

"A Socio-Psychological and Semiotic Analysis of Epicurus' Portrait" by Bernard Frischer

Post by "Godfrey" of April 2, 2021 at 1:45 AM

The attached article has some food for thought regarding Epicurean outreach and the symbolism behind Epicurus' portrait. I just gave it a quick read; not sure that I agree with all of it and I'm unfamiliar with many of the other authors referred to. Having said that, however, I did find that it touched on several topics of discussion in the forums, particularly regarding some ways to think about art for outreach.

Post by "Cassius" of April 20, 2021 at 8:41 PM

I restored this thread but Godfrey posted this in a thread started by Joshua on "The Sculpted Word"

Post by "Godfrey" of April 21, 2021 at 12:25 AM

Here's the article to download.

Post by "Onenski" of January 18, 2023 at 2:50 PM

Hi!

I read the paper because I want to defend that Epicurus' portraits, rings and sculptures worked as technics to improve the practice of epicureanism. Arguably, there was an intention of those representations in inspiring epicureans in the daily practice of this philosophy.

I have to say that I didn't find information about that in the paper, but it's interesting anyway.

Post by “Onenski” of January 18, 2023 at 2:54 PM

I share some notes I did.

The question behind the paper is: how epicureanism produce new members of the School? There are at least two possible ways: 1) indoctrination of the children of epicurean members; 2) attracting new people from the outside. There's no information of children raised as epicureans, but there's information of the recruitment of external people. The problem is that recruitment of new people is too difficult, and it's not too effective (as some studies with religious recruitment suggest).

Supposing that epicureans actually used the attraction of new people rather than indoctrination, there were two methods (according to Hieronymos the peripathetic): active and passive. In the first, the philosopher gives speeches in public or publishes his books. In the second, the philosopher creates a mysterious or attractive reputation for himself. That's the case, according to Frischer, of Pyrrho.

Frischer argues that passive recruitment is consistent with epicurean philosophy (specifically the "live unnoticed" and the search for security in the Garden). Epicurean philosophy spreaded out through portraits and sculptures, as we can see in *De finibus* or in Diogenes Laertius.

Frischer makes a semiotic analysis to suggest how some features in Epicurus' portrait work to attract people, in function of their symbolic meaning. He concentrates in two: "the sympathetic awareness" expressed in his face, and the throne. The first is present also in the sculpture of Asklepios of Melos, and in all Epicurus' portraits. This implies that those portraits were made to express that "sympathetic awareness" intentionally (because different artists from different places made those portraits), and also implies that Epicurus portraits were not merely representational, but symbolic.

The second feature analyzed by Frischer, the throne, symbolizes the divinization of Epicurus. This could be a satire of the gods, but it's also consistent with epicurean philosophy (think about Vatican Saying 33). The sage can be as happy as a god.

Frischer suggests that the recruitment of external people looked for certain psychological traits in new members. The idea is that some people have a major tendency to believe in epicurean premises (those who have more tendency to trust in their senses, for example) than others. Frischer uses some psychoanalytic framework (from Carl Jung) to make this suggestion (which I think is too speculative, by the way).

Briefly, Epicurus' portrait was intentionally symbolic and not merely representational. It had the function of attracting new people to the School. Additionally (and as a speculation of Frischer) this recruitment worked attracting a specific psychological profile.

Post by “Cassius” of January 18, 2023 at 3:10 PM

Thank you Onenski!

Post by “Joshua” of January 18, 2023 at 8:50 PM



Post by “Onenski” of January 19, 2023 at 1:30 AM

I just found a 3D model made by Frischer in a clip on YouTube.

(I think the reconstruction of the eyes is not the best, but I understand the difficulty of making more expressing eyes in his model.)

<https://youtu.be/M2lqmU0nGfU>

Post by “Kalosyni” of January 22, 2023 at 8:53 AM

[Quote from Onenski](#)

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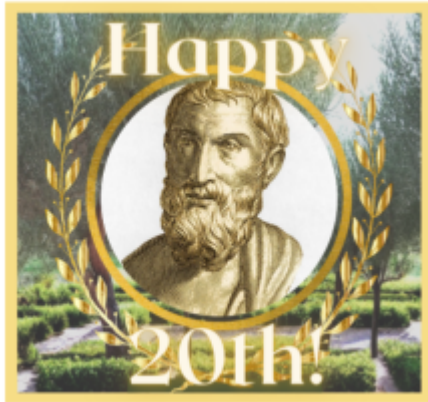
[Quote from Godfrey](#)

regarding some ways to think about art for outreach.

I've been pondering the use of the image of Epicurus as a symbol of the Epicurean philosophy. But it is also very close to a kind of "hero worship", which I personally feel troubling. Perhaps as modern Epicureans we need to develop a symbol which comes to stand for observation by the senses and also "pleasure as telos". And maybe it would be something along the lines of greek letter(s) -- I think Nate was working on some symbols but need to find those.

The image of Epicurus doesn't mean anything to people who don't know who Epicurus is and who are not "Epicureans".

I used this image (below) for the past 20th, and potentially will use for future announcements, which Cassius also places announcements onto the [Facebook group](#). As I read what Diogenes Laertius says about the will of Epicurus and his wishes for the 20th, including for the remembrance of Metrodorus, and other days remembering his brothers and Polyaeus, then it comes to me that there were very different cultural rituals practiced in ancient Greece. I guess I am still uncertain about the focus on Epicurus' image.



Post by “Cassius” of January 22, 2023 at 9:00 AM

It would be good for you to read Bernard Frischer's book and look at his examples of the artwork and his theories about how they were used.

Your reaction to "hero worship" is very common, but ultimately I think that the concern is unjustified. Epicurean philosophy teaches you to question authority and demand answers based on evidence, and it doesn't lead in the direction of general cultism for anyone who thinks about it.

The issue of how to deal with younger and less "educated" people may be difficult, but the ultimate point is as in

VS32. The veneration of the wise man is a great blessing to those who venerate him.

Once you strip away the word choice issues (is "veneration" really the best English word?) you come back to an obvious point - that people learn by watching more experienced and wiser people and paying respect to them benefits the observer as much or more than the observed.

Post by "Don" of January 22, 2023 at 11:09 AM

I haven't read Frischer's book yet. I need to add it to my ever-growing list of books to read.

On hero worship: From my perspective, there's no doubt that Epicurus was "venerated" as (sort of) divine figure. We just have to look to the hymns to Epicurus in Lucretius. That's also part of the whole birthday observations. It wasn't simply "cake and presents" to use a modern metaphor.

The word used in the Will of Epicurus in the "funeral offerings to my father, mother, and brothers" is ἐνάγισμα "enagisma." These were not just performed at the funeral, these were "an offering to the dead" per LSJ. There is also a German Wikipedia article on the practice. Here's a Google Translate version of that article:

[Enagisma - Wikipedia \(de-m-wikipedia-org.translate.goog\)](https://de-m-wikipedia-org.translate.goog/Enagisma)

So, that's in relation to Epicurus's father, mother, and brothers. It looks like standard practice for the dead.

The "the customary celebration of (Epicurus's) birthday" and "the meeting of all my School held every month on the twentieth day to commemorate Metrodorus" strikes me as those days each month dedicated to gods like Apollo, Aphrodite, Dionysus, etc. There is no specific word in those phrases that refer to a specific kind of celebration like enagisma.

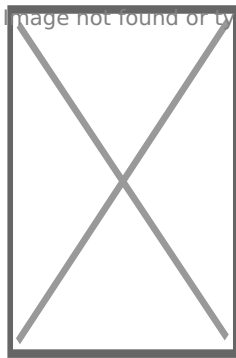
"Let them also join in celebrating the day in Poseideon which commemorates my brothers."
συντελείτωσαν δὲ καὶ τὴν τῶν ἀδελφῶν ἡμέραν τοῦ Ποσειδεῶνος:..."

The "celebrating" the day in Poseidon is συντελέω synteleo (συντελείτωσαν); and, according to LSJ, that is "celebrate or hold sacred rites."

"...and likewise the day in Metageitnion which commemorates Polyaeus, as I have done hitherto." συντελείτωσαν δὲ καὶ τὴν Πολυαίνου τοῦ Μεταγειτνιῶνος καθάπερ καὶ ἡμεῖς. The same word συντελείτωσαν is used here as well. So, the practicing of "sacred rites" was established by Epicurus himself for his brothers and Polyaeus. In fact, both "funeral offerings" and monthly "sacred rites" were performed for Epicurus's brother.

The book *The Sacrificial Rituals of Greek Hero-Cults in the Archaic to the Early Hellenistic Period* by Gunnel Ekroth is available for reading online. It sheds some light on the terms within those texts:

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[Chapter I. Terms assumed to be related to hero-cult rituals](#)

In the modern literature on hero-cults, a number of terms have been classified as being particularly applicable to the sacrifices to heroes. This terminology...

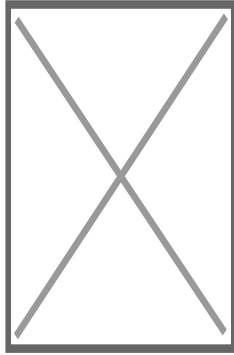
books.openedition.org

Quote

The general tendency in modern scholarship has been to regard enagizein and its associated nouns as particularly connected with sacrifices to the dead and the heroes....Casabona's detailed study of the sacrificial terminology has shown, however, that the relation between enagizein and thyein is that of a technical term versus a very general term.

...

On the general level, the meaning of enagizein has been understood as tabu facere, to render sacred or to place in the domain of the sacred, i.e., to remove from the sphere of the living.²³⁷ Concerning the rituals covered by the terms, two main explanations have been advanced. On the one hand, enagizein has been considered to refer to a total destruction of the victims or offerings by burning them in a holocaust.²³⁸ In this sense, an enagizein sacrifice would imply that no part of the animal would be available for consumption by the worshippers. On the other hand, the terms have been linked to various kinds of libations, such as wine, melikraton, milk and, in particular, blood.²³⁹ It has also been suggested that enagizein and the related nouns can refer to both kinds of actions, i.e., the discarding of the blood of the animal followed by the burning of the carcass.



[Chapter IV. The ritual pattern](#)

1. The sacrificial rituals of Greek hero-cults This study has had two aims, first of all, to establish the sacrificial rituals of Greek hero-cults in the...

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Quote

Destruction sacrifices at which no dining took place, covered by the terms holokautos in the inscriptions and enagizein, enagisma and enagismos in the literary texts, are rare and cannot be considered as the regular kind of ritual in hero-cults. All the terms seem to cover the same kind of ritual, the destruction of the offerings, but they have different bearings on the character of the recipient. Holokautos was more neutral, being used for both heroes and gods, while enagizein, enagisma and enagismos are particular to hero-cults and the cult of the dead. Apart from referring to a destruction sacrifice, enagizein, enagisma and enagismos also mark the recipient as being dead and therefore impure in some sense, and distinguish him, or a side of him, from the gods, who are immortal and pure. In most cases, the destruction sacrifices to heroes were performed as separate rituals and not in connection with a thysia.

I found the underlined section interesting in that the gods in Epicurean theology were "immortal and pure" and Epicureans were seen as able to live akin to the gods in life. Since there is NO afterlife in Epicurean philosophy, it's also interesting to think how these rites would be interpreted within the Garden.

Post by "Don" of January 22, 2023 at 12:26 PM

I just saw melikraton in that one excerpt from the book. That's VERY similar to the word used in Philodemus's poem!

μελιχρότερα

melikhrotera

(Merriam Webster) melicrate

archaic

: a fermented or unfermented beverage of honey and water : hydromel

Post by “Onenski” of January 22, 2023 at 9:56 PM

I think this can be related to the opinion in some scholars about the Garden as a sectarian and authoritarian place. One example is Martha Nussbaum's *Therapy of desire*, but it's not the only one (I've been reading a paper on Basic Education in Epicureanism and it's the same).

Their idea is that Epicurus was a kind of megalomaniac, because of those statues, rings and portraits; or the celebrations every month; or because of the paternalistic practices, described supposedly by Philodemus.

I haven't read Philodemus, and I don't know why I think Nussbaum and other people take what he says to argue that Epicurus was egotistical.

By the way, is there a thread with a discussion about this "authoritarian" objection to Epicurus?

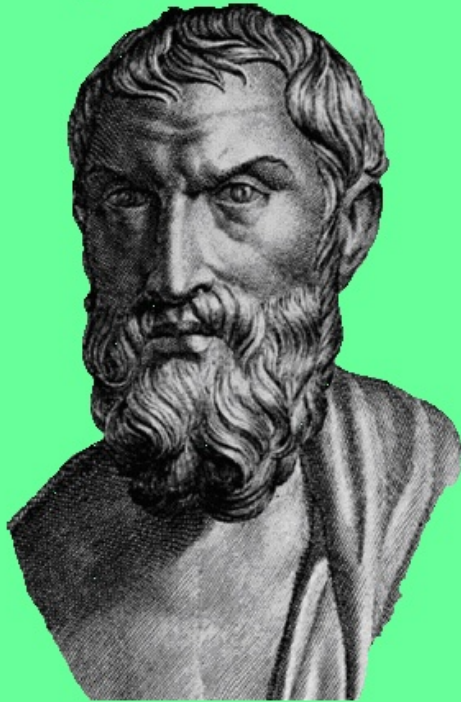
Post by “Cassius” of January 22, 2023 at 10:06 PM

Onenski I looked for a specific thread on the cultishness question and could not find one.

Maybe this one is closest: [DeWitt's "Organization And Procedure In Epicurean Groups"](#)

I see I did a graphic long ago:

Is Epicurean Philosophy Cultish?



I am not pressuring any of you into testifying thoughtlessly and unreflectively in favour of those who say “this is true” for I have not laid down the law on anything, not even on matters concerning the gods, unless together with reasoning.

One thing only I ask of you, as I did also just now: do not, even if you should be somewhat indifferent and listless, be like passers-by in your approach to the writings, consulting each of them in a patchy fashion and omitting to read everything.

- Diogenes of Oinoanda (Martin Ferguson Smith)
Fragment 30.

It would be fine if you would like to start another one directly on point. It would probably be worthwhile to do so because this is another area where the criticism is easy to make and is superficially persuasive, but which I think there are many good answers in response.

Does one generally see one's father as being "authoritarian" when he gives "orders" to a child? At what age or mental capacity do we see orders to a child being improper? Is it proper to tell a dying person that they are dying when maybe there is a possibility that they will recover if they fight hard enough? There are lots of related questions as to when things are proper and when they are not, and it's as easy I think for a partisan against Epicurus to attack him as it is for a partisan for Epicurus to defend him. Probably the only way to proceed is to line up the possibilities openly and let each person decide for himself, and they will probably make their decision based on their general impression of Epicurus rather than on any one single factor.

Post by “Charles” of January 23, 2023 at 9:21 AM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Your reaction to "hero worship" is very common, but ultimately I think that the concern is unjustified. Epicurean philosophy teaches you to question authority and demand answers based on evidence, and it doesn't lead in the direction of general cultism for anyone who thinks about it.

I think it's worth heeding some amount of caution over this. There's always been the trend of venerating past philosophers, and that is still true today. However, were it not for the insistence of the Epicurean school and of Epicurus himself on carrying his image, we would have a dearth of objects and depictions. It lends a much-needed certainty and confidence to an otherwise fragmented system.

The issue instead, lies in our usage of his image. Carrying around copies of jewelry that once existed among the schools (different schools often had signifiers ala the cloak and staff of the cynics) is acceptable, and so are keeping busts of notable Epicureans, in my view. There are others too, such as the commissioned art of Epicurus breaking his chains on the front page of the site. It's when we get into objects such as clothing and votive candles when it starts to become cult-like.

Pair this with our stringent need/belief to retain the classical elements of the philosophy and to not hoist eclectic principles on the same pedestal of Epicurus, and the issue becomes more apparent.

Post by “Don” of January 23, 2023 at 11:58 AM

[Quote from Onenski](#)

Their idea is that Epicurus was a kind of megalomaniac, because of those statues, rings and portraits; or the celebrations every month; or because of the paternalistic practices

It seems the practices of wearing rings or displaying portrait busts or having cups with Epicurus's picture on them is a physical manifestation of both Seneca's quote "Do all things as if Epicurus were watching" and VS32 Honoring a sage is itself a great good to the one who honors. τοῦ σοφοῦ σεβασμὸς ἀγαθὸν μέγα τῷ σεβομένῳ ἐστί.

σεβασμὸς in modern Greek just means "respect" however, in ancient Greek it was broader: "to be moved by awe, fear, or respect for others or for their opinions; to feel shame; to experience the same feelings in a religious sense." So, this coincides in some ways with the orientation Epicureans should feel toward the gods themselves.

Post by “Don” of January 23, 2023 at 3:36 PM

[Quote from Charles](#)

It's when we get into objects such as clothing and votive candles when it starts to become cult-like.

I'm assuming when you say "clothing" you're talking about distinctive apparel like a Catholic clerical collar, Japanese robes for Zen practitioners, and the distinctive attire of Hare Krishna proselytizers or even Mormon (excuse me, LDS) missionaries. If that's the case, I agree. There's no need for Epicureans to adopt a distinctive style or piece of clothing.

That said, if a group of Epicureans wants to host a special event that encourages attendees to wear an ancient Greek or Roman costume, I see no harm in that as long as it's for the pleasure of attendees and seen as a fun part of the evening. It's a form of re-enactment. There are re-enactors of all stripes, from those recreating Roman soldiers to US Civil War and Revolutionary-era regiments to members of the Society for Creative Anachronism.

The issue appears to me to lie in the adoption of a distinctive piece of clothing that announces to the world that "Hey, I'm a member of X!! Look at me!! I am SO special!!" Epicureans, it seems to me, did live unobtrusively most of the time but were always available if someone was curious about the school. The wearing of a ring or a piece of jewelry is a way to remind **oneself** to "act as if Epicurus were watching." It's not meant to be an advertisement to the world that "I'm acting as if Epicurus were watching! Look at me!" Rings and jewelry and cups in one's own home are private reminders. Unless someone comes up and closely examines that ring or is invited to one's home, they're not going to know the items contain a portrait of Epicurus. That's where the wearing of a t-shirt with Epicurus on it might be questionable?

As for votive candles, if it's done in the spirit of honoring the person of Epicurus and/or the philosophy, I see no problem if it brings pleasure to the person setting out the portrait and candles. If it reminds someone to "do everything as if Epicurus were watching" Sic fac omnia tamquam spectet. Just like a ring or piece of jewelry, that seems fine. We have pictures in our homes of relatives and others that we hold dear. Having a picture with a candle of someone who provides a foundation for one's way of living doesn't seem so far out of bounds to me.

And to be clear: EPICURUS IS NOT WATCHING! He's dead. He's gone. His atoms have dispersed. It's his philosophy by which we've chosen to live our lives. It's the philosophy that he taught that provides guidance. A feeling of awe or respect for the founder should not be confused with blind adherence to some guru.

In thinking further along these lines, Epicurus and his philosophy are compared to light throughout Lucretius. For example:

O thou who first uplifted in such dark
So clear a torch aloft, who first shed light
Upon the profitable ends of man,
O thee I follow, glory of the Greeks,
And set my footsteps squarely planted now
Even in the impress and the marks of thine
...

For if must needs be named for him the name
Demanded by the now known majesty
Of these high matters, then a god was he,-
Hear me, illustrious Memmius- a god;
Who first and chief found out that plan of life
Which now is called philosophy, and who
By cunning craft, out of such mighty waves,
Out of such mighty darkness, moored life
In havens so serene, in light so clear.
...

Even Epicurus went, his light of life
Run out, the man in genius who o'er-topped
The human race, extinguishing all others,
As sun, in ether arisen, all the stars.
Wilt thou, then, dally, thou complain to go?

In light of that (pun intended), maybe a votive candle is not such a bad symbol to remind someone of Epicurus and the philosophy. Hmmm 🤔

S F O T S E



SIC FAC OMNIA TAMQUAM SPECTET EPICURUS

Post by “Joshua” of January 24, 2023 at 2:31 AM

Here's another way to look at it:

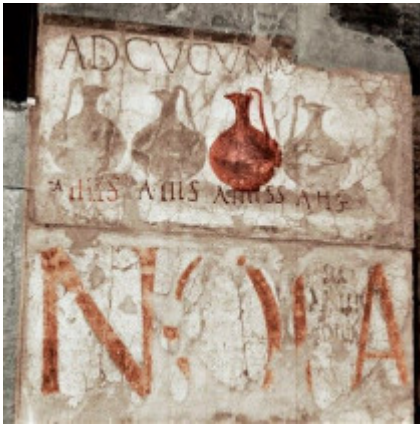


-John Harvard





One thing that is nearly always missing from film and television portrayals of ancient city life is *advertising*. Fortunately the lost city of Pompeii furnishes many examples:



"AD CVCVMAS"..."This way to the wine jars!"



Goat's milk dairy. Send me a pot of cheese!



...or maybe I'll get some milk for the puppy.



Metalworker's shop



"Salve, citizen! Which way to the---oh, I see it's this way..."

In light of this, we can imagine a prominent statue of Epicurus in Athens with perhaps some useful directions. "The Garden School, Dipylon road, etc." And then at the turning that leads to the garden, a corresponding statue to let them know they found the right place.