

Gobbet Piece

"I said that a woman should give birth to children for her city between the ages of twenty and forty, and a man after he has reached his peak. From this point he should father children for the city until the age of fifty-five..." (Pl. R. 460e – 461b)¹

This quote from Plato gives an insight into the beliefs surrounding pregnancy during the late fifth century/early fourth century. It shows that in Ancient Athenian society, pregnancy was something which was, in some way regulated, as there were specific time periods in which people were expected to begin having children and when they should stop. However, while the quote from Plato can be taken as a societal view, Plato's view was derived "in his ideal state, childbirth was strictly regulated..."². Plato was a philosopher (the ancient definition of philosophy was simply the "love of knowledge"), meaning that the works created by him were his ideas on an idyllic society, and not entirely representative of what the views of those in Classical Athens really were.

The idea that pregnancy and childbirth was something which would be regulated by the State is something which comes from Plato's idyllic view of how Athens should have been. Had the State regulated pregnancy, there would have been the expectation on people to have their children within a specific timeframe, and would also result in families having a certain number of children. However, the timeframe which Plato suggests would only be a guideline depending on the age of people, as there were many different factors which could have impacted on pregnancy and childbirth. There were high infant mortality rates across the Ancient world and as far into future as the 20th Century; diseases and the significant lack of appropriate medical help made the chances of children living until the ages of between 3 and 5 very slim. There were also risks that the mother faced, both during pregnancy and childbirth, such as Puerperal fever (an infection that may be contracted during childbirth, also known as Childbed fever).³ Plato's idea of the right ages for pregnancy and childbirth were guidelines on when people should have children, based on his idyllic view.

The quote from Plato represents an idyllic view of what pregnancy and childbirth should be in Classical Athenian society. It is not, however, representative of what the norms in Athens actually were during this period, as there was both significant risk to the mother and child when it came to pregnancy and childbirth, as well as the fact that the marriage age was more inline with the age a girl began her menstruation (between the ages of 13 and 16), which also meant that she would be of appropriate age to have a child.

¹ Kapparius, 2002, pg99

² Kapparius, 2002, pg99

³ <https://www.britannica.com/science/puerperal-fever>