

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

Post by “Kalosyni” of July 9, 2026 at 9:39 AM

Further on this...four categories, and also who was left out...

Google AI query: which classes in ancient athens in 300 bc had both the interest and time for studying or hearing about epicurean philosophy?

Epicurean philosophy—founded by Epicurus when he established his school, "The Garden," in Athens around **306 BC** [1]—was revolutionary because it deliberately rejected the traditional Athenian class system. [1, 2]

The Academy (Plato) or the Lyceum (Aristotle), required a rigorous, elite background in mathematics and political theory, but the Garden of Epicurus did not. Because of this, the classes that had the interest and time to engage with it spanned a unique cross-section of Athenian society: [1, 2, 3, 4, 5]

## 1. Wealthy Intellectuals and Aristocrats (The Elite)

- **The Interest:** Many wealthy individuals were deeply disillusioned by the political chaos of 300 BC. Athens was trapped in a cycle of Macedonian military occupations and puppet governments. Epicurus offered a radical alternative: *lathe biosas* ("live unnoticed"). He advocated for completely withdrawing from public life, politics, and civic duties to protect one's peace of mind. [1, 2, 3, 4, 5]
- **The Time:** This class possessed unlimited leisure time (*scholē*) funded by their estates and slave labor. They could afford to spend entire days lounging and debating in the Garden. [1, 2]

## 2. High-Class Courtesans (Hetairai)

- **The Interest:** The Garden was highly scandalous in 300 BC because Epicurus openly welcomed women. *Hetairai* were highly educated, intellectually curious, and lacked the political ties that bound male citizens. Epicurean philosophy's emphasis on friendship over civic duty deeply resonated with women who were legally marginalized by the state. Famous *hetairai*, such as **Leontion**, became prominent Epicurean scholars and even wrote philosophical treatises refuting male philosophers. [1, 2, 3, 4, 5]
- **The Time:** As independent entrepreneurs, *hetairai* managed their own schedules. Attending philosophical gatherings was natively aligned with their professional lives, which centered on intellectual and social engagement with elite thinkers.

## 3. Enslaved People (Douloi)

[15-20% of all enslaved people were privileged or highly skilled, see below for more]

- **The Interest:** Epicurus famously admitted slaves into his school as intellectual equals, a practice that shocked traditional Athenians. Epicureanism taught that all human beings share the same basic psychological vulnerabilities and capacity for happiness. For a slave, a philosophy that removed the fear of vengeful gods and treated them as a friend—rather than a "living tool"—was incredibly appealing. [1, 2, 3, 4, 5]
- **The Time:** Most slaves had no free time. However, **privileged domestic slaves** or highly skilled **slave-craftsmen** (*choris oikountes*) who lived independently and paid a portion of their wages to their masters often had pockets of personal time in the evenings. Epicurus's own slave, **Mys**, became a fully initiated and respected philosopher within the community. [1]

#### 4. Wealthy Resident Aliens (Metics)

- **The Interest:** Because *metics* could not vote or hold political office in Athens, traditional philosophies that focused on "how to rule a city" (like Plato's *Republic*) were irrelevant to them. Epicureanism provided a universal framework for happiness that did not require political citizenship or belonging to a specific homeland. [1, 2, 3, 4]
- **The Time:** Wealthy foreign merchants, bankers, and doctors had generated significant wealth from Athens' booming trade sector, granting them the financial freedom and leisure time to pursue philosophy.

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#### Which Class Was Left Out?

The **working-class citizens (Zeugitae and Thetes)**—the average Athenian craftsmen, small farmers, and laborers—generally lacked both the time and interest for Epicureanism. They were consumed by the daily grind of survival under Macedonian occupation. Furthermore, traditional working-class citizens often viewed the Garden's radical inclusion of slaves and women, combined with its rejection of public civic duty, as deeply unpatriotic and lazy.

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Google AI query: what percentage of all slaves were privileged or highly skilled?

There are no precise census records from 300 BC, but modern economic historians estimate that **between 15% and 25%** of the total [slave population in ancient Athens](#) could be categorized as highly skilled or privileged. [1, 2]

Because the Greeks viewed slaves as property rather than tracking them by occupation, scholars reconstruct these proportions based on literary references, court cases, and trade logs. [1, 2, 3, 4]

#### The Breakdown of the Enslaved Population

<https://www.epicureanfriends.com/thread/5167-during-the-time-of-epicurus-who-could-read-well-enough-to-study-philosophy/?postID=40614#post40614>

Out of an estimated total of roughly **80,000 to 100,000 slaves** in Attica around this period, the division of labor generally fell into three distinct bands: [1, 2, 3, 4]

- **The Privileged/Highly Skilled (15% - 25%):** This group consisted of *choris oikountes* ("those living apart"), who were trusted to run workshops, bank counters, and businesses independently. It also included *demosioi* (state-owned public slaves) who served as the Scythian archer police force, mint workers, and administrative clerks. These were the rare individuals with the pocket money or freedom of movement to theoretically engage with Epicurean philosophy. [1, 2, 3, 4, 5]
- **The Domestic/Household Slaves (35% - 45%):** These individuals lived within the *oikos* (household). While their daily physical comfort was drastically higher than that of a laborer, they were entirely dependent on the personal temperament of their master and had very little personal autonomy, leisure time, or independent income. [1, 2, 3, 4]
- **Unskilled Agricultural and Mine Laborers (35% - 45%):** This was the largest and most brutal tier. Thousands of completely uneducated chattel slaves worked the fields or were leased out to work the state silver mines of Laurium. They suffered extreme physical attrition and had virtually zero opportunities for education or leisure. [1, 2, 3, 4, 5]

### Why Highly Skilled Slaves Were Rare

- **Market Value:** A highly skilled slave (like a literate accountant, doctor, or master stonemason) was an expensive luxury asset. While a common laborer cost about 1 to 2 *minae*, a highly skilled artisan or tutor could command 5 to 10 *minae* (nearly a year or two of an average free citizen's wages), limiting how many existed in the market. [1, 2, 3]
- **The Incentive System:** Masters purposely granted these skilled slaves privileges—like letting them live in their own homes or keep a small percentage of profits (*peculium*)—not out of kindness, but as an incentive structure to prevent sabotage and maximize business revenue. [1, 2, 3, 4, 5]

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Google AI query: what percentage of metics were wealthy?

Based on demographic and economic reconstructions, only about **5% to 10% of metics in Ancient Athens were truly wealthy**, while roughly **40% to 45% belonged to a solid middle class**. The remaining **50% or more were poor**, working-class laborers and small tradespeople. [1]

While history often highlights famous, ultra-wealthy [metics](#) like the arms-manufacturer Cephalus or the philosopher Aristotle, they represented a small minority of the overall foreign population. [1, 2, 3, 4]

Based on historical data from the 4th century BC, the metic wealth spectrum breaks down as follows:

### **1. The Ultra-Wealthy Elite (5% - 10%)**

This group consisted of major international merchants, large-scale slave owners, shipowners, and powerful bank operators. While they were legally barred from owning real estate, they held massive fortunes in "invisible wealth" (cash, loans, ships, and slaves). Like wealthy citizens, this top tier of metics was rich enough to be swept into the *eisphora* (extraordinary war taxes). [[1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#)]

### **2. The "Hoplite" Middle Class (~40% - 45%)**

Historical military logs show that about **43% of metics** possessed enough wealth to qualify for the "hoplite census". This meant they earned enough money to buy their own heavy armor and shields to fight in the army alongside middle-class citizens. This group included independent shop owners, successful artists, master craftsmen, and medium-scale traders. [[1](#), [2](#), [3](#)]

### **3. The Working-Class and Impoverished (~50%+)**

More than half of all metics were economically indistinguishable from the poorest Athenian citizens (*thetes*). They lived hand-to-mouth as retail shop assistants, common construction laborers, street vendors, and independent shoe-makers or potters. This tier also included freed former slaves who legally became metics upon gaining freedom, usually starting their independent lives with zero generational wealth. [[1](#), [2](#), [3](#)]