

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

Post by “Joshua” of July 11, 2026 at 4:04 PM

## Quote

Astonishing that the single copy of Lucretius was found. Another thing this made me think about was that probably the number of illiterates who learned by someone reading the texts or booklets decreased when Epicureanism moved to the Latin language of Rome. Unless they were translated into Latin, probably only the few educated elites were privy to the teachings of the Garden. Do you or anyone have knowledge of how that went in the Roman language areas?

[DaveT](#), we do have a partial record of the transmission of Epicureanism from Greece (and Greek) to Rome (and Latin), and much of it comes down to us from Cicero himself. Cicero wanted to cultivate a high Latin literature, and he wished also to confer on this nascent project a beautiful stylistic polish. To that end, he extolled the efforts of those who wrote on high matters in Latin, and he scorned authors whose work did not meet his aesthetic standard.

Enter the Epicureans Amafinius and Rabirius! Cicero writes in book four of his *Tusculan Disputations* about the history of Roman philosophy:

## Quote

The study of philosophy is certainly of long standing with us; but yet I do not find that I can give you the names of any philosopher before the age of Lælius and Scipio: in whose younger days we find that Diogenes the Stoic, and Carneades the Academic, were sent as ambassadors by the Athenians to our senate. And as these had never been concerned in public affairs, and one of them was a Cyrenean, the other a Babylonian, they certainly would never have been forced from their studies, nor chosen for that employment, unless the study of philosophy had been in vogue with some of the great men at that time; who, though they might employ their pens on other subjects, some on civil law, others on oratory, others on the history of former times, yet promoted this most extensive of all arts, the principle of living well, even more by their life than by their writings. **So that of that true and elegant philosophy, (which was derived from Socrates, and is still preserved by the Peripatetics, and by the Stoics, though they express themselves differently in their disputes with the Academics,) there are few or no Latin records;** whether this proceeds from the importance of the thing itself, or from men's being otherwise employed, or from their concluding that

the capacity of the people was not equal to the apprehension of them. **But, during this silence, [the Epicurean] C. Amafinius arose and took upon himself to speak; on the publishing of whose writings the people were moved, and enlisted themselves chiefly under this sect, either because the doctrine was more easily understood, or because they were invited thereto by the pleasing thoughts of amusement, or that, because there was nothing better, they laid hold of what was offered them.** And after Amafinius, when many of the same sentiments had written much about them, the Pythagoreans spread over all Italy: but that these doctrines should be so easily understood and approved of by the unlearned, is a great proof that they were not written with any great subtlety, and they think their establishment to be owing to this.

He seems to suggest that Amafinius was the first person to transmit Greek philosophy into Latin. However, Cicero found the prose style of these early Roman Epicureans deeply offensive to his cultivated sensibilities. In the first book of his *Academic Questions*, he quotes from Varro, who shares his desire for a native Roman literature written in good Latin:

#### Quote

Varro: "For as I saw that philosophy had been explained with great care in the Greek language, I thought that if any of our countrymen were engrossed by the study of it, who were well versed in Greek literature, they would be more likely to read Greek treatises than Latin ones: but that those men who were averse to Greek science and to the schools of the Greek philosophers would not care the least for such matters as these, which could not be understood at all without some acquaintance with Greek literature. And, therefore, I did not choose to write treatises which unlearned men could not understand, and learned men would not be at the trouble of reading. And you yourself are aware of this. **For you have learnt that we cannot resemble Amafinius or Rabirius,** who without any art discuss matters which come before the eyes of every one in plain ordinary language, giving no accurate definitions, making no divisions, drawing no inferences by well-directed questions, and who appear to think that there is no such thing as any art of speaking or disputing.

According to Wikipedia, Martin Ferguson Smith estimated that Amafinius lived in the late second and early first century BC. This would put his birth about 100 years after the death of Epicurus. I don't have a copy of Smith's translation of Lucretius to check the citation.