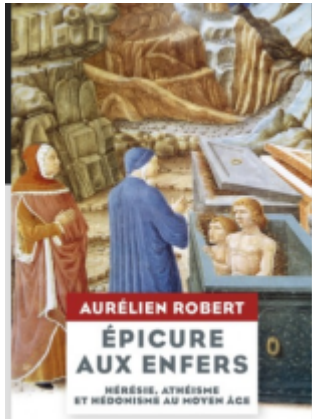


Aurelian Robert and His Book "Epicurus in The Underworld"

Post by "Cassius" of February 26, 2021 at 3:37 PM



This comes from Facebook - I hope we can encourage him to post here as well:

I am very pleased to announce the publication of my book: Epicurus in the Underworld. Heresy, atheism and hedonism in the Middle Ages, published by Fayard, Paris (in French). Here is the link to the publisher's website, where you can read a few pages and buy the book (with links to many bookshops online). With a lot of pleasure!

<https://www.fayard.fr/histoire/epicu...s-9782213711744>

Cassius: This looks like an interesting book, but unfortunately for most of us here, it is in French. Here is the opening blurb through google translate:

DESCRIPTION DETAILS

Long before the Renaissance, medieval philosophers, doctors and theologians attempted to rehabilitate the figure of Epicurus and revive his thought. From the heretic to the model of life for Christians, from the caricature of an atheist immoralist to the promotion of pleasure, Aurélien Robert follows the long construction of representations of Epicureanism, received and transformed in the Middle Ages. And thus delivers an unpublished portrait of medieval philosophy.

In Dante's *Divine Comedy*, only one philosopher can be found in the sixth circle of Hell, among the heretics: Epicurus. How a thinker who lived in the 4th century BC. Can it be judged like this? By offering an archeology of representations of the Epicurean in the three great monotheistic religions, Aurélien Robert traces the long development of associations between Epicureanism and hedonism, atheism and heresy, and their transformation in the Middle Ages.

But this story hides another, which has remained in the shadow of an imposing religious literature. From the XIIth century appeared attempts at rehabilitation of the Greek philosopher, nearly three centuries before the rediscovery of Lucretia by Poggio Bracciolini. These testimonies from theologians, doctors and philosophers present Epicurus as a great sage, even a model for Christians. At the same time, his thought of pleasure gradually regained its prestige. Contrary to popular belief, it was not the Middle Ages that invented the epicurean caricature. Even more, it was at this time that attempts were made to save Epicurus and his philosophy from the underworld.


Research director at the CNRS, former member of the French School of Rome, Aurélien Robert is a specialist in the history of philosophy of the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. In 2019, he received the CNRS bronze medal for all of his work.

[Aurélien Robert](#)
[Cassius Amicus](#)

thanks a lot! I'll try to post a more detailed overview in English very soon!

Please do, Aurelien! I wasn't sure whether it was a good idea for the group for us to post this, but if you are actively following along the thread and you can comment here, then that will be great.

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/1900-aurelian-robert-and-his-book-epicurus-in-the-underworld/?postID=11163#post11163>

I am coming to the conclusion that if I had to randomly pick the people from a particular country to rate them as "most in tune with Epicurus" I would probably pick France. I have some ideas for "least in tune" too, but I will keep those to myself. page not found or type unknown

I am going to tag [Charles Edwins](#)

here to be sure he sees this, as he is particularly interested in French literature on Epicurus

[Aurélien Robert](#)

Epicurus in the Underworld. Heresy, Atheism and Hedonism in the Middle Ages

Aurélien Robert

Could the figure of the epicurean jouster be a medieval invention? Was it not until the rediscovery of Lucretius in the 15th century that Epicurean philosophy regained its letters of nobility? Did the notion of pleasure play a role in the philosophical debates of the Middle Ages? By answering these questions, this book proposes a new history of the reception of Epicurus and his philosophy, which breaks with certain received ideas. Far from being unknown until the 15th century, Epicurean thought was the subject of intense debates in the Middle Ages, ranging from religious anathema to philosophical praise. To understand this history, it is necessary to distinguish, on the one hand, the origin and function of the figure of the heretical, atheist and hedonistic Epicurean, and, on the other hand, the philosophical reception of Epicurus' wisdom, which took a decisive turn in the 12th century. While the caricature of the depraved Epicurean who does not believe in God originated in Antiquity, the Middle Ages made it popular by identifying it with a number of well-known biblical figures. Furthermore, although no medieval thinker accepted his materialistic physique or his criticism of religion, from the 12th century onwards, some did not hesitate to take up for them part of Epicurus' ethics. This same ambiguity was found up to the 17th century, even among the Renaissance humanists: the vulgar Epicurean was publicly criticised, but Epicurus' wisdom was praised in more restricted enclaves. Epicurus' slow return to philosophy can therefore only be analysed over a long period of time. This is what this book tries to show.

The heretical Epicurean

In his *Lives and Doctrines of Illustrious Philosophers*, Diogenes Laertius reports a number of malicious remarks against Epicurus. In addition to the frequent philosophical attacks aimed at his materialism, his refusal of all providence or the role he accorded to pleasure, they were aimed at the man, his morals and his beliefs. However, as the book shows, an important change took place from the second century AD, when the Epicurean became a figure of heresy. Such an association was born in the eastern confines of the Roman Empire, from Asia Minor to Egypt, where the first Christian sects were in competition with pagan philosophical schools, particularly those of the Epicureans. The extent of this competition can truly be gauged by reading the apologies of Christianity sent to Roman dignitaries, sometimes even to the emperor. The Epicurean appears to be the most immoral pagan thinker and the furthest removed from Roman moral and religious practices, as opposed to Christianity, which is presented as fully compatible with these values. These attacks on philosophers quickly turned

into speeches against heretics. For if the Greek term *hairesis* initially designated a group or sect, without any religious connotation, it took on a new meaning at that time and allowed an unprecedented rapprochement between religious heresies and philosophical schools, establishing a consubstantial link between the two types of sect. The leaders of heretical movements were in reality disguised philosophers. Gradually, by aberrant shortcuts, so far removed from Epicurean philosophy, the Epicurean was made the heretic by *antonomasia*. A strategy that can be found, in slightly different forms, in Judaism and Islam, to which the book offers a significant place.

A pastoral use of the figure of the Epicurean

The image of the heretic Epicurean, a symbol of atheism and vulgar hedonism, is therefore by no means a medieval creation, although it is found even in Dante's *Divine Comedy*, which places Epicurus and his disciples in the sixth circle of Hell among heretics. From this ancient heritage, the Middle Ages forged a "biblical portrait" of the Epicurean, matching several figures from the Old and New Testaments to the ancient philosopher. The Epicurean was none other than the madman of the Psalms who said in his heart that God does not exist; he was also the character of the Ecclesiastes who drew from the observation of the vanity of the world that all pleasures must be enjoyed; and finally, he was the one who cried out "let us eat and drink, for tomorrow we will die" in Isaiah. In addition to this new portrait of the Epicurean, it is above all the use of this figure that evolved during the medieval period to occupy a very important place in what Jean Delumeau called "the pastoral care of fear". The people must have recognised themselves in this portrait of the heretic Epicurean and feared that they would suffer the punishments of hell that were reserved for them. This is why it occupies a singular place in the sermons. To be epicurean, that is, not to believe or to believe badly, or to be guided by earthly pleasures alone, was to become a heretic Christian. Due to the multiplication of this public discourse of the theologians, this representation of the Epicurean became extremely popular and it was soon found in literature and poetry, including popular ones. It can therefore be said that Dante's *Inferno* expresses a vision of Epicurus that is the culmination of this logic at work in medieval preaching.

A first rehabilitation of Epicurus in the Middle Ages?

In the shadow of this theological and pastoral literature, we find texts praising the wisdom of Epicurus as early as the 12th century. We can thus see the existence of a double discourse: one is addressed to the people, the other is limited to scholarly debates. The second half of Epicurus in the Underworld analyses this positive discourse on Epicurean asceticism, which was supposed to serve as a model for Christian ethics. In addition to the very favourable judgements of Peter Abelard, William of Malmesbury and John of Salisbury, Epicurus found its place in numerous collections of "Lives of Philosophers", as early as the 13th century, two centuries before the Latin translation of Diogenes Laertius. These texts are most often compilations of quotations from classical authors - particularly Seneca - and from the Fathers of the Church. Epicurus almost appears as a monk before his time: he despises external goods, honours, wealth and abuses of all kinds. If he makes use of pleasures, it is a measured use,

always governed by virtue. He is therefore considered to be a great sage, whose features no longer have anything in common with those of the heretic Epicurean. Paradoxically, when humanists took over this literary genre in Petrarch's time, they were much more critical of Epicurus than were the so-called "scholastic" authors, often in a pejorative manner. Despite the scarcity of sources, interest in Epicurean wisdom was therefore ancient and the early humanists were hardly in favour of it, contrary to a widespread idea.

Pleasure regained

The first praises of Epicurus in the 12th century, then the Lives of Epicurus of the 13th and 14th centuries, insisted on the intellectual dimension of epicurean pleasure. But this ascetic vision of Epicurean philosophy was also accompanied by more precise philosophical debates on the relationship between virtue and pleasure, or on the necessity of bodily pleasures. Among these debates, the one inaugurated by physicians as early as the 12th century proved to be particularly rich in teachings. Against Epicurus, some of whose ideas they knew through Galen, they defended the necessity of sexual pleasure, not only for the body, but also for the balance of the mind. They therefore went further than the philosophy of the Garden in the rehabilitation of pleasure, finding, without knowing it, the analyses of Lucretius. In *De natura rerum*, Lucretius situated the evils of love in passion, not in sexuality. Most of the themes that would become important during the Renaissance were therefore already dealt with in the Middle Ages. They certainly lacked the humanistic erudition to describe Epicurus' theses accurately, but they still gave a glimpse of them that no longer had anything to do with the popular image of the heretical, atheistic and hedonistic Epicurean. The final chapter thus shows how humanists, including those most inclined to praise Epicureanism, ultimately contributed little to the positive discourse of the Middle Ages in terms of philosophical content. The tone certainly gained in freedom, the historical accuracy was greater, the language more beautiful and the rhetoric more effective, but we cannot attribute all the credit to the Italian humanists in the rediscovery of epicureanism.

Epicurus' reception over time

The issues addressed in this book therefore fill a void in the studies on the reception of epicureanism. Above all, they challenge the widespread (and recently brilliantly staged by Stephen Greenblatt in *The Swerve*) idea that epicureanism was rediscovered only in the 15th century, thanks to the humanist Poggio Bracciolini, who brought back to Italy a (medieval) manuscript of Lucretius. At the end of the itinerary proposed in the book, it seems more accurate to say that this return of Epicurean ideas to the Renaissance would probably not have been possible without the first historical and philosophical work of the scholars of the Middle Ages. For it was indeed during Antiquity that Epicurus was placed in the underworld and it was in the Middle Ages that he began to get out from it.