

Athenian Political Prejudices

Post by “Joshua” of December 24, 2025 at 2:50 PM

Epicurus' status was clearly low by birth, and that he was derided for this in antiquity is a matter of record. But that he was born in the colonies is a symptom of his low status rather than the cause of it.

The real problem was wealth. Athens was democratic not only in its politics but in its outlook, at least so far as male citizens were concerned, and inheritance was divided equally rather than by primogeniture.

This caused problems, because the largest heritable asset in a family was commonly land, and land only grows by acquisition. Successful landowners could buy more, but unsuccessful ones could only sell what they had, or bequeath it to their heirs; heirs who would each receive an equal portion. If the father had only enough land to support a family, and that land was divided among four sons upon his death, the sons obviously could not each produce enough to support families of their own. Over time, plots got smaller and smaller, and families poorer and poorer.

You see the same problem at work on American Indian reservations today. The solution to this problem in antiquity was to bundle the poorest families onto ships, and send them off to a distant shore to found a colony. The whole project of colonization was the project of thinning out an underclass; not unlike the modern story of the British settlement of Australia as a penal colony.

Epicurus' parents were very probably 'transported' or 'removed' in this way, and on Samos took up whatever work they could find--pedagogy for his father, always a dismal line of work in antiquity, and some kind of low folk magic for his mother, according to the rumors.

There is an interesting epitaph in the Greek Anthology which bears slightly on this question;

Book XI - Convivial and Satirical Epigrams

No. 249 - Lucilius

Quote

"Menophanes bought a field, and from hunger hanged himself on another man's oak. When he was dead they had no earth to throw over him from above, but he was buried for payment in the ground of one of his neighbors. If Epicurus had known of Menophanes' field he would have said that everything is full of fields, not of atoms."

This may at least hint at the problem of land shortages and poverty in Greece at the time.

Ironically, Menophanes deserves some credit because the Standard Model in physics suggests that everything is full of fields! Only kidding.

Aristotle was the private tutor of a whole new generation of rulers (Alexander the Great and Ptolemy I chief among them), and the Academy and the Lyceum attracted the sons of the wealthiest families in Athens. We can expect a certain amount of sneering. I still haven't read Pamela Gordon's book.