

Epicurus's Birthday: The 7th, 10th, or 20th of Gamelion? A Mystery Solved

Abstract

The date of Epicurus's birth has been a source of confusion and debate since at least the 1800s; however, the evidence for a clear and consistent date has been in plain view all along.

There are good reasons to accept that the date of Epicurus's birth in Apollodorus' *Chronicle* referenced by Diogenes Laertius in *The Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers* (LOEP 10.14) should be translated as "in the seventh month of Gamelion" and not "on the seventh day of the month of Gamelion" as numerous scholars have proposed.

Additionally, it has been shown that τῆ προτέρᾳ δεκάτῃ τοῦ Γαμηλιῶνος in Epicurus's Will refers to the 20th day of the lunar cycle in the ancient Athenian calendar and not to the tenth day of the month. A more literal translation would be "on 'the earlier tenth' of Gamelion."

In light of these corrections to the interpretation of the texts, there is reason to accept, with a high degree of confidence, that Epicurus's birthday was customarily celebrated annually on Gamelion 20 because that was his actual birthday. It is to this "Annual Feast of the 20th" (εἰκάδα δειπνίζων ἐνιαύσιον) to which Philodemus was inviting Piso in Epigram 11.44 in the *Greek Anthology*. It follows that the decision to choose the 20th of each month as the date for the monthly assembly of Epicurus's students would be in keeping with other monthly observances of the "birthdays" of "divine beings" in the Athenian calendar. In fact, Pliny the Elder, in his *Natural History* (35.2), states explicitly that Epicurus's birthday was celebrated every 20th of the month.

Furthermore, since the ancient Athenian month of Gamelion most closely matches January in the current Gregorian calendar, an optimal choice for modern Epicureans to keep to the spirit of Epicurus's Will would be to celebrate Epicurus's Birthday on January 20 every year. If a "movable feast day" is desired to more closely adhere to the ancient calendar, one can use a reconstructed Ancient Athenian calendar such as the *Hellenic Month Established Per Athens* to celebrate the event on Gamelion 20.

Introduction

The date of Epicurus's birth has been a source of confusion and debate since at least the 1800s; however, the evidence for a clear and consistent date appears to have been in plain view all along.

The ancient Athenians had various ways of timekeeping including two concurrently-running calendars: the festival calendar and the prytany calendar. There was also an Olympiad, a four-year cycle. The year was also considered to begin around the time of the Summer Solstice, not in midwinter as the modern calendar. The festival or civic calendar was used to determine the dates of festivals, both large and small, and other monthly, annual, and regular observances. The festival calendar had twelve months of 29 or 30 days each and years were designated by the eponymous archon¹ who presided over the Assembly during that time period. Each archon held the office for one year. The prytany calendar was an administrative calendar tied to the prytany or administrative council of the Athenian assembly. This calendar had ten months of 35 to 38 days each and was used primarily to keep track of financial transactions as proposed by the Boule and approved by the Ekklesia (Assembly). This is just a summary of the complex system of time-keeping used in ancient Greece. Entire books and whole academic careers have been built on this subject. Our focus will be the festival calendar as that is the calendar by which the birthdays of Plato, Aristotle, and Epicurus are all noted in Diogenes Laertius's *The Lives and Opinions of Eminent Philosophers (LOEP)* and other works.

It has been consistently accepted that Epicurus was born on the island of Samos to Athenian parents in the month of Gamelion in the third year of the 109th Olympiad during the archonship of Sosigenēs (342-341 BCE). However, it is the specific day of the month that has been a source of debate.

What was Gamelion?

Gamelion, known as “the month of marriage” (Parke, 104), was the seventh month of the ancient Athenian festival calendar. Each city-state (polis) had its own names for the twelve lunar months. The chart below provides four different city-states’ calendars as given by Robert Hannah in “Ancient Greek Calendars.”

Table 139.2 The lunar calendars of Athens, Delphi, Delos, and Phokis

Athens	Delphi	Delos	Phokis
Hekatombaion	Apellaios	Hekatombaion	Tenth
Metageitnion	Boukatios	Metageitnion	Eleventh
Boedromion	Boathoos	Bouphonion	Twelfth
Pyanepsion	Heraios	Apatourion	First
Maimakterion	Daidaphorios	Aresion	Second
Poseideon	Poitropios	Posideon	Third
Gamelion	Amalios	Lenaion	Fourth
Anthesterion	Bysios	Hieros	Fifth
Elaphebolion	Theoxenios	Galaxion	Sixth
Mounichion	Endyspoitropios	Artemision	Seventh
Thargelion	Herakleios	Thargelion	Eighth
Skirophorion	Ilaios	Panemos	Ninth

¹ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Eponymous_archon

Although Gamelion was the seventh month of the *Athenian* calendar, the reader will note that the name is not used in any of the other four examples. Epicurus was an Athenian citizen even though he was born in that polis's colony on Samos. Therefore, his birthday was determined by that polis's calendar. Gamelion's status as the seventh month is well-documented in the Athenian calendar, both in antiquity and in modern scholarship.

Gamelion was based on the lunar cycle so it corresponds in the modern Gregorian calendar to thirty days that usually start around early January but can sometimes run through early February, depending on the cycles of the moon. The first month, Hekatombaion, began each year around the first New Moon after the Summer Solstice. Therefore, Gamelion would occur seven months later in midwinter.

Was Epicurus born *on the seventh day of the month of Gamelion* or during *the month of Gamelion, the seventh month*?

The pertinent passage under discussion is *LOEP* 10.14 (using the Greek of Hicks at the Perseus Digital Library):

Ἐγεννήθη δέ, φησὶν Ἀπολλόδωρος ἐν Χρονικοῖς, κατὰ τὸ τρίτον ἔτος τῆς ἐνάτης καὶ ἑκατοστῆς Ὀλυμπιάδος ἐπὶ Σωσιγένοῦς ἄρχοντος **μηνὸς γαμηλιῶνος ἑβδόμη**,...

"So, he was born, says Apollodorus in (his) *Chronicle*, during the third year of the 109th Olympiad in the archonship of Sosigenēs **μηνὸς γαμηλιῶνος ἑβδόμη**,...

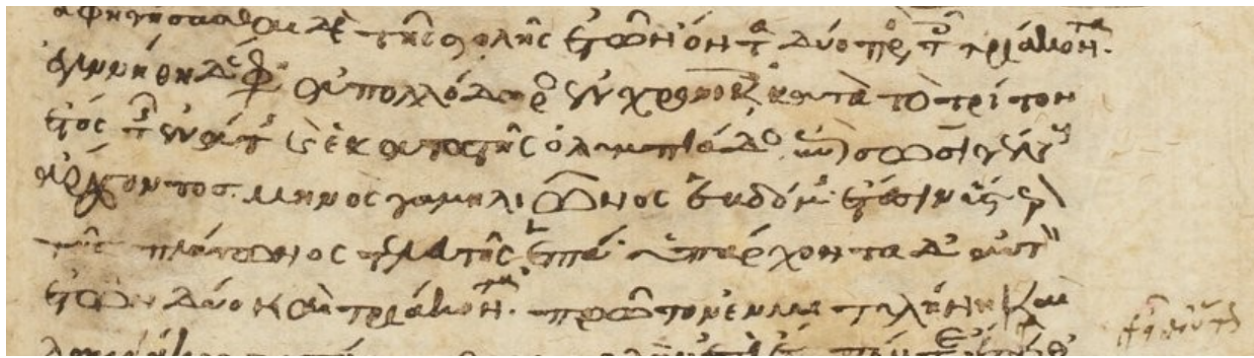
In fact, it is the final three words that are of most interest to the current discussion:

μηνὸς γαμηλιῶνος ἑβδόμη,...

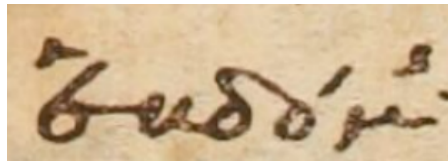
- μηνὸς = genitive singular of ὁ μῆν "month" (Attic form of μείς, masculine, 3rd declension)
- γαμηλιῶνος = genitive singular of Γᾶμηλιῶν "Gamelion" (masculine, 3rd declension)
- ἑβδόμη = dative feminine singular of ἑβδομος "seventh"

The first two words in that selection, being in the genitive case, would appear to be best interpreted as the use of the genitive of time. In this case, those words would be translated as "during/in the month of Gamelion." However, there appears to be controversy among scholars as to the form and meaning of the final word as well as a difference among the manuscripts themselves.

As a starting point, we can examine at least three manuscripts directly from digitized copies available online:

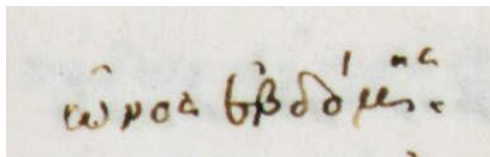
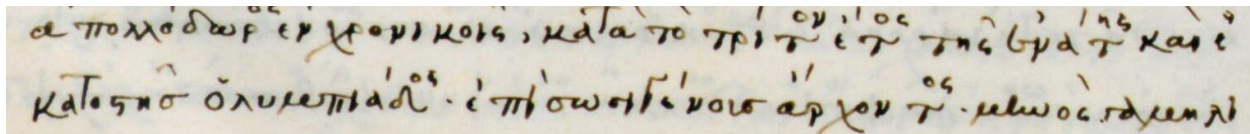


Here, on line 4 about 1/3 of the way from the left margin, one can spot μηνος γαμηλιωνος... in codex Parisinus gr. I758 known as P, from the 14th/15th century, on Folio 218r.² However the last word in the phrase takes the form of

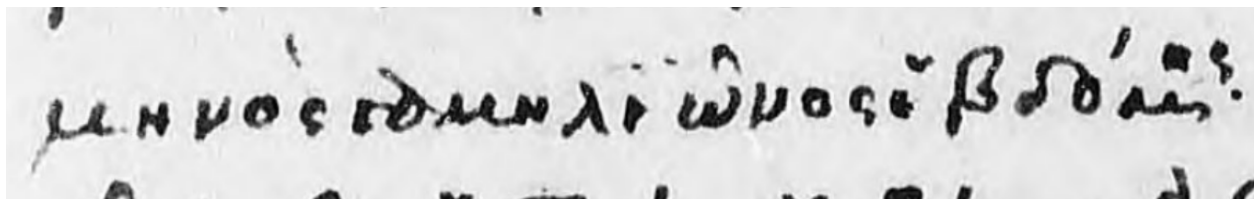


εὐδόμης (with the superscript at the end appearing to be a contraction of -ης per several sources³). This would appear to be, according to LSJ, a declined form of εὐδομος which is a Boeotian dialect form for ἑβδομος "seventh."

Directly below is this line as it appears in codex Laurentianus LXIX. 35 (14th c.) known as H.⁴



The first image is the beginning of the line with the folio ending with μηνός γαμηλι and ending at the top of Folio 218v with ὠμος ἑβδόμης (with the ending again supplied by the superscript ^{Hs})



This version above is from the line in codex Parisinus gr. 1758 (14th or 15th c.) known as Q, Folio 185.⁵ Here we also have μηνος γαμηλιωνος ἑβδόμης again with a superscript providing the ending.

² <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b8470453h/f447.item>

³ <https://schmidhauser.us/tools/rql/rgreekl2.pdf> #789 and <https://vuntblog.blogspot.com/2013/07/abbreviations-in-greek-minuscule.html>

⁴ <http://mss.bmlonline.it/s.aspx?Id=AWOltZA211A4r7GxMME1&c=Laertius%20Diogenes#/oro/446>

⁵ <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b107231783/f185>

So, one can see that at least manuscripts P, H, and Q all have genitive ἐβδόμη/ἑβδόμη and not Hicks' dative ἐβδόμη. This was also noted as early as 1887 by Hermann Usener in his *Epicurea*. Unfortunately, he, too, transliterated that last word the same as Hicks' ἐβδόμη⁶:

15 Ἐγεννήθη δέ, φησὶν Ἀπολλόδωρος ἐν Χρονικοῖς, κατὰ τὸ τρίτον ἔτος τῆς ἐνάτης καὶ ἑκατοστῆς Ὀλυμπιάδος ἐπὶ Σωσιγένους ἄρχοντος μηνὸς γαμηλιῶνος ἐβδόμη, ἔτεσιν ὕστερον τῆς Πλάτωνος τελευτῆς ἑπτὰ. ὑπάρχοντα δ' αὐτὸν ἐτῶν δύο καὶ τριάκοντα πρῶ- 15

However, Usener also adds a footnote:

B | ἐν χρονικοῖς om Ff || 16 ἐνάτης] ᾠ Ff | σωσιγένους F || 17 inter μηνὸς et τῆς uacuum spatium unius et quod excedit uersus reliquerat B¹ παπυλεῶνος ἐβδόμη . . . ἔτεσιν ὕστερον suppleuit B² | ἐβδόμη B²: ἐβδόμης FPQHf || 18 δ'] δὲ Ff | β̄ καὶ λ̄ F | πρῶτον ἐν BPQH:

Usener's note concerning line 17 reads (translated from Latin):

"|| 17 between μηνὸς and τῆς there is one empty space, and what is left in verse B¹ παπυλεῶνος ἐβδόμη. ... ἔτεσιν ὕστερον supplied B² | ἐβδόμη B²: ἐβδόμης FPQHf ||"

So, Usener seems to be saying that manuscript B² had εβδομη (again, not dative) while manuscripts F, P, Q, and Hf had ἐβδόμη. Since I do not have access to a digitized copy of B, I have no idea to what παπυλεωνος refers. It appears to possibly be a misreading, a scribal error, or a mistransliteration in B, because gamēliōnos “during Gamelion” is clearly present in P, H, and Q above. Usener implies that at least four manuscripts support ἐβδόμη and only B² supports the alternative spelling which is also not dative.

It should be noted that in other places in *LOEP*, Diogenes Laertius consistently uses a dative construction for stating “the Xth day of [month Y].” If the dative is not used here (i.e., the genitive or even nominative instead), that is likely a noteworthy discrepancy. This discrepancy has been noted by other scholars who convincingly imbue it with significance.

Two examples of Diogenes Laertius' use of the dative ordinal day will suffice and also provide us with another interesting wrinkle in reading the phrase in Book 10 as “the seventh day of the month of Gamelion.” In *LOEP* 3.2, we read:

Apollodorus in his Chronology fixes the date of Plato's birth in the 88th Olympiad, on the seventh day of Thargelion (Θαργηλιῶνος ἐβδόμη), the same day on which the Delians say that Apollo himself was born. (Hicks, 1925)

There are several interesting points to note here:

1. The word for "month" is conspicuously absent in this phrasing due to its redundancy. The word is already implied by the name of the month itself in question, Thargelion, the eleventh month.

⁶ <https://archive.org/details/HermannUsenerEpicurea1887/page/366/mode/1up>

- a. This is the same for Aristotle’s birth date in *LOEP* 2.44, quoting Apollodorus again: Θαργηλιῶνος ἕκτη (6th of Thargelion)
 - i. The fact that this quote is also from Apollodorus is significant as well. One would assume similar constructions throughout his work.
2. Diogenes goes to pains to point out that the seventh day was important for celebrating a festival of Apollo.

Parke, in *The Festivals of the Athenians*, also agrees that the 7th of Thargelion was the Delian celebration of the birth of Apollo; however, Parke also notes throughout his work that the 7th of *every* month was sacred to Apollo. If Epicurus was born on the 7th of Gamelion, it seems odd that Diogenes Laertius would not have mentioned this fact in that location or that Apollodorus would not have mentioned it in his text.

We now turn our attention to scholars other than Usener who have noted problems with interpreting the phrase μηνὸς γαμηλιῶνος ἑβδόμης as “[born] on the seventh day of the month of Gamelion.” Lewis (1969) unequivocally states that “Gamelion is the seventh month of the Attic year and the numeral is a gloss.” Algra (1999) also states definitively that Epicurus “was born on the twentieth of the month of Gamelion (24 January 341)” with a footnote: “The debate over the exact date of [Epicurus’s] birth was definitively resolved by Alpers 1968.” Alpers 1968 is a reference to Klaus Alpers’ paper “Epikurs Geburtstag” wherein he dismisses the seventh day of Gamelion almost out-of-hand since he goes on to “definitively” establish Gamelion 20 as Epicurus’s birthday.

It does appear from all the evidence that μηνὸς γαμηλιῶνος ἑβδόμης should be interpreted as “during the seventh month of Gamelion” or, more literally, “during the month of Gamelion, (during) the seventh (month).” Whether this is from the hand of Apollodorus himself or whether the “seventh” is a gloss from a later scribe, one cannot ascertain for certain. Could the seventh have been simply a numeral that was later written out fully? The different forms of the Attic and Boeotian ordinal number are intriguing, especially since Boeotia didn’t use Gamelion as the name of one of their months. The seventh month for them was Hippodrómios, therefore a gloss describing Gamelion as “the seventh month” would make sense. However, speculation is in many ways irrelevant due to the strength of the argument for Epicurus having been born on Gamelion 20.

We will next look at the widespread misinterpretation of the phrase τη προτέρα δεκατη in Epicurus’s Will to put to rest the idea that a possible birth date was Gamelion 10.

Misinterpretation of τη προτέρα δεκατη

In his Will (*LOEP* 10.18), Epicurus sets out the days of various celebrations to be observed within the Epicurean school after his death. One of those is his annual birthday celebration: καὶ ἡμῖν εἰς τὴν εἰθισμένην ἄγεσθαι γενέθλιον ἡμέραν ἐκάστου ἔτους τῇ προτέρα δεκάτῃ τοῦ Γαμηλιῶνος, ὥσπερ καὶ εἰς τὴν γινομένην σύνοδον ἐκάστου μηνὸς ταῖς εἰκάσι τῶν συμφιλοσοφούντων ἡμῖν εἰς τὴν ἡμῶν τε καὶ Μητροδώρου <μνήμην> κατατεταγμένην. “And for the customary celebration of my birthday every year on *the earlier tenth** of Gamelion, and likewise for the assembly of my disciples which takes place on the twentieth of each month, having been established (in recollection) for myself and Metrodorus.” (Bailey, with edits and emphasis added).

Bailey, Hicks, and many other scholars simply translated the phrase τῆ προτέρᾳ δεκάτῃ as “on the tenth day,” completely ignoring the significance of προτέρᾳ within the phrase. Note also that the phrase is in the dative, just like the dative ordinal dates discussed above.

Each day in an Athenian lunar calendar month had a specific name in addition to a simple ordinal designation, here is a list excerpted from Pritchett (2001, p. xiii):

1.	νουμηνία	α'
2.	δευτέρα ἰσταμένου, ἐσιόντος	β'
3.	τρίτη ἰσταμένου, ἐσιόντος	γ'
4.	τετράς ἰσταμένου, ἐσιόντος	δ'
5.	πέμπτη ἰσταμένου, ἐσιόντος	ε'
6.	ἕκτη ἰσταμένου, ἐσιόντος	ς'
7.	ἑβδόμη ἰσταμένου, ἐσιόντος	ζ'
8.	ὀγδὴ ἰσταμένου, ἐσιόντος	η'
9.	ἐνάτη ἰσταμένου, ἐσιόντος	θ'
10.	δεκάτη ἰσταμένου, ἐσιόντος	ι'
11.	ἐνδεκάτη	ια'
12.	δωδεκάτη	ιβ'
13.	τρίτη ἐπὶ δέκα	ιγ'
14.	τετράς ἐπὶ δέκα	ιδ'
15.	πέμπτη ἐπὶ δέκα, διχομηνία (<i>IG I³ 6</i>)	ιε'
16.	ἕκτη ἐπὶ δέκα	ισ'
17.	ἑβδόμη ἐπὶ δέκα	ις'
18.	ὀγδὴ ἐπὶ δέκα	ιη'
19.	ἐνάτη ἐπὶ δέκα	ιθ'
20.	εἰκάς, εἰκοστή, δεκάτη προτέρα, δεκάτη προτεραία	κ'
21.	δεκάτη φθίνοντος, δεκάτη ὑστέρα, δεκάτη ἀπιόντος	κα'
22.	ἐνάτη φθίνοντος, μετ' εἰκάδας, ἀπιόντος	κθ'
23.	ὀγδὴ φθίνοντος, μετ' εἰκάδας, ἀπιόντος	κη'
24.	ἑβδόμη φθίνοντος, μετ' εἰκάδας, ἀπιόντος	κς'
25.	ἕκτη φθίνοντος, μετ' εἰκάδας, ἀπιόντος	κς'
26.	πέμπτη φθίνοντος, μετ' εἰκάδας, ἀπιόντος	κε'
27.	τετράς φθίνοντος, μετ' εἰκάδας, ἀπιόντος	κδ'
28.	τρίτη φθίνοντος, μετ' εἰκάδας, ἀπιόντος	κγ'
29.	(full month) δευτέρα φθίνοντος, μετ' εἰκάδας, ἀπιόντος	κβ'
30.	ἔνη καὶ νέα, Δημητριάς	λ'

As can be seen, the 20th had various names within the ancient Athenian calendar including “the earlier tenth” δεκάτη προτέρα. The other names of the 20th will be familiar to Epicureans since εικός is the name of the monthly 20th assembly (εικάσι being the form in Epicurus's Will).

The month was divided into three sections of ten days each in relation to the waxing, full, and waning moon, although some months had 30 and others 29 days. Merritt (1974) also provides lists of the names of the days in his work which coincides with Pritchett's. Pritchett and Merritt had a bitter academic rivalry, but each were in agreement on this list of names for the 20th day of the lunar cycle.

In fact, Pritchett substantiates this with several other citations throughout his works. In his *Athenian Calendars and Ekklesias*, p. 56, one reads:

Aristophanes *Clouds* 1131 gives the count as εικός, ὑστέρα εικός. At Erythrai, the 20th day was designated as προτέρα (without δεκάτη): F. Graf, *Nordionische Kulte* (1985) 195. The εικός was sacred to Apollo, being the day on which he was born: *Ety. Mag.* 298.1. For a decree of the Εἰκαδεῖς, see *IG II²* 1258 (324/3 B.C.). Εἰκάδιος was an epithet of Apollo, see Wernicke, *RE* s.v. (1895) 50.60–66. The son of Apollo was Εἰκάδιος.

In Pritchett's work on the Choiseul Marble, there is a note on p. 24 that reads:

To maintain that the abandonment of stoichedon order and the crowding of letters constitute arguments for a lack of available space is to misunderstand completely the inferior workmanship of the Ionic mason. What would this factor have to do, for example, with variation in the height of letter forms? I deduce that the mason was non-Athenian from the fact that in all Athenian inscriptions the regular way to refer to the twentieth day of a month was by the phrase *dekate protera*; this is what the Attic mason used in line 29. The Ionic mason, however, inscribed the phrase “on the twentieth day of the month,” the only use of such a phrase I know of in all official Attic inscriptions. The Ionic mason was not familiar with the regular way to indicate days in the Athenian calendar. The word *eikoste* has been restored elsewhere, but without warrant.

⁵ There are only three possibilities: Erechtheis, Kekropis, and Antiochis.

There is simply no question that Epicurus is clearly saying that his customary or usual birthday celebration is on the 20th day - “the earlier tenth/dekate protera” - of Gamelion. We have already addressed the controversy surrounding the seventh of Gamelion, and this adherence to the text's τῆ προτέρα δεκάτη definitively puts to rest the proposition that the 10th of Gamelion is a contender for the date of Epicurus's birth.

Some scholars have recognized the significance of τῆ προτέρα δεκάτη, including Alpers (1968). Bailey (1926, p. 410) provided the following commentary:

τη προτέρα δεκατη: sc δεκάτη ἱσταμένου as opposed to δεκάτη φθίνοντος Cic. de Fin. II 31. 101 ff makes a severe attack on Epicurus for these provisions for the celebration of his memory: id testimonio cavebit is qui nobis quasi oraculum ediderit nihil ad nos pertinere post mortem? The answer would probably be that Epicurus did not suppose that such celebrations would affect him, but thought it would be valuable to the coming generations of his disciples to keep his memory fresh. From the festival on the 20th Athenaeus says that the Epicureans were known as the εικαδισταί.

Bailey appears to recognize the three “10th’s” since he references τη προτέρα δεκατη (“the earlier tenth” or 20th day), δεκάτη ἰσταμένου (“the tenth waxing” or 10th day), and δεκάτη φθίνοντος (“later tenth” or 21st when the moon was waning). However, he appears to have failed to recognize the significance of this when he translated it simply as “on the tenth of Gamelion” in his text.

Before are several examples of translations of these terms within other ancient Greek texts to substantiate the fact that Epicurus was unequivocally saying his birthday was celebrated on Gamelion 20:

Andocides, *On the Mysteries*, 1.121⁷

“ [121] εἰ δὲ μή, ἐγὼ ἐπιδικάσομαι.” γνοὺς ταῦτα Καλλίας λαγγάνει τῷ υἱεῖ τῷ ἑαυτοῦ τῆς ἐπικλήρου, τῆς δεκάτης ἰσταμένου, ἵνα μὴ ἐπιδικάσωμαι ἐγώ. ταῖς δ’ εἰκάσι, μυστηρίοις τούτοις, δοὺς Κηφισίῳ χιλίας δραχμὰς ἐνδείκνυσί με καὶ εἰς τὸν ἀγῶνα τοῦτον καθίστησιν.

[121] As soon as Callias learned of this, he entered a claim for the girl in his son's name, on the tenth of the month, to prevent me from obtaining an order. Soon after the twentieth, during the Mysteries which are just over, he gives Cephisius a thousand drachmae, gets an information lodged against me, and involves me in today's trial.

Plutarch, *Alexander*, 76.2⁸

[2] τῆς εἰκάδι λουσάμενος πάλιν ἔθυσσε τὴν εἰθισμένην θυσίαν καὶ κατακείμενος ἐν τῷ λουτρῶνι τοῖς περὶ Νέαρχον ἐσχόλαζεν, ἀκροώμενος τὰ περὶ τὸν πλοῦν καὶ τὴν μεγάλην θάλατταν. τῆς δεκάτης φθίνοντος ταῦτ’ αὖ ποίησας μᾶλλον ἀνεφλέχθη, καὶ τὴν νύκτα βαρέως ἔσχε, καὶ τὴν ἐπιούσαν ἡμέραν ἐπύρεττε σφόδρα, καὶ μεταρθεὶς κατέκειτο παρὰ τὴν μεγάλην κολυμβήθραν, ὅτε δὴ τοῖς ἡγεμόσι διελέχθη περὶ τῶν ἐρήμων ἡγεμονίας τάξεων, ὅπως καταστήσωσι δοκιμάσαντες.

[2] On the twentieth, after bathing again, he performed his customary sacrifice; and lying in the bathing-room he devoted himself to Nearchus, listening to his story of his voyage and of the great sea. The twenty-first he spent in the same way and was still more inflamed, and during the night he was in a grievous plight, and all the following day his fever was very high. So he had his bed removed and lay by the side of the great bath, where he conversed with his officers about the vacant posts in the army, and how they might be filled with experienced men.

Cicero notes⁹ that Epicurus’ heirs, “Amynochus and Timocrates, shall after consultation with Hermarchus assign a sufficient sum to celebrate his birthday every year in the month of Gamelion, and also on the twentieth day of every month shall assign a sum for a banquet to his fellow-students in philosophy, in order to keep alive the memory of himself and of Metrodorus.”

Amynomachus et Timocrates, heredes sui, de Hermarchi sententia dent quod satis sit ad diem agendum natalem suum quotannis mense Gamelione, itemque omnibus mensibus vicesimo die lunae dent ad eorum epulas qui una secum philosophati sint, ut et sui et Metrodori memoria colatur. See Cicero, *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum* II :101–102 (Rackham, LCL).

⁷ <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0017%3Aspeech%3D1%3Asection%3D121>

⁸ <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A2008.01.0129%3Achapter%3D76%3Asection%3D2>

⁹ https://ecommons.luc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=4875&context=luc_diss

The annual celebration of Epicurus's birth on Gamelion 20 was undoubtedly the event to which Philodemus was inviting Lucius Calpurnius Piso Caesoninus, the father-in-law of Julius Caesar, in his famous epigram:

To-morrow, dearest Piso, your friend, beloved by the Muses, who keeps our annual feast of the twentieth invites you to come after the ninth hour to his simple cottage. If you miss udders and draughts of Chian wine, you will see at least sincere friends and you will hear things far sweeter than the land of the Phaeacians. But if you ever cast your eyes on me, Piso, we shall celebrate the twentieth richly instead of simply.¹⁰

αὔριον εἰς λιτὴν σε καλιάδα, φίλτατε Πείσων,
ἐξ ἐνάτης ἔλκει μουσοφιλῆς ἕταρος,
εἰκάδα δειπνίζων ἐνιαύσιον: εἰ δ' ἀπολείψεις
οὔθατα καὶ Βρομίου χιογενῆ πρόποσιν,
ἀλλ' ἐτάρους ὄψει παναληθέας, ἀλλ' ἐπακούση
Φαιήκων γαίης πουλὸν μελιχρότερα:
ἦν δέ ποτε στρέψης καὶ ἐς ἡμέας ὄμματα, Πείσων,
ἄξομεν ἐκ λιτῆς εἰκάδα πιωτέρην.¹¹

Additionally, Pliny the Elder in his *Natural History*, Book 35.2, states (emphasis added):

Thus it is that we possess the portraits of no living individuals, and leave behind us the pictures of our wealth, not of our persons.

And yet the very same persons adorn the palæstra and the anointing-room with portraits of athletes, and both hang up in their chamber and carry about them a likeness of Epicurus. ***On the twentieth day of each moon they celebrate his birthday by a sacrifice, and keep his festival, known as the "Icas," every month***: and these too, people who wish to live without being known! So it is, most assuredly, our indolence has lost sight of the arts, and since our minds are destitute of any characteristic features, those of our bodies are neglected also.¹²

There is a footnote to Pliny's text from the translator, John Bostock, that reads: *In reality, [Epicurus's] birth-day was not on the twentieth day of any month; but, for some reason which is not known, he fixed upon this day.—B. He was born on the seventh day of the month Gamelion.* This strikes me as the height of academic hubris in that a scholar writing in the mid-19th century and so far removed from the early first century CE assumes that he knows more than Pliny the Elder, who actually lived contemporaneously with Epicureans and no doubt knew some members of that school personally.

εἰθισμένην and ὥσπερ

Having established to a high degree of confidence that Epicurus celebrated his birthday on the 20th day of Gamelion (during the seventh month), we should address the implications for this on the monthly observance of the 20th as the day on which the members of the Epicurean school met to

¹⁰ English translation: <http://www.attalus.org/poetry/philodemus.html>

¹¹ Greek source: <http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:greekLit:tlg7000.tlg001.perseus-grc4:11.44>

¹² <http://data.perseus.org/citations/urn:cts:latinLit:phi0978.phi001.perseus-eng1:35.2>

remember Metrodorus and to celebrate the birthday of Epicurus. It's interesting to note that <μνήμην> "remember" – according to Bailey (p. 411) – "was restored by Aldobrandinus from the corresponding words of Cicero" (*de Finibus*, 2.31): ut et sui et Metrodori memoria colatur.

Recall that in his Will that Epicurus wrote:

καὶ ἡμῖν εἰς τὴν εἰθισμένην ἄγεσθαι γενέθλιον ἡμέραν ἐκάστου ἔτους τῇ προτέρᾳ δεκάτῃ τοῦ Γαμηλιῶνος, ὥσπερ καὶ εἰς τὴν γινομένην σύνοδον ἐκάστου μηνὸς ταῖς εἰκάσι τῶν συμφιλοσοφούντων ἡμῖν εἰς τὴν ἡμῶν τε καὶ Μητροδώρου <μνήμην> κατατεταγμένην.

Bailey translated εἰθισμένην as "customary," and ὥσπερ as "likewise." I would argue that the nuances of those words provide more clues to both the date of Epicurus's birthday as well as why the monthly 20th was established.

εἰθισμένην is more literally something like "having-been-ACCUSTOM-ed" which is very clumsy English but provides more nuance. Epicurus is writing that, over time, he and his students have become accustomed to celebrating his birthday on Gamelion 20, τῇ προτέρᾳ δεκάτῃ τοῦ Γαμηλιῶνος. The emphasis to me seems to be on the celebrating. It is a tradition that has become established. I can see no other reason for a tradition to become established than that is the day on which Epicurus was actually born.

The fact that it is connected grammatically and thematically to his discussing the monthly 20th also leads me to believe that the 20th was established because the "20th" of the month became "sacred" (in the broadest sense) to Epicurus. Just like the seventh was sacred to Apollo, the fourth to Aphrodite, and so on, each god had a day on which they were considered to have been born. That day each month was then sacred to that god. Epicurus was spoken of as almost god-like by his students (see the hymns to Epicurus in Lucretius, for example), so it follows that his birth date each month would take on special significance for his students.

One can ask why the day was also dedicated to Metrodorus? Maybe Metrodorus was also born or died on a 20th. There's no way to tell now. However, due to the fact that Metrodorus would have been appointed Epicurus's successor had he not died before Epicurus, it makes sense to me that Epicurus wanted to share a commemorative day with him. It seems that Epicurus losing Metrodorus would have been (to Epicurus) akin to the Garden losing Epicurus himself.

The word ὥσπερ is also significant in establishing this link between the annual and monthly 20th celebrations. As mentioned above, Bailey uses "likewise" in his translation, but ὥσπερ is a way of comparing two topics. It is a strengthened form of ὡς "thus, so" meaning something like "indeed just as" or "just exactly like." So, that section of his Will could be paraphrased:

Celebrate my birthday on the 20th of Gamelion as we've been doing, just exactly like we assemble together on the 20th of every month to remember Metrodorus and me (as the leaders of this school).

Translating the ancient 20th to the modern calendar

Since the ancient Athenian month of Gamelion most closely matches January in the current Gregorian calendar (shifting one or two weeks forward and back), an optimal choice for modern Epicureans to keep to the spirit of Epicurus's Will would be to celebrate Epicurus's Birthday on January 20 every year. This maintains the 20th as a "sacred" commemoration on the month occurring midwinter.

For those wanting a feast that more closely matches the lunar cycles of the ancient calendar, one can use a reconstructed Ancient Athenian calendar such as the *Hellenic Month Established Per Athens*¹³ but Gamelion 20 should be used as the day.

Conclusion

It is nearly impossible to provide a specific modern Gregorian date to an event that happened in antiquity. The variable days, chronologies, and simply the vast stretch of time make calculations like that almost sure to fail to one degree or another. Saying that Julius Caesar died on March 15 because he died on the Ides of March¹⁴ is a convenient shorthand at best. We understandably want to put historical events in a context significant to us, but history has no such obligation to accommodate our desires.

However, when we have dates given in reference to the calendar actually used in ancient times, we can place that date within the context of the event's contemporary culture. Knowing an event took place on a day in Gamelion or in Thargelion or on the Idus Martiae may not mean much to us; but, to the people who lived through it, it was as readily comprehensible to them as it is to us when we say in the United States that we're celebrating the Fourth of July.

We are fortunate to have as much information as we do concerning the birth of Epicurus, let alone enough information for it to be debated. That said, the ancient textual references, the volumes of scholarship, and the corrected interpretations all clearly point to Epicurus being born on the 20th day of Gamelion during the third year of the 109th Olympiad when Sosigenēs held the archonship in Athens.

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Epicurus’s Birthday: The 7th, 10th, or 20th of Gamelion? A Mystery Solved

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