

Living off the land

Post by “Don” of July 26, 2023 at 8:04 AM

Even with the difficulty (or almost impossibility) of getting modern equivalent values for ancient money, your calculations look at least plausible to me. Nicely done.

The important thing to me seems to be that even experimenting on eating what "less than an as" would buy, Epicurus wasn't starving himself like an ascetic. He wasn't trying to live on a single grain of rice like Siddhartha Gautama during his ascetic phase. Epicurus was experimenting from time to time on how much would actually satisfy his hunger.

[Quote from HsiehKW](#)

Don I'm meaning to experiment with how far I can go live on today's equivalent of 2 asses in my currency. But unlike Epicurus, I don't think I'd have a good reason to gloat or boast.

We have to be careful about phrases like this, because we don't have Epicurus's "well-known" letter that Seneca refers to. The relevant section is Seneca letter 18:8-11 (emphasis added):

Quote from Seneca

Even Epicurus, the teacher of pleasure, used to observe stated intervals, during which he satisfied his hunger in meager fashion; he wished to see whether he thereby fell short of full and complete happiness, and, if so, by what amount he fell short, and whether this amount was worth purchasing at the price of great effort. At any rate, he makes such a statement in the well known letter written to Polyaeus in the archonship of Charinus.[7] Indeed, he boasts that he himself lived on less than an as, but that Metrodorus, whose progress was not yet so great, needed a whole as. 10. Do you think that there can be fulness on such fare? Yes, and there is pleasure also, - not that shifty and fleeting pleasure which needs a fillip now and then, but a pleasure that is steadfast and sure. For though water, barley-meal, and crusts of barley-bread, are not a cheerful diet, yet it is the highest kind of pleasure to be able to derive pleasure from this sort of food, and to have reduced one's needs to that modicum which no unfairness of Fortune can snatch away. 11. Even prison fare is more generous; and those who have been set apart for capital punishment are not so meanly fed by the man who is to execute them. Therefore, what a noble soul must one have, to descend of one's own free will to a diet which even those who have been sentenced to death have not to fear! This is indeed forestalling the spear-thrusts of Fortune.

So, Epicurus undertook these intervals of experimenting with a meager diet, "less generous than prison fare," from time to time to prove to himself that if he *had* to live on that much due to unforeseen circumstances in the future, he could still be happy. He was testing his limits experimentally.

We have to be careful about the English translation of Seneca's *glorior* in the Latin text as "boast". Remember that we're getting Epicurus's Greek filtered through the Stoic Seneca's Latin. *Glorior* does mean "boast" but also "take pride in." And remember we don't have Epicurus's words. We can't know how he described his feeling. To indulge in some DeWittian flight of fancy referring to a lost text, I could easily imagine Epicurus writing to Polyaeus: "Recently, I've been able to satisfy my hunger pleurably on less than an obol. I'm quite pleased with that outcome. Metrodorus has found he still requires a full obol, and we have had enjoyable frank discussions about our experiences..." That's all imagination remember. But if the lost letter went something like that -- and we don't know if it did! -- I could see the Seneca the Stoic saying Epicurus was boasting or was proud of himself.