

Epicurus' Birthdate

Post by “Eikadistes” of July 8, 2022 at 1:05 PM

Why do we have three different birthdates for Epicurus?

The 7th

“Epicurus was born (as Laertius relates out of the Chronology of Apollodorus) in the 3rd year of the 109th Olympiad, the 7th day of the month Gamelion” (Gassendi, *Epicurus, His Life and Doctrine* 106, 1660)

“[F]or he was born on the 7th and dy’d on the 10th of the Month *Gamelion*” (Stanley, *The History of Philosophy: Volume 3*, 122, 1660)

“[A]fter the death of Epicurus they were to be perpetuated in memory of himself [...] the anniversary of his birth, which fell on the seventh day of the month Gamelion” (De Witt, *Epicurus and His Philosophy* 104, 1954)

“First as to chronology. Of the authorities used in the *Life* far the best is Apollodorus, whose versified *Chronology* embodied the results of the great Eratosthenes. His data make it clear that Epicurus was born on the 7th of Gamelion (*i.e.* in our January) 341 B.C., and died in 270 B.C.” (Taylor, *Epicurus*, 18-19, 1911)

“Diogenes Laertius (10:14) also records a tradition that placed Epicurus’ birthday on the seventh of Gamelion. On the confusion (ancient and modern) between the gathering on the twentieth of every month and the celebration fo Epicurus’ birthday on the tenth of Gamelion, see Clay 1986 and Sider 1997: 152-53 and 156. Cicero (*Fin.* 2.101) and Pliny (*HN* 35.5) differentiate between the two” (Gordon, *Then Invention and Gendering of Epicurus* 30, 2012)

“He was born, according to Apollodorus in his *Chronicles* [...] on the seventh day of the month of Gamelion, seven years after the death of Plato.” (Mensch, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 498, 2020)

The 10th

“Another part went to defray the expenses of the social meetings held annually on the anniversary of the birthday of Epicurus (the 10th of the Attic month Gamêlion)” (Wallace, *Epicureanism* 66)

“[T]he annual gathering of the group to celebrate his birthday on the tenth of Gamelion (in January).” (Clay, *The Cambridge Companion to Epicureanism* 22)

“Epicureans are to observe: Epicurus’ birthday on the tenth of the month Gamelion” (Gordon, *Then Invention and Gendering of Epicurus* 30)

“The Will provides (a) for an annual celebration of the birthday of Epicurus on the tenth of Gamelion (his birthday was actually on the seventh, according to Diog. Laert. 10.14)” (The Greek Anthology: The Garland of Philip and Some Contemporary Epigrams 394)

The 20th

“He was born on the twentieth of the month of Gamelion (24 January 341) [...] The debate over the exact date of his birth was definitively resolved by Alpers 1968.” (Algra, *The Cambridge History of Hellenistic Philosophy* 43)

“There were two rites for Epicurus: one annual, the twentieth of Gamelion, his birthday, and one on the twentieth of each month...” (Dorandi, *Oxford Handbook of Epicurus and Epicureanism* 58)

“Cf. Plut., *Adv. Col.* 1117AB. Epicurus’ birthday was commemorated each year and the twentieth day of each month was celebrated in honour of Metrodorus and later also of Epicurus himself. Cf. De Witt, *Epicurus* 105.” (Rist, *Epicurus: An Introduction* 11, 1972)

“[F]or conducting the customary birthday feast for us every year on the twentieth of Gamelion” (Epicurus, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers* translated by Stephen White 417, 2021)

Post by “Cassius” of July 8, 2022 at 1:13 PM

Great post Nate. What is your conclusion - the seventh of Gamelion I presume?

I kind of see this as symptomatic of a lot of the commentary on Epicurus - it seems generally sloppy and people regularly say things that are not supportable in the texts.

Maybe to be generous, when there are so relatively few people interested in him many it is easier to make mistakes since there are so few eyeballs watching what is published.

And the divergences you cite are largely pre-internet age. As per the comments yesterday about the Wikipedia entries, in the age of the Internet it's both easier to correct AND easier for perpetuate errors.

This is a problem with no easy solution.

Post by “Eikadistes” of July 8, 2022 at 1:45 PM

"Sloppy commentary" is exactly right. I think this is what happens when secondary sources cite each other over source material. It seems to me that Epicurus' birthday may have been posthumously celebrated (after centuries) on the 20th as an extension of the monthly Eikas celebration. That, however, does not mean that he was born on the 20th of Gamelion, only that his birthday was celebrated in accordance with the monthly Eikas festival.

I am comfortable ruling out the 20th as a reflection of his historical birthdate. I think it is a symbolic custom. Who started that custom is also of interest, as they may not have had access to Epicurus' Last Will.

As to the differences between the 7th versus the 10th, Epicurus, himself, refers to the "**customary celebration of my birthday on the tenth day of Gamelion in each year**", whereas ancient authors like Diogenes agree that he was born on "**seventh day of the month of Gamelion**". I tend to think that one may have favored a historical birthdate as opposed to a celebration that has been tweaked to accommodate an occasion (like celebrating your birthday on the weekend).

My question, now, is this: is the usage of "customary" in Epicurus' *Will* a reflection of a symbolic celebration, moved in accordance to some other occasion? Or is this a technical description of his actual birthdate?

Post by “Eikadistes” of July 8, 2022 at 2:42 PM

I note that Diogenes documents both dates (the 7th and the 10th) within one page of each other, the first one being a citation to Apollodorus, and the second being a citation of Epicurus' *Last Will*: "He was born, according to Apollodorus in his *Chronicles*, in the third year of the 109th Olympiad, during the archonship of Sosigenes, on the seventh day of the month of Gamelion, seven years after the death of Plato" (498). And then, one page later, "[T]he customary celebration of my birthday each year on the tenth of Gamelion." (Mensch, *Lives of Eminent Philosophers by Diogenes Laertius* 499)

Since Both of these citations come from Diogenes, and they occur within a few paragraphs of each other, I think it is likely that the tenth is a symbolic custom, designated by Epicurus, and the seventh is the actual date of his birth.

The only proposition I have heard that corresponds with our Calendar comes from Alpers (about whom I could not find more information besides a citation from Alger) who proposes that the

24th of January corresponds with the 20th of Gamelion. So, if we are to take the 7th of Gamelion to be the actual date of Epicurus' birth, then that should work out to January 11, 341 BCE. And then, the "customary celebration" of Epicurus' birth would fall on January 14, each year.

From my sources, I am drawing the following conclusions:

The 7th of Gamelion is the actual date of Epicurus' birth (*Jan. 11th?*)

The 10th of Gamelion is the date of celebration for those who strictly follow Epicurus' *Last Will* (*Jan. 14th?*)

The 20th of Gamelion is the date of celebration for the *Eikadistae* who merged his Birthday with Gamelion Eikas (*Jan. 24th?*)

Post by "Joshua" of July 8, 2022 at 6:15 PM

Quote

The 21st day: "the later tenth". The Attic month had three days named "tenth" (equivalent in a straight sequence to the 10th, 20th, and 21st days). These were distinguished as

10th: "the tenth (of the month) waxing"

20th: "the earlier tenth" (i.e. waning)

21st: "the later tenth" (i.e. waning)

Does this clarify things for you? 🙄

Also of note; the 7th day of each month was (apparently) sacred to Apollo. Since one of the aspects of that God was *Apollo Epicurius*, is it too bold to propose that Neocles and Chaerestrates may have had this in mind when they named him? Or perhaps Epicurus really was born on the 10th or 20th, and later ancient commentators pigeonholed him into the seventh to fit the Apollo connection.

Impossible to say. But I would like to see this "3 tenths" business cleared up.

Post by "Joshua" of July 8, 2022 at 6:21 PM

One further point I'm gleaning from Wikipedia; the Greeks celebrated birthdays monthly instead of annually. So we've got a local Athenian calendar, enshrouded in a Greek culture, which has been generally interpreted for us by non-Athenians, non-Greeks, and/or latecomers.

Post by “Don” of July 8, 2022 at 8:46 PM

Fascinating thread! Thanks for doing all the legwork 😊

Post by “Cassius” of July 8, 2022 at 8:46 PM

Intriguing suggestions!