Sāmkhya-yoga practice, that the Advaita-vedāntins performed on the basis of the Bhagavad Gītā.

These last considerations could be most useful in trying to establish a dating. Unfortunately, the Indian chronology is still based on ideological and not very scientific conventions, that the last century bequeathed to us. This persuades the specialists to use the utmost prudence. In fact, with such uncertainty, we prefer to follow a relative chronology without claiming to propose a precisely defined date. The Advaita inspiration and the fact that Śaṅkara ignores these three Upaniṣads are insufficient indications to support the fact that these were elaborated in a period after the death of the great acārya. In fact, Śaṅkarācārya, in his works, commented and used only nine Upaniṣads, which the tradition had already defined as pramāṇya.

The analysis of the language used here, is not, however, of great assistance in placing the Garbha Upaniṣad historically. It is an elegant classical Sanskrit, structurally fluent and not inclined to artificial archaism, as in the case of the so-called sectarian Upaniṣads. Unfortunately, this type of Sanskrit was frequently used in learned Brāhmaṇas' circles during the centuries of decline of the Gupta era. However, it can be distinguished from both the complex language of Śaṅkarian treatises and the Puranic Sanskrit, which is more concerned with content than form.

However, it is really the comparative study on the contents that start us off on placing the Garbha Upaniṣad from a chronological point of view. The Agni Purāṇa, for example, gives a description of the embryo's development with monthly progressions, but the stages do not prove to correspond with those of the Upanisadic text under examination; however, a closer adherence between the two texts in comparison, is found in the

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5 With the term preta one intends the soul of the deceased in the stage which proceeds that of pitṛ. Straight after the death of the body, the soul forms, thanks to the offerings of the family, a provisional "body" which allows it, in one year, to reach the abode of the ancestors. See Garuda Purāṇa, Preta Khaṇḍa, 5, 33-37.
8 AP, CCCL, 19-32, 40-45.
enumeration of the organs and humours. Nevertheless, in the later case, both the Garbha Upaniṣad and the Agni Purāṇa could possibly go back to the commune sources of the Brhadāranyaka Upaniṣad and the Maitri Upaniṣad.

The Mārkandeya Purāṇa does not give the description of the phases of the embryo’s development, but it coincides surprisingly with the Upaniṣad in question, in two details: the first regards the methods of nutrition of the fetus. “The prāna grows well, thanks to the food and drink received from the mother, which arrive by means of a cord in the form of a vein”, affirms the Garbha Upaniṣad. The Purāṇa, for its part, sustains that: “The cord called Apyāyanī is fixed in the umbilical and is connected to the mother’s womb. When the food and drink reach the uterus, the fetus grows, the body in this way being nourished”. The second detail, in which our Upaniṣad and the Mārkandeya Purāṇa correspond, is expressed in the following passages: “Finally, when, offspring of a long series of matrices, arrives at the door of the uterus, and pushed by spasms, is born with great pain, then, encompassed by Viṣṇu’s wind, it forgets the previous births and deaths and favourable and unfavourable karmas”. The Purāṇa describes the effect of the oblivion of childbirth as follows: “When it is expelled from the womb, it falls into an unpleasant torpor, from which it recovers on contact with air. In this way, it is enveloped by Viṣṇu’s power, and its soul, being disturbed, loses its memory”. Also, the aim for which the uterine development is described, proves to be the same for the two texts: both the Upaniṣad and the Purāṇa want to induce in the reader repulsion for the return to the matrix, and thereby stimulate the desire to obtain mokṣa. The Mārkandeya Purāṇa seems, however, more inclined to add some finishing touches, that render more precise the physiological description, which could induce us to assume that the Upaniṣad furnished the basis for the Puranical elaboration.

The Śīva Purāṇa moves away from the Garbha Upaniṣad only in certain points, which are, in our view, of little significance. For example, in this text, the phases of the formation of the embryo’s organs, while generally maintaining the same sequence, appear slightly anticipated in respect to the times forecast by the Garbha Upaniṣad. Otherwise the contents seem to faithfully trace the general lines of the Upaniṣad. Not even the literary style of this Purāṇa diverges from the Upaniṣad in question: in fact, one finds the literary form of making the fetus speak in the first person, as at the beginning of the fourth khaṇḍa: “Having appeared thousands of times in the mother’s womb, by eating I have...”. The Śīva Purāṇa, likewise, declares: “I died and was reborn many times.”

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7 BAU, III, 9, 28.  
8 MU, III, 4.  
9 MP, XI, 11-12.  
10 MP, XI, 18-19.  
11 SP, Umā Saṃhitā, 22, 26.
All the same, there are other considerations that induce us to assume that the Śiva Purāṇa, in these passages, was elaborated on the basis of prior knowledge of the Garbha Upaniṣad and the other Atharvavedic Upaniṣads connected with it. In fact, the treatment of the argument of the embryo’s intrauterine development, the delivery, and a physiological composition of the human organism, is preceded by the description of the rite śrāddha, which constitutes the subject of the Pindā Upaniṣad. After completing the discourse of the embryonic phase and its analogy with the death of the body, the Śiva Purāṇa concludes by proposing, as a method of avoiding the danger of rebirths, exercises to control the breath prāṇāyāma. It, therefore, concludes in harmony with the third Upaniṣadic text of the trilogy, of which we have previously spoken, the Prāṇāgniḥotra Upaniṣad. It is true that the Śiva Purāṇa imparts a teaching specifically pāsupata, of a rite that the Prāṇāgniḥotra Upaniṣad describes in Brahmanic terms; however, one cannot doubt that this sivait text has picked up on the theme of the three Upaniṣads of the Atharvaveda².

To conclude such a comparison, one can affirm, with sufficient certainty, that the Garbha Upaniṣad is definitely prior to the Śiva Purāṇa. More cautiously, one can surmise an anteriority with respect to the Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa, while it is impossible to propose any hypothesis with regard to the Agni Purāṇa. However, all that we have deduced with a comparative method, leads us to think that the Upaniṣad we are dealing with, is contemporaneous to the period of fixation of the most ancient Purāṇas. Naturally, it is not possible to probe further back in time, to the period of elaboration of these oral traditions, especially for that which concerns the Puranic sources. The composite origins of these mythological collections could possibly be traced back to the prehistory of numerous ethnic groups, very different among themselves, and therefore sheltered from historical investigation.

The Garbha Upaniṣad develops in five khandas, of which the first two are dedicated to a list of different components of the human body; a somewhat obscure listing, that takes for granted the reader’s knowledge of classical doctrines of Brahmanism, of which the Sāmkhya is outstanding. However, the second khandā closes with a rapid exposition of how the physiological components of the body originated. The third khandā, which constitutes the heart of the brief treatise, is dedicated to the intrauterine life, from the moment of conception until the birth. In analogy with the belief by which the ghost-like body of the defunct (preta) develops, starting from the moment of death, by the aggregation of organs, likewise, here is affirmed that also the embryo grows creating from month to month a certain number of organs, instead of developing itself in its entirety, in a homogeneous way. In this same section, the Upaniṣad tries to justify the

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² It would also be interesting to analyse the contents of the Garuḍa Purāṇa concerning the embryo’s development. In this text both teachings are mixed together; the first for instance, which is more faithful to the Garbha Upaniṣad, calls the umbilical cord vāpyāyini (GP, Preta Khaṇḍa, 32, 61); the other, of tantric inspiration, calls the umbilical cord susumnā (GP, Preta Khaṇḍa, 32, 33). This Purāṇa has the two traditions intertwined and only a special philological study would allow its comprehension.
reasons for which one is born of one sex rather than another; further, it explains the causes of the birth of twins and of congenital malformations. The fourth khaṇḍa, as has already been noted, is largely constituted by a declaration made in the first person by the fetus itself. It complains of the painful condition to which it is subjected to, transmigrating from one matrix to another and it proposes to escape such a fate, as soon as it is born. The fetus, therefore, identifies three means, all equally effective, of liberating itself from the effects of karman: the practice of Śāmkhya-yoga, Bhakti directed at Śiva-Maheśvara and Bhakti for Viṣṇu-Nārāyaṇa. But from the Vedantic point of view, it mentions a fourth method, that not only liberates one from karman, but also permits the contemplation of Brahmān. The fetus’ intrauterine soliloquy is abruptly interrupted by a description of the birth which produces the oblivion of previous existences and, perhaps also, of the latest saintly resolutions. The fourth khaṇḍa, in this way, represents the literary apex of the Upanisad, concluding the fetus’ almost lyrical monologue with a dramatic finale. The brief treatise closes with the fifth khaṇḍa, which brings us back to a listing of the body’s components, but this time considered as objects and instruments of sacrifice. It is, therefore, a section that already relates to the contents of the Prāṇāgniḥotra Upanisad.

The Garbha Upanisad (translation).

1. Orī! This body is composed of five, and remains in these five with six supports, six attributes 13, seven humours, three impurities, two matrices, nourished by four foods. This body is composed of five because its five elements are: earth, water, fire, wind and ether. What is earth, what is water, what is fire, what is wind, what is ether? Here, that which is solid is earth, that which is liquid is water, that which is hot is fire, that which moves is wind, that which is hollow is ether. Here, earth is stability, water produces seminality, fire illuminates, wind pushes, ether gives space. Beside these, the ears perceive sound, the skin is used to touch, the eyes receive images, the tongue savours rasas, the nose receives smells; and then, the generation organs experience pleasure and apāna has the function of voiding, buddhi is designated to the intelligence, manas to ideation and speech expresses the word. It has six supports because it experiences sweet, sour, salty, bitter, spicy and sharp tastes. On top of these there are the seven notes; sadja, rṣabha, gāndhāra, madhyama, paṅcama, dhaivata and niṣāda. Combined, they become dozens [tens] and are described by the words “pleasant” or “unpleasant”.

2. It has seven humours; white, red, black, grey, yellow, fawn and pale. How is it made of seven humours? When Devadatta 14 was connected with

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13 These are the six musical notes listed at the end of the first khaṇḍa.
14 Gift of God. In this case it does not refer to the shell of Varuṇa and Arjuna, but the future baby’s name.
food, then, for their commune fluidity, the seven flavours that form the Rasa were produced. From this [Rasa] blood had its origin, from the blood flesh, from the flesh fat, from the fat tendons (snāva), from the tendons bones, from the bones marrow, from the marrow semen. Uniting the semen and the blood the embryo arises. It is said that in the heart there are all the elements; in particular, in the heart there is fire, from which is born bile, from bile is born wind, and consequently from the wind is produced the heart [of the baby].

3. One night after the union in a fertile period, arises a nodule (kalila); after seven nights it changes into a bubble (budbuda); in half a month arises the embryo (pinda); after one month it becomes solid; when two months have passed the head appears; after three months the formation of the feet is completed; at four months happily originate the sex, the abdomen and the hips; at five months the back forms; after six months form the mouth, nose, eyes and ears; at seven months the individual soul concludes its unification. At eight months all the parts are complete. If the seed of the father is prevalent a male is born, if that of the mother prevails a female. If the forces are equal a being with two natures arises. In the event of mental derangement (during the union) one gives rise to hunchbacks, dwarfs, cripples and blind babies. If the winds press against the seed from the two sides, a body bent into two forms, from which are generated twins. The fivefold composition can live and the quintuplicate conscience has the intelligent perception of smell, of taste and so forth: “It then contemplates on the free and unchangeable syllable” [Om]. Having concentrated in itself this immutable syllable, form, in the body of the incarnate individual, the eight producers [Prakṛti, Budhī, Abhāmkāra, the five Tanmatrās] and the sixteen products [Manas, the ten Indriyas, and the five Bhutas]. The prāṇa grows well on the food and drink received from the mother, which arrive by means of a cord in the form of a vein. Finally, at the ninth month it is complete in every detail, remembers the previous births and is aware of karman, good and bad, completed or not completed.

4. “Having appeared thousands of times in the mother’s womb, by eating, I have experienced food and, by drinking from the [mother’s] breast, [I have experienced] drink. I was born, I died and am again reborn. Alas, immersed in the ocean of suffering, a solution does not come to mind! However many good and bad actions I have performed towards fellow-man, this many I must consume: who thus experiences the fruit [of the actions] passes away. When I liberate myself from the matrix, I shall practice the Sāṅkhya-yoga, to obtain liberation from the effects [of karman] that produce that painful abode. When I liberate myself from the matrix, I

The text translated by Deussen has a gap: for this reason he does not mention the tendons.
shall prostrate myself at Maheśvara’s feet, to obtain liberation from the
effects [of karman] that produce that painful abode. When I liberate myself
from the matrix, I shall prostrate myself at the adored god Nārāyaṇa’s feet,
to obtain liberation from the effects [of karman] that produce that painful
abode. When I liberate myself from the matrix, I shall contemplate the
eternal Brahman”.

Finally, when, offspring of a long series of matrics arrives at the door
of the uterus, and, pushed by spasms, is born with great pain, then, encom-
passed by Viṣṇu’s wind 16, it forgets the previous births and deaths and
favourable and unfavourable karman.

5. Why is it considered “body”? Because in it the fires are united (Śri),
like the fire of consciousness, of sight, and of digestion. In it the fire of
digestion consumes that which is eaten, drunk, licked, sucked. The fire of
sight produces the vision of forms. The fire of consciousness discriminates
between favourable and unfavourable karman. There are three seats [for the
fires]: in the heart resides the fire Daksīṇa, in the stomach the fire Gārhat-
tya, in the mouth the fire Abavanīya. The sacrifice is Buddhi, who offers the
sacrifice is Manas, the officiant is the intention (Nidāṇa), the animal to
sacrifice is egoism, the satisfaction is the sacrificial consecration, the cup
used in the sacrifice is the faculties of sensation, the oblation are the
faculties of actions, the pot [for the oblation Puroḍāsa] is the head, the
grass Darbha is the hair, the altar’s stove is the mouth. The head has the
four [parts] of the skull furnished with sixteen dental alveoli on both sides;
there are one hundred and seven organs, one hundred and eighty articula-
tions, nine hundred nerves, seven hundred veins, five hundred muscles
three hundred and sixty bones, four and a half koti [45 million] of hairs;
the heart weighs eight pala, the tongue twelve pala, the bile a prastham, the
phlegm a āḍbaka the seed a kuṭāvam, the fat two prastha, urine and faeces
vary in proportion to the food 17. This is the Pippalāda doctrine of Libera-
tion, the Pippalāda doctrine of Liberation.

Thus ends the Garbha Upaniṣad.

16 Viṣṇu, as his name indicates, is the all pervasive god. Here, Viṣṇu’s wind represents the
atmosphere into which one is born and that enters into the lungs of the new born with the
first breath.

17 Pala is equivalent to 93 grams. Four palas form a kuṭāvam, 372 grams. Four kuṭāvams
form a prastham, 1488 grams. Four prasthams form an āḍbaka, 5952 grams.
नवम परिशोधनां श्रवण करने युनामुन्न न। पकाति तेन द्याभि पासों फँकः बभोगिन। पदि पद्यां पुनःनामि रेत्यं योगो व संगान्षेह। अइच्छारकार्यां फँबुकुमिरवाकु। पदि पद्यां पुनःनामि व रेत्यं मुक्त्यो मण्डलकार्यां आरण्यां देवन। अइच्छारकार्यां फँबुकुमिरवाकु। पदि पद्यां पुनःनामि व रेत्यं मुक्त्यो मण्डलकार्यां आरण्यां देवन।

अपि जन्मोऽर्धनारध नायिमं वीरं न. पनी श्रवणां त्रिभुजस्वत्व मौलितारी संयमस्ते वधेन्द्र-वीरव्यानो सहहुःतेन वातावर्ष चैण्वेन वाचुना संह्येय तव। न करति वनमन्येन न च करने युनामुन्न। ॥ ॥ शारीरान्ति फलाकू, साक्ष्य-द्रुम्यो तत् चत्रध्यानेन ज्ञानान्तिरेकुर्थानाँ। कोण्तांतिरेकु। तव तत् कोण्तांतिरेकुर्थानां। द्वीपस्तरयो यथा पवित्रितं दशयान। ददराणी रूपायां दन्ते रोरतिः ॥ ज्ञानान्ति: युनामुन च करने विन्यातित्वद चत्र। दृश्यद्वीपानि सर्वविव इद्र्ये इदिष्ट्यों हर्मणी सन्त यूजजनसीवासा। पजसानां इद्र्यो: पारीं मनो निमायः कोण्तां दानादुः पारो हरितेनसा संपूर्णवुह इप्रबन्धालो यज्ञानं च अन्ते हरितेश्वरं हरितेश्वरं। नृत्यां खुर्लिती महायो अपि निमायः कोण्तां दानादुः पारो हरितेनसा संपूर्णवुह इप्रबन्धालो यज्ञानं च अन्ते हरितेश्वरं हरितेश्वरं।