

During the time of Epicurus, who could read well enough to study philosophy?

Post by "Bryan" of July 11, 2026 at 3:13 PM

We do have two complete manuscripts, *Codex Oblongus* and *Codex Quadratus*, as well as the partial *Gottorpienses* -- all Carolingian and from the 800's.

Being able to read and write in Greek was a standard part of the education for the whole class of wealthy Romans. Many refused to read books written in Latin -- and it was common to question if producing "Latin literature" was even desirable. Latin is really a stark and unadorned language.

Cicero considered it patriotic to write fully in Latin, but he admits (just as Lucretius does) that writing completely in Latin is more difficult for him than expressing himself in Greek. In his private letters he switches between Greek and Latin within the same sentence very frequently. And, despite what Shakespeare has told us, Caesar's last words, if he said anything at all, were "καὶ σύ, τέκνον;" Greek was not used to "show off," many literate Romans were just thinking in Greek.

For Epicurean texts generally, the evidence points more to Christian indifference -- they were not burning our books, but they were not preserving them either.

"Look well and listen well whether any of our assailants bring forward a single argument from Anaximenes and from Anaxagoras, when, though the Stoic and Epicurean philosophies were more recent and taught largely, even their ashes are not so warm as that a single spark can be struck out from them against the Christian faith."

Augustine (fl. 394 CE), Letter 118.12

Some early Christian writers, before Christianity's integration into the Empire, also viewed the Epicureans as a bit of an example based in the Epicurean rejection of a conventional education. For example Tertullian, who was the first major Christian writer to compose in Latin, shakes his finger at Rome as says:

"We reject your spectacles equally to the extent that [we reject] their origins, which we know to be derived from superstition -- and because we stay away from the very things for which they are conducted. There is nothing for us to say, see, or hear with the insanity of the circus, with the imprudence of the theater, with the atrocity of the arena, with the vanity of the exercise

ground. How do we offend, if we prefer other pleasures? If we do not wish to be accused of knowing [them] – the fault is ours, perhaps, but not yours! But we reject the things which are pleasing to you all, nor do our things delight you all: given that it was permitted for the Epicureans to determine a certain truth of pleasure – that is, calmness of soul (animī aequitātem) – so too [it should be permitted] for the grand concerns of the Christian life."

Tertullian (fl. 200 CE), Apologetics, 38

Also relevant:

"If human nature is capable of wisdom: then artisans and peasants and women and, finally, all who bear the human form ought to be taught so that they may become wise – and so that a wise public may be formed from every language, condition, sex and age... the Stoics sensed this to such a degree that they said philosophizing is necessary even for slaves and women – and Epicurus as well, who invites those untrained in all literature into philosophy..."

Lactantius (fl. c. 290 CE), Divine Institutes, 3.25.4 & 7

We do have Alexander of Abonoteichus publicly burning Epicurus' [Principal Doctrines](#) in the marketplace, but he was an insane occultist and not a Christian.