

## Birth and Childhood Rituals for Followers of Hellenic Reconstructionism

by Melissa Gold, based on a clergy education assignment. April 24, 2023

Couples or individuals who follow Hellenic Reconstructionism may wonder what they need to know and do ritually when expecting their first child and once the child arrives. Below is a timeline of what parents might do traditionally at various times, starting even before conception. Although the list of steps is detailed, no parent should consider that all the steps must be done. Pregnancy brings enough challenges as it is, and the important goal is a healthy birth of a healthy child. However, for those parents who want to enrich their experience of birth and raising a family within the Hellenic tradition, this list provides the important details up to the time when the child becomes an adolescent.

**Pre-birth** – Preparing for a child you wish to raise in the Hellenic tradition is like preparing for any other child, and you might incorporate the following Hellenic actions into your preparations:

- Hoping to conceive. Make prayers to Aphrodite, whom Orphic Hymn 55 calls “giver of heirs,” and to Hera, who is associated with water, conception and the development of life, of whom Orphic Hymn 16 says: “Mother of rainstorms, nursemaid of winds that give birth to all things/Without you, absolutely no life ever happened/You are universally commingled in everything divine/For you alone govern all things and you rule all life/By the celestial susurrus of the rushing rain” (Orpheus).
- Choosing a name. You can, of course, choose any name you wish! If you would like to give your child a Greek name, and your partner agrees, you can choose from a number of existing ancient names. Names for boys in ancient times emphasized some trait parents wanted him to display in the outer world; girls’ names were often either a feminine form of boys’ names or some positive abstract (Golden p 24). Do some research and make sure you know and are comfortable with what the Greek name means. Children can be named for gods, except for Zeus or Hades. Remember that a very unusual name may be difficult for the child at school or for grandparents or others to say.
- Asking *kourotrophic* deities to protect pregnancy and gestation. Kourotrophic deities are those that assist in the rearing of children (Liddle and Scott) and are “intimately involved with the growing process” (Garland p 112). Begin prayers to kourotrophic deities once pregnancy is confirmed, you might up a small shrine that will last until the child comes of age. Typically, the gods considered kourotrophic deities are Artemis, Dēmētēr, Gē, Hekatē, Hestia, Lēto and Heraklēs—as well as the *kouretes*—and especially Artemis and Hekate. Of Hekatē, the Theogony says: “And the son of Kronos made her a nurse of the young” (line 450) and “whom she will she greatly aids and advances” (line 429). Some kourotrophic deities are “associated with running water because rivers and streams were believed to promote fertility and growth. The association between water and the growing child, whether the *paidion* [infant] happens to be inside or outside the womb...” (Garland

p 112). Hesiod tells us that the goddess Tethys “brought forth a holy company of daughters who with the lord Apollo and the Rivers have youths in their keeping—to this charge Zeus appointed them” (Theogony lines 346-348) and, in fact, there are “three thousand neat-ankled daughters of Ocean who are dispersed far and wide, and in every place alike serve the earth and the deep waters (Theogony lines 364-366). Goddesses of rivers can be addressed collectively and you could add the name of any local river to your protective prayers. Also continue to honor Hera.

- Taking of omens. As the date of the expected birth nears, the parents can take omens regarding the birth or child (Garland p 104). If negative omens or signs arise, the parents should determine what ritual actions and objects might improve the outcome and provide peace of mind. This is an optional activity for those who wish to do divination.

**Birth** – Most births occur today in hospital rather than at home, but you can make prayers ahead of time and during labor to the goddesses of birth.

- Praying to goddesses that assist at birth for a speedy, easy, and uneventful labor. The goddesses of birth are Eileithuia and Artemis, often thought of as one, although Eileithuia just attends birth while Artemis is also concerned with the child from birth to coming of age. Of Artemis as Prothuraia (meaning “before the door of birth”), Orphic Hymn 2 says: “Eileithuia, release our pains at our time of terrible necessity/For you only do wives call the soul’s rest/For you care to end the pains of deliveries, Artemis Eileithyia and most revered Prothuraia” (Orpheus). Callimachus writes: "The cities of men I [Artemis] will visit only when women vexed by the sharp pang of childbirth call me to their aid—even in the hour when I was born the Moirai (Fates) ordained that I should be their helper, forasmuch as my mother suffered no pain either when she gave me birth or when she carried me in her womb, but without travail put me from her body" (Hymn 3 to Artemis, lines 20ff). Offer prayers and incense before labor begins and once it has begun (incense is likely not allowed in hospitals and you might want to do this early in labor before heading to the hospital).
- Making the ritual cry at the moment of birth. The female attendees might utter the ritual cry (*ololyē*) as the child’s body emerges into the light (Garland p 104), as the goddesses did at the birth of Apollo (Homeric Hymn to Delian Apollo, line 119). This is a high-pitched trill made by the tongue. In a hospital setting, this might not be possible or may have to be done quietly. You can also offer a quick prayer of thanksgiving to the assisting goddesses.

**Once Home** – If mother and child are healthy, they should be able to return home in a couple of days. You might perform a couple of special rituals to celebrate the new arrival.

- Announcing the birth. Hang a wreath of olive for a boy, a knot of wool for a girl on your front door to announce the birth (Golden p 24). If olive branches are not available, use

laurel or other plant used to make athletic wreaths in ancient times. Leave these tokens on the door until after the *Amphidromia*. This both announces to the neighbors that the child has safely arrived but also indicates that outsiders should not visit at this time. In ancient times, the concern for outsiders was that they not become tainted by the pollution of birth (Garland p 75) but this is also a time that the parents need rest and the child is vulnerable to germs. [Note: if you wish not to announce the apparent gender of the child but only a healthy birth, use any fresh vegetation with or without strands of wool.]

- Performing rituals of thanksgiving at home. In ancient times, the mother would purify herself on the fourth day by bathing, to remove the miasma of birth from herself. Today, both parents (or single parent) can purify on the fourth day (a mindful shower will do), then perform a personal ritual to thank the kourotrophic deities and birth goddesses you have prayed to during the previous months (Garland p 83). Garland quotes an epigram by Phaidimos from the third century BCE that you can adapt to your situation: “The son of Kikhēsius dedicated sandals to you, Artemis, and Themistodikē simple folded woollen garments, lady, because you came gently to her when she was in labor, without your bow, and held your two hands above her. Artemis, grant that Leon should live to see his baby boy wax strong in limb as a young man” (pp 83-84).

**Several days after the birth** – The traditional rituals after birth are the *Amphidromia* (going around) and the *Dekatē* (tenth day). In modern times, you can perform them separately or at the same time (Panopoulos *et al* p 131).

- Performing the *Amphidromia*. This ceremony, witnessed by only the family and those who assisted at the birth, introduces the new child to the family gods on or about the fifth day after birth (Golden p 24). The child’s father (or other parent or grandfather) circumambulates, that is, ceremonially walks around an altar on which there is a symbolic flame. In ancient times, the father would have gone around a hearth, the Hestia of the home. The “father” should address all the household gods and introduce the child to them as a new addition to the household (Garland p 94). Make small offerings and conclude with a small festive meal. A sample ritual script for the *Amphidromia* can be found in *Old Stones, New Temples* (pp 161-162).
- Protecting the child with charms. An optional practice after the *Amphidromia* is to tie small magic charms (*baskania*) to the child or its clothing to protect against bad luck, illness or the dreaded “evil eye” (Garland p 94). Of course, make sure that the charms or the yarn that attaches them cannot harm the child or be ingested.
- Performing the *Dekatē*. On the tenth day after birth, parents hold a second celebration to present the child to the larger community and announce the child’s name (Golden pp 23-24). Hold this ceremony at the family altar or an altar set with images of the kourotrophoi along with offerings of cake and incense. A sample ritual for the *Dekatē* can be found in *Old Stones, New Temples* (pp 163-165). The *Dekatē* can be a larger occasion and

attendees might bring gifts. Of course, a festive meal follows the ritual. In ancient times, women would dance around the altar and would receive a special cake (Golden pp 24). The name-giving ceremony can occur later if circumstances warrant (Panopoulos p 131).

- Ensuring ritual purity after birth. The ancients considered a woman who had delivered a baby to be ritually impure for at least three to five days. What this means is that those who consider themselves members of a priesthood (ritual leaders) should not visit the woman during this time nor should the birth parent lead a ritual. If the birth occurs at home, the priesthood should not visit for at least three to five days but may do so after the Amphidromia (Garland pp 96-97). Other family members who attended the birth or live in the house with the new mother should also not lead rituals until the Amphidromia (Garland p 97). The mother may attend public rituals and lead them on the 40<sup>th</sup> day after birth (Garland p 97).

**Kourotrophic Deity** – You don’t need to “select” a single kourotrophic deity for your child, as all the deities mentioned above may provide protection or influence over the child at various times in his or her life. However, you may find that one deity comes to figure prominently or your child may find themselves drawn to a particular deity, not necessarily one of the customary kourotrophic deities. This deity can receive special honors but all of them should receive honors on special occasions. Let the child hear and see you performing these rituals.

- Continuing prayers to the kourotrophic deities for the child. See the section on praying to kourotrophic deities above. Such prayers should naturally begin at birth and continue on birthdays and at any time the child is sick or faces some sort of danger until their coming-of-age ritual.
- Thanking the kourotrophic deities. A minor deity named Kourotrophos as well as Hekatē and Artemis were honored in ancient times on the 16<sup>th</sup> of the Greek month Metageitnion and several times a year on the Acropolis (Parke p 178). This day is a suitable occasion on which to do a small thank offering to these three and the other kourotrophic deities. Check the Hellenion calendar for when the kourotrophic ritual is held, as the date changes each year because the Hellenic calendar is lunar ([www.hellenion.org/calendar](http://www.hellenion.org/calendar)).

**Family and Community Ritual Life** –Involve your child in your ritual life as soon as they are able to take part. Provide roles in regular family rituals, like Noumēnia, Agathos Daimōn or Hekatē’s Deipnon along with any Dēmos or Prōtodēmos festivals and libations that you attend. Let ritual leaders know that you will bring a child or children to the ritual so that they can prepare some part of the ritual for the child to do. Even young children can sip watered wine, inhale incense, scatter barley, hand you a ritual object from a basket and perhaps say some of the ritual words, especially the names of the gods and goddesses and some epithets. As well, children have a special role in several festivals or observances during the year:

- Apaturia. The Apaturia is a three-day festival occurring during the month of Pyanepsiōn, but on no fixed date. In ancient times, the various small communities in Athens called

*phratriai*—whose members were “descended from a common male ancestor—would choose their own time to meet Parke (p 89). The third day of the festival was the one of importance for families, as this was when new family members were introduced to the community. In ancient times, the Apaturia was mostly an all-male affair that registered births, coming of age (manhood) and marriage (Parke p 89). Today, there are no *phratriai*. We may have a Dēmos or Prōtodēmos or fellowship or ritual group that could serve the same function. Also, as Campbell notes “In keeping with our modern commitment to gender equity, the ritual should be held for girls as well as boys” (p 165). For infants, the Apaturia would be a time to introduce the child to the group in a ritual followed by a feast. This is also an occasion in which adolescents celebrating coming of age might hold their rituals. Sample rituals for the various days of Apaturia can be found in *Old Stones, New Temples* (pp 248-250).

- Puanepsia. In the same month as the Apaturia, Athenians celebrated the Puanepsia, which centered around a meal called *panspermia*, a mixture of beans, wheat and other seeds and grains. This dish represented a pooling of provisions by Theseus and his companions returning from Crete as an offering to Apollo for bringing them safely back to Athens (Plutarch, *Theseus*, 22.4). During this day, boys would roam the city while carrying *eiresiōnes* and chanting the *eiresiōne* song above as they traveled from house to house. Plutarch described the *eiresiōne* as “a bough of olive wreathed with wool, such as Theseus used at the time of his supplication, and laden with all sorts of fruit-offerings, to signify that scarcity was at an end” (*Theseus*, 22.5). Parke says that the branches bore pastry shapes of harps, cups, vine branches and other things. The revelers apparently expected a gift from each house they visited (p 76). For today’s children, help them create their own *eiresiōne* and learn to chant the *eiresiōne* song. If the family can attend a Puanepsia ritual, the children can bring their *eiresiōnes* and parade around the altar after the ritual. Supply treats to all children. Information about how to make the *eiresiōne* and *panspermia* and other information about the holiday can be found on the Hellenion web site ([www.hellenion.org/festivals](http://www.hellenion.org/festivals)).
- Oskhophoria. The Oskhophoria was celebrated on the same day as Puanepsia in ancient Athens. The main feature of this occasion was carrying clusters of grapes still on the vine from a sanctuary of Dionysos in Athens to the shrine of Athena Skiras at Phaleron (Parke p 77). The telling of fables and stories during a meal were part of the rites, and these were apparently directed toward children (Golden p 43). For today’s children, try creating a puppet show of the legend of Theseus and the children he saved from the minotaur as part of the celebration or read a children’s version of the story. Information about the holiday can be found on the Hellenion web site ([www.hellenion.org/festivals](http://www.hellenion.org/festivals)). The Oskhophoria and Puanepsia can be celebrated at the same time.
- Khoes. The second day of the festival Anthestēria, called Khoes (“Pitchers”), is in part connected with children. On this day in ancient times, Athens engaged in wine-centered celebrations, and very small children, probably boys, were given little jugs (khoes) as

gifts, perhaps to allow them their first taste of (watered) wine (Garland p 122). These youngsters, about three years old, may have also received crowns of flowers (Golden pp 41-42). The jugs for children, which were small versions of the drinking vessels used by adults during the festival, depicted scenes of activities that children engaged in on the second day. These include dogcart races, ball games, wrestling and crawl-offs (Golden p 43). Another activity children took part in, especially girls, was a rite of Aiōra (swing), in which children sat in swings tied to tree branches (Golden p 43). In modern times, boys and girls should take part equally. Khoes may be a kind of initiation, in that children get their first floral crown and their own ritual cup for rituals. Let them taste watered sweet wine. Active games should be part of other practices for the day, whether in a group ritual or a family oriented one. Information about the holiday can be found on the Hellenion web site ([www.hellenion.org/festivals](http://www.hellenion.org/festivals)).

- Diasia. Ten days after Antheſtēria, Athenians celebrated the Diasia, an appeasement festival in honor of Zeus Meilikhios (kindly), which took place in the countryside to welcome spring with solemn but joyful celebrations and honor the chthonic aspect of Zeus. The festival involved night rites with sheep- or pig-shaped bread or pastry offerings, sacrifices, feasting, dances and hymn chanting (Parke pp 120-22). Children may have been a special presence on this day, receiving gifts. Today, as this was a more rustic and family-oriented festival, it is a good time to spend with family and friends. Hold a feast that includes bread formed into the shapes of sacrificial animals. If you can put some of the bread animals into a consuming fire, do so. Remember the dead on this night along with the well-being of your family (however you view it) with offerings and libations (*Hellenion Festivals*).
- To know when the various festivals occur each year, refer to the online Hellenion calendar ([www.hellenion.org/calendar](http://www.hellenion.org/calendar)).

**When the other parent isn't Hellenic** – For some of us, our partner knew we were followers of Hellenic Reconstructionism when we married or had our hand-fasting. For others, we began to follow the tradition after marriage or handfasting, and our partners may experience some resentment about the change. Some non-Hellenic partners may not care what traditions you follow or wish your children to follow and some may. In the second case, the partner may object to what you're doing or simply wish to include their traditions equally. Ronit Baras is director of a not-for-profit organization that provides education on diversity and advocates for religious and cultural tolerance. She writes problems arise in multi-faith families when one or both parents are dogmatic about their religious beliefs. Parents need to remember why they selected their partner in the first place and accept their differences and uniqueness. “You do not have to convert anyone to your religion in order for it to be right for you,” Baras says (“How Can Parents with Different Religions Raise Kids Successfully?”). She further recommends that families celebrate both religions' holidays as well as holidays and ceremonies from other religions to broaden the children's perspective and allow them to choose what path they will follow as adults. Like sex,

she suggests you talk about “religion” only if your child asks, and answer only the questions they ask. Otherwise, model what you feel is best about your tradition and involve the children as much as they wish to be involved. Alison Bowen, writing in the *Chicago Tribune*, suggests that couples talk about their parenting style before getting married (“How to Raise a Child in an Interfaith Marriage”). She quotes Seattle Rabbi Ted Falcon who says, “What is important for couples to know when they get together is to what degree each is attached to their own faith and tradition, and how they imagine children.” What do they see as the conflicts between their beliefs or practices and how will they bridge that? Obviously, grandparents can pressure one or both parents to raise the child in one tradition only, and parents should also discuss and agree on how they will handle that.

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