

*(by Peny Tsakanikou, archaeologist)*

I was born in Athens on the 13th day of the month Anthestirion [\[1\]](#) , around 440 B.C. Not an ordinary day at all! Athenians were celebrating the great feast honoring Dionysos and Hermes Chthonios [\[2\]](#) . I saw the day-light for the very first time on the third day of the Anthestiria festival: the day of the dead and the dying. “Bad omen” thought the midwife that delivered me but she kept it to herself. My parents, in order to exorcise the bad luck, gave me the name “Myrtis”, a bloomy name for the start of a flourishing life, happy and carefree as the escorts of Bacchus

[\[3\]](#)

...

I was the first child of a family that lived comfortably. My father Kleomenis, an Athenian citizen, was a metal worker and the owner of a workshop near River Ilissos. When he was in his thirties he married Dioni, my mother, an Athenian young lady, who was then only fifteen years old. Their marriage was based on an arrangement between the groom and his father in law, the so called “guarantee”. So my mother moved from her father’s house to her husband’s, ready to undertake her responsibilities for which she was preparing all her life, with the guidance of her mother, my grandmother Thaleia.

When she reached her twenties, Dioni was already the mother of two children, me and my younger brother Nikandros. The arrival of the little boy brought a great joy to the family –surely greater than my own birth- because in this way our father’s name would be eternally continued and the paternal property would be safely left. I still remember the branch from the olive-tree that my father hanged on the front door, as a symbol of the arrival of his male child, as well as the great celebration in our home when the baby was five days old.

Until the age of seven -the proper time to start his education- Nikandros was growing up with us in the women's apartments, the "gynaekonitis". There was the centre of the house everyday life: the kitchen, the storerooms, where we used to spin the wool and turn it into thread and where was the loom for weaving. There was my mother's "kingdom". From my early childhood I was taught to do all the housework, since my skill in housekeeping would determine my virtues and would ensure me a good marriage in the future. I was really trying to be up to my parent's expectations and become a worthy Athenian young lady, but the truth is that I envied my brother. He was going to school with his own "paedagogos" [\[4\]](#) , he was learning reading and writing, mathematics and music while he was daily practicing in gymnastics. He would obtain proper education and cultivation of his mind, so that he would be able to participate in the public affairs, as an Athenian citizen. I learned how to read and write by my mother. She taught me all she had learned by my grandmother. I was never outdoors without an escort. Only during the great religious celebrations the worshipping women were allowed to participate freely.

I know that I was obliged to stay at home, to listen the least possible, to speak the least possible without interfering in men's talks, but I have been curious by my nature. At nights, when my father and his friends were gathering at home, during the "symposia" that were taking place in men's apartments, the "andron", I used to secretly listen to what they were talking about. Of course, the presence of women was forbidden! I was really charmed by their conversations on politics before drinking was about to start. They were continuously talking about Pericles, the great Athenian leader, democracy, the rebuilding program of the sanctuaries on the Acropolis and the course of the Athenian Alliance.

We used to live in a neighborhood under the north slope of the Acropolis. Through my window I was watching the works on the sacred hill continuing after the superb opening of the Parthenon in 438 B.C. A crowd was going up and down the hill every day: marble workers, painters, sculptors, slaves and many faithful people ready to donate offerings to their gods. It was like a busy beehive!

That image was not at all the same with the one that came to light through my grandfather's Nikandros narrations. He had fought against the Persians and he was distinguished for his bravery during the naval battle of Salamina. Often, at summer nights when the family was gathered in our central yard, he was telling us about the evacuation of Athens right before the Persians' final attack, how children and women were transferred to Salamina for their salvation, and what the Athenians saw when they returned to their demolished and plundered city. «There !» he used to say «can you see the column parts inside the Acropolis fortified wall? These are parts of the old sanctuaries in order to remind us that civilization won the battles and that Greeks have a great strength when they join their forces»

I am a grown up girl by now, around 10 years old. The atmosphere in Athens has changed. It is rather tense. Father is always outdoors. He spends most of his time at the Agora participating at the citizen's assembling. He returns absorbed in his thoughts. The war has started. It is the year 431 B.C. «What war?» I asked my mother, «Have the barbarians returned?». «Don't even ask» she replied, «A different war has started, with the Spartans this time». «But they are Greeks too, right?» I asked myself. «What about the great strength of the Greeks when they join their forces against a common enemy, as grandfather Nikandros used to say? Who is now the common enemy and who are the barbarians?»

The war continued furiously. Athens was full of people who came from neighboring cities in order to be protected from the Spartan attacks inside the walls. Only women and children remained. Men were in the battlefields. For the first time I saw women outdoors without an escort and working so hard as men. The first year of the war ended with many losses. Among the dead was my father's brother. In the public funeral, Pericles touched us with his funeral speech. He glorified the bravery and the greatness of the Athenians, he appealed to the virtues of democracy and he gave courage to the relatives of the dead.

«I still don't understand: why all this pain?»

We are in the year 430 B.C. Athens has become a very crowded city. A disease burst out. People and animals are sick. They are dying quickly, within a few days. Healthy people are afraid to get close to the diseased. They are dying helpless and they are buried without offerings and honors. Neighborhoods are emptying, everywhere grief, despair. Two of our slaves got sick yesterday. First they felt burning heat and strong headache. Then their throat was swollen. Strong pain in the chest and severe coughing followed. My mother didn't let me go near them. «Be careful», she said "be careful".

«Maybe my turn has come... I am not afraid... After all I was born on the day of the dead...»

#### Recommended Bibliography:

Davis, W.S. *A Day In Old Athens: A Picture Of Athenian Life*. New York, 1914.

McNeill, William H. *Plagues and People*. New York: Anchor Books, 1976.

Pomeroy S. B., *Goddesses, Whores, Wives, and Slaves*, (New York 1975).

Reeder Ellen D., (Ed) *Pandora: Women in classical Greece*, Princeton University Press, (Princeton, N. Jersey, 1995).

Τζεδάκις, Γιάννης, (Εκδ) *Από τη Μήδεια στη Σαπφώ: Ανυπότακτες γυναίκες στην αρχαία Ελλάδα*, ΥΠΠΟ, ICOM-Ελληνικό Τμήμα, (Αθήνα, 1995).

Recommended links:

<http://www.ime.gr/chronos/05/gr/>

---

[1] The ancient month Anthestirion corresponds to late February-early March.

[2] In Greek mythology the name Chthonios (Χθόνιος) means "of the earth or underworld" and usually refers to Gods.

[3] Bacchus is another name for Dionysos.

[4] Paedagogos was a male servant obliged to escort his young master to the school bearing the educational equipment.