

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

Post by “Kalosyni” of July 9, 2026 at 2:01 PM

I find this fascinating, so I am continuing to share:

Google query: was the cost of papyrus the reason why there aren't many of epicurus' writings left to us today?

No, the cost of papyrus was **not the primary reason** why Epicurus' writings were lost. While papyrus was expensive, the loss of his work was driven by **cultural shifts, religious opposition, and a change in writing technology** centuries after his death. [[1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#), [5](#)]

Only a tiny fraction of ancient literature has survived to the modern day, and Epicurus' works were lost due to specific historical factors: [[1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#)]

## 1. Ideological and Religious Opposition

The most significant factor was the rise of Christianity in Late Antiquity. [[1](#), [2](#), [3](#)]

- **Theological conflict:** Epicurus taught that the universe was made entirely of random atoms and empty space. He argued that the soul dies with the body and that the gods have no involvement in human affairs. [[1](#), [2](#)]
- **Active neglect and censorship:** Christian monastic scribes—who became the primary curators of literature through the Middle Ages—found these ideas fundamentally blasphemous and ungodly. Because they chose not to invest the time, labor, and expensive materials needed to copy his texts, his books were simply left to rot. [[1](#), [2](#), [3](#), [4](#), [5](#)]

## 2. The Technological Shift to Parchment

In the 3rd and 4th centuries AD, the western world transitioned from using fragile papyrus rolls to the **codex** (the modern book format made of durable animal skin or parchment). [[1](#), [2](#), [3](#)]

- Translating the vast library of ancient literature into this new format was highly resource-intensive.
- Only works deemed absolutely essential, educational, or spiritually appropriate were transcribed into codices. Because Epicureanism had died out in popularity by Late Antiquity, his 300 scrolls were never transferred to the new media format. [[1](#), [2](#), [3](#)]

## 3. Natural Decay of Papyrus

Papyrus is made of plant matter and **quickly decays in moist, European climates**. Unless a scroll was stored in an exceptionally dry environment like the Egyptian desert, it would completely disintegrate within a few centuries if it wasn't continuously copied. [1, 2, 3, 4, 5]

## How We Know About Him Today

Despite the widespread destruction of his library, bits of Epicurus' work survived through a few distinct avenues: [1]

- **The Biography of Diogenes Laërtius:** A 3rd-century historian preserved three of Epicurus' actual letters and a summary of his doctrines inside a massive biographical book on Greek philosophers. [1, 2]
- **The Roman Poet Lucretius:** Lucretius wrote a sweeping Latin poem called *On the Nature of Things* that serves as a detailed breakdown of Epicurus' physics and philosophy. Its rediscovery in a monastery in 1417 sparked the Renaissance. [1, 2]
- **The Villa of the Papyri:** When Mount Vesuvius erupted in 79 AD, it buried a private luxury library in Herculaneum. The heat carbonized the scrolls, preserving them. Modern scientists are currently using X-ray imaging and AI to read these charred fragments, many of which contain lost texts from Epicurean philosophers. [1, 2, 3]

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Google query: during the popularity of epicurean philosophy in ancient greece and rome, did Epicurus' works get copied multiple times?

Yes, **Epicurus' works were copied thousands of times** and distributed widely across the Mediterranean during the height of his philosophy's popularity. Between the 3rd century BC and the 2nd century AD, Epicureanism was one of the dominant intellectual movements of the Greco-Roman world, creating a massive commercial demand for his texts. [1, 2, 3, 4]

The physical evidence and historical records from that era confirm that multiple copies were standard practice:

### 1. Proof from the Villa of the Papyri

The absolute proof that his works were duplicated survives in the **Villa of the Papyri** at Herculaneum. When archaeologists excavated this ancient Roman library (buried by Mount Vesuvius in 79 AD), they found a specialized Epicurean collection. [1, 2, 3, 4]

- Within this single private library, scholars discovered **multiple, duplicate copies of the exact same books** by Epicurus. [1, 2]
- For instance, the library contained multiple copies of Book 2 and Book 11 of Epicurus' masterwork *On Nature*, and **at least three separate copies of Book 25**. [1]
- Analysis of the handwriting shows these duplicates were written by different scribes, proving that copying his books was a standardized, ongoing industry. [1]

### 2. A Philosophy Built on Exact Copying

Unlike other philosophical schools that encouraged students to debate and evolve the founder's ideas, Epicureanism was highly dogmatic. Epicurus insisted that his core doctrines be memorized verbatim by his followers. [1, 2]

- Because precision was vital to the school, Epicurean communities established across Greece, Asia Minor, and Italy required **highly accurate, standardized copies** of his texts. [1, 2]
- The school effectively operated a decentralized copying network to supply new "Gardens" (Epicurean communities) with the authorized canon. [1, 2, 3, 4]

### 3. Mass Roman Distribution

By the 1st century BC, Epicureanism became a massive trend among the Roman elite. Prominent Roman figures—potentially including Julius Caesar, Virgil, and the wealthy financier Atticus—embraced the philosophy. [1, 2, 3, 4, 5]

- To meet this demand, Roman commercial publishing houses (which employed teams of literate slaves writing simultaneously via dictation) produced Epicurean scrolls en masse for bookstores across the Republic and Empire.
- The Roman statesman Cicero, though a critic of Epicurus, complained in his writings about how widespread and wildly popular Epicurean books had become among ordinary Roman citizens, noting that they flooded the market. [1]

Ultimately, the fact that his works were copied so many times makes their later, total disappearance in the Middle Ages even more striking. It was not a lack of copies in antiquity that doomed his writings, but the systematic, centuries-long halt of the copying process during the Christian era. [1, 2, 3]