

The blazing battlements of the world

Post by “Mathitis Kipouros” of July 17, 2021 at 10:43 AM

In the MFS version there is a footnote linked to the following text (1.71-73):

..."far beyond the blazing battlements of the world".

The footnote reads:

"The reference is to the fiery envelope that, according to the Epicureans, surrounds the world"...

This is the first time I've come across this "fiery envelope belief". What is he talking about?

Post by “Don” of July 17, 2021 at 11:13 AM

Interesting catch!

The Leonard translation at Perseus has: "The flaming ramparts of the world."

In the Loeb Classics translation, there's a note: "Lucretius refers to the fiery belt around our world (see also 2.1144, 5.454) but also is picturing Epicurus as a general successfully storming the walls and setting them ablaze."

Here's the Latin line:

processit longe flammantia moenia mundi

I'm wondering if the "flammantia moenia mundi" (the flaming/burning walls of the world) is simply a poetic way of describing the heavens with all their stars that surrounds our "world" and separates it from the rest of the universe.

Post by “Cassius” of July 17, 2021 at 11:33 AM

I have wondered the same thing without much progress. I've not seen that Loeb comment (presumably Rouse or Smith himself?) And though I kind of like it I find it unlikely. My thoughts are pretty much like Don's - with the addition that maybe they knew of the Northern Lights?

Post by “Don” of July 17, 2021 at 11:55 AM

I'm skeptical of the Northern Lights, but if I remember correctly (source amnesia) there's a section that talks about the stars being fed by some source of fire in the heavens.

Yeah, I think Lucretius is just poetically describing the shell surrounding the geocentric "world" we live in. Epicurus was able to break beyond that wall (NOT literally!) and discern the natural, material workings of the Universe.

Post by “Mathitis Kipouros” of July 17, 2021 at 5:25 PM

Thanks to both. Interesting answers. I agree that the poetry could have interpretations that are coherent with Epicurean Philosophy; so it's the more confusing to read MFS talking about *an Epicurean deduction/description/observation of a "fiery envelope"* as I don't believe the use of poetics was common neither in Epicurus nor in any other disciple except Lucretius, and it doesn't seem like a description of anything observable in the world that wouldn't have been described quite differently were this the case.

Post by “Cassius” of July 17, 2021 at 5:36 PM

Well given that it's pretty clear that Epicurus saw the totality of the universe as an unlimited number of separate worlds, with the Intermundia presumably located between those worlds, it's probably to be expected that Epicurus thought the worlds were divided from each other and the Intermundia by something. And given that we see the stars in the sky at night, like Don says, it would be logical to have those divisions be fiery. I guess that's about as far as my own speculation leads.

Post by “Mathitis Kipouros” of July 17, 2021 at 6:24 PM

Just getting into full-nerd-mode, because it's not significant but it's weird nonetheless: Strange that MFS would talk about this as something so obvious, dropped casually as a 1 line footnote without further references or information, and yet we're not being able to pin point what exactly is he talking about.

Post by “Cassius” of July 17, 2021 at 7:32 PM

It does seem that people like to read their own conclusions into Epicurus as if they were obvious. We too are probably guilty if it, but it is very important that we keep that tendency in check, as it will keep us from being open to deeper insights if we simply presume he thought as we do and then stop inquiring.