

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

Post by “Joshua” of July 11, 2026 at 3:21 PM

Regarding the loss of texts:

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Alongside discussions of Virgil and Ovid, for example, the Roman rhetorician Quintilian remarked that “[Macer](#) and Lucretius are certainly worth reading,” and went on to discuss [Varro of Atax](#), [Cornelius Severus](#), [Saleius Bassus](#), [Gaius Rabirius](#), [Albinovanus Pedo](#), [Marcus Furius Bibaculus](#), [Lucius Accius](#), [Marcus Pacuvius](#), and others whose works he greatly admired. The humanists knew that some of these missing works were likely to have been lost forever—as it turned out, with the exception of Lucretius, all of the authors just mentioned have been lost—but they suspected that others, perhaps many others, were hidden away in dark places, not only in Italy but across the Alps. After all, Petrarch had found the manuscript of Cicero’s Pro Archia in Liège, in Belgium, and the Propertius manuscript in Paris.

-*The Swerve* by Stephen Greenblatt

And regarding Epicurean texts specifically, we do have a very telling remark that dates from the 4th century AD. In this letter written by the emperor Julian the Apostate for the purpose of instructing his pagan priests, he sets strict limits to the kinds of works those priests will be permitted to read:

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But for us it will be appropriate to read such narratives as have been composed about deeds that have actually been done; but we must avoid all fictions in the form of narrative such as were circulated among men in the past, for instance tales whose theme is love, and generally speaking everything of that sort. For just as not every road is suitable for consecrated priests, but the roads they travel ought to be duly assigned, so not every sort of reading is suitable for a priest. For words breed a certain sort of disposition in the soul, and little by little it arouses desires, and then on a sudden kindles a terrible blaze, against which one ought, in my opinion, to arm oneself well in advance.

And it's interesting to note the very first name he mentions, as a writer of works deemed unsuitable:

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Let us not admit discourses by Epicurus or Pyrrho; but indeed the gods have already in their wisdom destroyed their works, so that most of their books have ceased to be. Nevertheless there is no reason why I should not, by way of example, mention these works too, to show what sort of discourses priests must especially avoid; and if such discourses, then much more must they avoid such thoughts. For an error of speech is, in my opinion, by no means the same as an error of the mind, but we ought to give heed to the mind first of all, since the tongue sins in company with it.

-pg. 328, fragment of [A Letter to a Priest](#), by Emperor [Julian](#)

Finally, there is this famously difficult passage from the Christian historian (I use the word begrudgingly) Paulus Orosius, who was commissioned by Augustine to write a response to the pagans who blamed the sack of Rome in 410 AD on the lapse in devotion to the pagan gods, itself caused by the rise of Christianity. Here he describes the Caesar's conduct in the Siege of Alexandria in 47 BC. It is probably the single most important passage in all ancient literature touching on the question of the Christian role in the loss or destruction of books, and it is not at all easy to parse:

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During the combat, orders were issued [by Julius Caesar] to set fire to the royal fleet, which by chance was drawn on shore. The flames spread to part of the city and there burned four hundred thousand books stored in a building which happened to be nearby. So perished that marvelous monument of the literary activity of our ancestors, who had gathered together so many great works of brilliant geniuses. In regard to this, however true it may be that in some of the temples there remain up to the present time book chests, which we ourselves have seen, and that, as we are told, these were emptied by our own men in our own day when these temples were plundered—this statement is true enough—yet it seems fairer to suppose that other collections had later been formed to rival the ancient love of literature, and not that there had once been another library which had books separate from the four hundred thousand volumes mentioned, and for that reason had escaped destruction" (Historiarum Adversum Paganos [History Against the Pagans] Libri VII, VI.15.31ff)

He appears to admit to the Christian practice of plundering pagan temples, *and* to the looting of the books found therein. He does not record the fate of the books that were taken.