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A GOOD TIME FOR A PRIVATE FESTIVAL:  
BACCHYLIDES 20 B AND THE TESTAMENT OF EPICURUS

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- 1) Bacchylides 20 B, 5: Καὶ συμποσ[ίαι]σιν ἄγαλμ' [ἐν] εἰκάδεσ[σιν] (an adornment for the symposia on the twentieth of any month)
- 2) From the Testament of Epicurus (F 217 Usener), in: Diog.Laert. 10, 18: τὴν γενομένην σύνοδον ἐκάστου μηνὸς ταῖς εἰκάσιν (the get-together on the twentieth of every month)

In his excellent commentaries on Bacchylides, Herwig Maehler<sup>1</sup> barely tries to explain why the twentieth of any month of any Greek festival calendar<sup>2</sup> would be a good date for a symposion: “The twentieth day of the month may have had something to do with Apollon Eikadios.” This is probably the case – but why? I do not know why the twentieth day of the month (which was based on the lunar phase cycle and started, in principle at least, with the first visibility of the lunar crescent) was associated with Apollo, but I do think there are good reasons for holding a symposion or a similar type of private festival on this particular day. It has been observed that most Greek festivals take place during the waxing moon, including the full moon.<sup>3</sup> The Greeks, or some of them, probably counted as a day of the full moon the sixteenth of the month as well, on the evening of which the moon, while usually not full astronomically speaking,<sup>4</sup> looks full to the naked eye (in fact, the moon’s apparent shape changes least around the time of the full moon). Anyway, the sixteenth of the month the Olympic games were held (the Parthenios or the Apollonios) was the last day of those games, the day the prizes were awarded and some of the shorter victory odes performed – Bacchylides even seems to begin his seventh victory ode with an invocation of this day. There are several reasons for the preference for the waxing and the full moon, of which the aesthetic and prescientific ones spring readily to mind,<sup>5</sup> but strangely enough too many contemporary scholars do not seem to realise just how considerable the practical benefits were. The waxing moon is not only symbolic and beautiful – even before the end of its first quarter it provides light and thus safety and confidence, even on slightly cloudy nights, and exactly when it is usually most needed for a public festival: from just after sundown well into the night and, in the case of the full moon, until sunrise. As every serious hiker knows, bright moonlight can improve one’s pace significantly compared to the light of a torch, even an electric one.<sup>6</sup> While torches of some type should always be carried during hikes after sunset (because any area in the moon’s shadow will be almost totally dark), moonlight is not only just “nice to have”. The chorus of Aristophanes’ *Clouds* says in 607–614 that the goddess Selene wants to remind the Athenians and their allies of the money she is saving them (at least a drachma per month) which otherwise they would have to spend on torches. This is hardly an exaggeration. Starlight is not nearly enough to see by at night.

<sup>1</sup> H. Maehler, *Die Lieder des Bakchylides. Zweiter Teil: die Dithyramben und Fragmente. Text, Übersetzung und Kommentar*, Leiden 1997; id., *Bacchylides: A Selection*, Cambridge 2004.

<sup>2</sup> As F. M. Dunn has shown, the Athenian civil month, while based on the phases of the moon, was not strictly observational, even if no actual tampering in the negative sense took place: *Tampering with the Calendar*, *ZPE* 123 (1998), 213–231.

<sup>3</sup> See particularly J. D. Mikalson, *The Sacred and Civil Calendar of the Athenian Year*, Princeton 1975, 13–24; C. Trümper, *Feste zur Vollmondzeit: Die religiösen Feiern Attikas im Monatslauf und der vorgeschichtliche attische Kultkalender*, *ZPE* 121 (1998), 109–115.

<sup>4</sup> One would think that the full moon always fell on the fifteenth of the civil month, but as Dunn has shown (see n. 2) p. 216, even under ideal conditions (i.e. for observing the lunar crescent), the full moon could fall (in Athens) on the eleventh to sixteenth day of the month, rarely on the tenth.

<sup>5</sup> See Cl. Préaux, *La lune dans la pensée grecque*, *Académie de Belgique, Mémoires, Classe des Lettres*, 2.Sér. 61, 4, Brussels 1973, particularly 64–135.

<sup>6</sup> See e.g. T. Gooley, *The Walker’s Guide to Outdoor Clues and Signs*, London 2014, 210. I recommend a good headlamp, by the way.

However, festivals which took place indoors could be celebrated on or near the new moon (in our sense of the word), as the archery contest of the *Odyssey* probably was.<sup>7</sup> And symposia could be held during the third quarter, when the gibbous waning moon will rise before midnight and set well after sunrise. The nights illuminated by a full moon from dusk till dawn would have been even better<sup>8</sup> but were, so to speak, booked solid, and no moonlight was needed for the preliminary stage of the symposium anyway, before sunset, when the guests or the first batch of them were already present (indoors, of course) and waiting for the sun to set before starting to drink; see *Alcaeus F 346, 1 Voigt*. There would have been sufficient moonlight for others to join the party later in the night, even well before midnight, and also for those who wished to go home before dawn.<sup>9</sup> When it was too cloudy for the moon to be visible, servants would have provided torches and escorted the participants home, see above, but if there was a nice (full or) gibbous moon anyone not too drunk or too old could go home unaccompanied, cf. *Xenophanes 21 B 1, 14–15*.<sup>10</sup>

The only fact which takes some explaining is the preference for the twentieth instead of the seventeenth to nineteenth. I am not saying the Greeks would not have held symposia on any other night except the twentieth, particularly of the third quarter, and Epicurus' preference for the twentieth can readily be explained by the fact that this was also the date of his birthday; see below. But in the case of Bacchylides other factors were involved. The Greeks, particularly but not only the Athenians, tended to divide the moon into decades,<sup>11</sup> which is why, as Martin L. West observes, “the 20th appears as one of the cardinal points of the Greek month”.<sup>12</sup>

As regards the nights of the waxing moon, i.e. those of the first and second quarters, not only were most of them reserved for other festivals, but, even more importantly, at least the first eleven nights of the month (counting from conjunction, i.e. the new moon in our sense of the word) were far less suited for holding symposia than those of the third quarter because there would have been no moonlight for a significant length of time before civil and even nautical dawn.<sup>13</sup> I cannot be more precise than that because the length of the phases of dawn depends not only on the observer's latitude but also on the time of year.

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<sup>7</sup> Cf. N. Austin, *Archery at the Dark of the Moon*, Berkeley/Los Angeles/London 1975, 244–246. In the case of the *Odyssey* the new moon in the modern sense must be meant (see 14, 161–162 and 19, 306–307), not the day of the first visibility of the moon's crescent in the evening.

<sup>8</sup> It is erroneous to assume that the full moon is exactly twice as bright as the half moon. Actually the difference is far more dramatic because the closer the moon approaches opposition, the shorter the shadows on its surface become. For a short time, due to the so called opposition surge the full moon is more than ten times brighter than the half moon. But this effect, of which shadow hiding is not the only reason, was observed only quite recently; see the wikipedia articles “opposition surge” and “Oppositionseffekt”, the reason probably being that astronomers hardly ever observe the full moon because the lack of shadows obliterates most structures.

<sup>9</sup> I have tried in vain to pinpoint the source of the ridiculous adage “It is always darkest just before dawn”. Coldest, as a rule, yes. Darkest, not during the second half of the synodic month, and even then only if we count astronomical dawn, during which it is still too dark to make out the horizon, see my n. 13.

<sup>10</sup> Xenophanes does not mention the moon, but how could anyone, no matter how sober, have found his way home in total darkness? Or were symposiasts expected to carry their own torches?

<sup>11</sup> For reasons explained by Cl. Préaux (see my n. 5) 78–81.

<sup>12</sup> Hesiod, *Works and Days*, Oxford 1978, on v. 792.

<sup>13</sup> For the roughly equivalent expressions in Greek, see my *Time in Greek Epic*, in: Ch. Reitz / S. Finkmann (eds.), *Structures of Epic Poetry*, vol. II/2, Berlin/Boston 2019, 183–214, p. 190. As for astronomical dawn and dusk, the Greeks almost certainly considered them as parts of the night because by then it is still or already too dark for sailors to make out the horizon. In fact, A. Chaniotis is far too optimistic when he affirms, at the beginning of his otherwise excellent *Nessun dorma! Changing Nightlife in the Hellenistic and Roman East*, in: id. (ed.), *La nuit. Imaginaire et réalités nocturnes dans le monde gréco-romain*. *Entretiens Hardt 64* (2018), 1–49, that “Unlike the definition of so many other subjects studied by historians that of the ‘night’ is clear and unambiguous.” This is unfortunately not the case, and even more unfortunately none of the other participants seems to have known enough about the astronomical aspects of the “réalités” either; see my *Basic Astronomy. Concerning Sappho F 34, F 96 and F 168 B Voigt, the Homeric Hymn to Hermes, and Pindar's fourth Isthmian Ode*, *Hermes* 149 (2021), 144–156, pp. 49–50, n. 50. Still, this volume is essential reading.

Now, let us consider the testament of Epicurus. I think Klaus Alpers<sup>14</sup> has proved beyond reasonable doubt that Epicurus' birthday was celebrated on the twentieth of the month of Gamelion and that this date is meant by the admittedly peculiar<sup>15</sup> expression τῆ προτέρᾳ τοῦ Γαμηλιῶνος. So, if this is the case, why does Epicurus not use the same expression for the monthly σύνοδος? He may have wanted to use a more matter-of-fact, even official sounding expression for his birthday but an older and more traditional one for the monthly get-together dedicated to his and Metrodorus' memory, and εἰκόσ seems to have been an old expression even when Hesiod (or some near contemporary of his) wrote the "Days" part of the Erga.<sup>16</sup> There is no reason to believe Plutarch, Non posse suaviter vivi 4 (Mor. 1089c) who says in so many words that the twentieth was, for Epicureans, a date for particularly sumptuous dinners. Epicurus chose his words carefully, avoiding the terms σύνδειπνον and συμπόσιον, and this may have prompted Cicero to let the Elder Cato say, Sen. 13, 45, i.e. in a treatise dedicated to the Epicurean Atticus: *Bene enim maiores accubitionem epularem amicorum, quia vitae coniunctionem haberet, convivium nominaverunt, melius quam Graeci, qui hoc idem tum comptationem, tum concenationem vocant.*<sup>17</sup> In fact, Cicero paraphrases a part of Epicurus' testament in Fin. 2, 101: *et sanciat (sc. Epicurus) ut 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 sunt.*

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<sup>14</sup> Epikurs Geburtstag, MH 25 (1968), 48–51. But, as Bacchylides 20 B shows, εἰκόσ was not, as Alpers assumes p. 51, an expression peculiar to the Kepos.

<sup>15</sup> So peculiar Cicero avoids translating it in his paraphrase Fin. 2, 101, see below. I fail to understand why the Athenians had an "earlier" and a "later" tenth day (of the waning moon, counting backwards); this would have made sense if they had omitted one of those in the "hollow" months, but W. K. Pritchett and O. Neugebauer have shown that they did not: when the month was hollow, the δευτέρα φθίνοντος was omitted: *The Calendars of Athens*, Cambridge, Mass. 1947, 30–32.

<sup>16</sup> See M. L. West (see my n. 12), 349. Like West 41–59, 346–347 and 376–378, I see no reason to doubt the authenticity of this final part of the Erga. I wonder, by the way, whether Epicurus avoided the term εἰκόσ for his birthday because he did not want to seem presumptuous, since according to Erga 792–793 this is a day on which intelligent men are born. But this theory of mine is only a very tentative suggestion as we do not know whether this part of the Erga was still taken seriously in Epicurus' time.

<sup>17</sup> Cicero voices the same sentiment in his own name in Fam. 9, 24, 3, a letter to Paetus written about a year after Sen., but using the Greek terms he translated in Sen. 13, 45, probably with terms coined by himself, see J. G. F. Powell, *Cicero Cato maior de senectute*, ed. with intr. and comm., Cambridge 1988, who points out that neither *comptatio* nor *concenatio* occurs elsewhere in classical Latin.