

# Comments on Greek Monetary Units

Post by "Cassius" of November 30, 2024 at 7:40 AM

These comments were part of a recent conversation on the costs of food and other items. I'm pasting them here as they might be usable to others in the future.

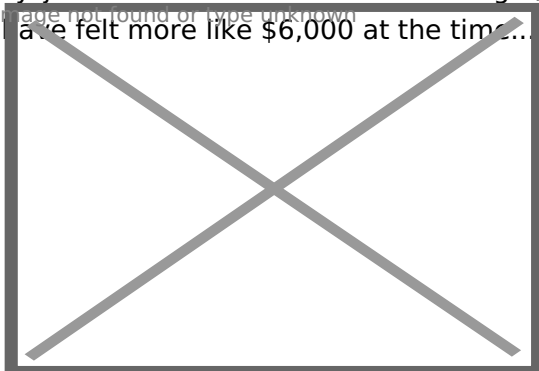
1 -

I wonder if there is anything to the idea that the diet in the garden was simple most of the time, perhaps largely home-grown, but then they went all-out once a month. Spending a mina on a dinner party is quite a lot, even if they had 100 guests.

A mina was equivalent to 100 drachmas. A drachma was about 4.3 grams of silver and was an average daily wage for average labor and had the purchasing power of around \$30 during Epíkouros lifetime. A full meal with meat, cheese and wine could easily cost a drachma. Epíkouros probably only spent so much on special occasions when hosting many people.

2 - Is it clear from the text that they're referring to a unit of currency rather than a measurement of weight? 1 Mina is either a lot of money or about 15 ounces. 15 ounces is a typical ribeye steak.

3 - Yeah, we'll have to figure this out together! I don't think a mina was ever in coin form, 15oz of silver (which was worth 100 drachma, and would be worth about \$350 today), would probably just be in the form of a small ingot/bar. But 15oz held more value in the past, and would have felt more like \$6,000 at the time... but I could be missing something.



[IMG\\_4953.jpeg](#)

4 - I guess the question is whether drachma, mina, etc were only used for the weights of precious metals or not. A dram (itself derived from drachma) is variously 1/16th or 1/8th of an ounce.

It looks like it's Plutarch's [Lives](#) to the rescue once again

#### Quote

[2] συνήρχοντο δὲ ἀνὰ πεντεκαίδεκα καὶ βραχεῖ τούτων ἐλάττους ἢ πλείους. ἔφερε δὲ ἕκαστος κατὰ μῆνα τῶν συσσίτων ἀλφίτων μέδιμνον, οἴνου χόας ὀκτώ, τυροῦ πέντε μνάς, σύκων ἡμιμναῖα πέντε, πρὸς δὲ τούτοις εἰς ὄψωνίαν μικρόν τι κομιδῆ νομίσματος: ἄλλως δὲ [p. 238] καὶ θύσας τις ἀπαρχὴν καὶ θηρεύσας μέρος ἔπεμψεν εἰς τὸ συσσίτιον. ἐξῆν γὰρ οἴκοι δειπνεῖν ὁπότε θύσας τις ἢ κυνηγῶν ὀψίσειε, τοὺς δὲ ἄλλους ἔδει παρεῖναι.

[2] They met in companies of fifteen, a few more or less, and each one of the messmates contributed monthly a bushel [medimnus] of barley-meal, eight gallons [χοῦς] of wine, five pounds [mina] of cheese, two and a half pounds [half-mina] of figs, and in addition to this, a very small sum of money for such relishes as flesh and fish. Besides this, whenever any one made a sacrifice of first fruits, or brought home game from the hunt, he sent a portion to his mess. For whenever any one was belated by a sacrifice or the chase, he was allowed to sup at home, but the rest had to be at the mess.

[bracketed text is mine]

That settles the question as far as I'm concerned. They're talking about the weight of the food, not the weight and value of the silver that was traded for the food.

5 - If there are 15 messmates, and every month each messmate brings five mina of cheese and two and a half mina of fruit (figs perhaps), that's 112.5 mina of food for the mess each month, which comes out to 3.75 mina per day per messmate not including the barley and wine, and, less frequently, meat.

Going by Wikipedia, a medimnus of barley was ~31 kg, and an Attic mina weighed ~0.4366 kg (nearly one pound)--71 mina per medimnus of barley. 35.5 mina of barley per messmate per day. That's clearly an absurd amount of barley, so I'll have to go deeper. The following two paragraphs are also from Wikipedia;

#### Quote

Sparta's agriculture consisted mainly of barley, wine, cheese, grain, and figs. These items were grown locally on each Spartan citizen's kleros and were tended to by helots. Spartan citizens were required to donate a certain amount of what they yielded from their kleros to their syssitia, or mess. These donations to the syssitia were a requirement for every Spartan citizen. All the donated food was then redistributed to feed the Spartan population of that syssitia.[143] The helots who tended to the lands

were fed using a portion of what they harvested.

#### Quote

It is believed that an active adult male in the sixth century BCE would have needed to consume about eight medimnoi per year, with a typical female consuming a slightly lower amount. From these figures, it can be estimated that a young family including a father, a mother and three children would have consumed approximately 25 medimnoi every year. The payment required to receive a very high rank, therefore, would feed approximately 20 families.

If instead of trying to convert the medimnus to mina (likely a fool's errand) I just use this paragraph as a guide, it tracks with the amounts listed by Plutarch. Each messmate eats a half-medimnus of barley per month, which would make  $\frac{6}{8}$ ths= $\frac{3}{4}$ ths of his diet at the mess barley, with the remainder of his diet being cheese, fruit, wine, and meat.

Edit; then again, even that would be 3.75 (cheese and fruit) + 11.25 (barley) = 15 mina per day of food. Roughly 4 to 5 times the usual amount by weight, but not out of the ordinary for a modern Olympic athlete during training (8000-10000 calories per day).

6 -

This is all good, helpful stuff, but a mina was definitely a unit of commerce during Epicurus' lifetime, whether coinage or not, because:

[redacted]

While we will probably never know the exact location of Epicurus's Garden in ancient Athens, we can take a number of educated guesses.

April 19, 2023

#### Quote

Source 2: The Testimony of Apollodorus the Epicurean (2nd century BCE via 3rd century CE)

Source 2 Text: Diogenes Laertius, Lives of Eminent Philosophers, Book 10.10-11.

Friends indeed came to him from all parts and lived with him in his garden (ἐν τῷ κήπῳ). This is stated by Apollodorus, who also says that **he purchased (πρίασθαι)**

**the garden for eighty minae (ὀγδοήκοντα μνῶν);** and to the same effect Diocles in the third book of his Epitome speaks of them as living a very simple and frugal life...

Also remember the context of the "spending a mina" on meals was in the slanderous book of Timocrates entitled Εὐφραντός ("Merriment"):

Quote

Again there was Timocrates, the brother of Metrodorus, who was his disciple and then left the school. He in the book entitled *Merriment* asserts that Epicurus vomited twice a day from over-indulgence, and goes on to say that he himself had much ado to escape from those notorious midnight philosophizings and the confraternity with all its secrets ; [7] further, that Epicurus's acquaintance with philosophy was small and his acquaintance with life even smaller ; that his bodily health was pitiful,<sup>12</sup> so much so that for many years he was unable to rise from his chair ; and that **he spent a whole mina daily on his table**, as he himself says in his letter to Leontion and in that to the philosophers at Mitylene.

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### Post by “Bryan” of November 30, 2024 at 12:54 PM

I think we are all in agreement about the mina as a unit. A mina was basically a pound -- and that could be a pound of anything, but in context of large purchases, was a reference to a pound of silver.

While Epíkouros occasionally spending a mina in a day was part of Timokrátēs' smear campaign, it seems that Epíkouros admitted that it was true: "Timokrátēs [also claims that]... [Epíkouros] spent a mina within a day on his table, as [Epíkouros] himself writes in a letter to Leóntion and in a letter to the philosophers in Mytilene." (Laértios 10.7)

Unless we understand instead "as [Timokrátēs] himself writes in a letter to Leóntion and in a letter to the philosophers in Mytilene" which would be possible, but Αὐτὸς seems more naturally to refer to Epíkouros, it seems to me.

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### Post by “Joshua” of November 30, 2024 at 8:07 PM

Bailey doesn't have much to add;

2. τό τε σῶμα ἐλασινῶς διακείσθαι: Bignone quotes evidence from the Herculaean writings of Epicurus' bodily infirmities, which is also supported by Plutarch, *contr. Epic. Beat.* 16.

4. μᾶν . . . ἡμερησίαν: possibly this was for the support of the whole community.

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Cyril Bailey, [Epicurus; The Extant Remains](#) endnote on page 405

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## Post by "Don" of November 30, 2024 at 10:29 PM

### [Quote from Joshua](#)

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Cyril Bailey, [Epicurus; The Extant Remains](#) endnote on page 405

I do think y'all are on to something. Timocrates (\*shakes fist in the air\*) may have been using the "fact" that Epicurus spent a mina "a day" on food... leaving out the "fact" that that is what sustained the whole resident teachers and staff and students (resident and "commuter") of The Garden, and even then I would suspect a good deal of that was home-grown, at least the fruits and vegetables. I highly doubt the Garden had enough land to grow sufficient barley or wheat. That was likely purchased. Intriguing to consider.

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## Post by "Eikadistes" of November 30, 2024 at 11:41 PM

### [Quote from Don](#)

I highly doubt the Garden had enough land to grow sufficient barley or wheat. That was likely purchased. Intriguing to consider.

Much of it was purchased with currency, but much of it was acquired through trade and good-will ... and other means. Usener fragments 184 and 185 (corresponding with Bailey 40 and 41) illuminate a lot of this. The employment of λήθω in the first fragment suggests to me that some of the provisions of grain were secured, to use a modern term, "under-the-table" or "off the top".

*If* Epicurus used as many resources as is alleged, he did not pay for it all (that's a big *if*).

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## **Post by “Don” of December 1, 2024 at 12:07 AM**

For reference, and thanks for calling these to my attention:

[ U184 ]

Philodemus, Treatises, Vol. Herc. 2, I.127: "The only contribution I require is that which ... ordered the disciples to send me, even if they are among the Hyperboreans. I wish to receive from each of you two hundred and twenty drachmae a year and no more." And in another letter: "Ctesippus brought me the annual tribute, which was sent on behalf of your father and you yourself."

[ U185 ]

Philodemus, Treatises, Vol. Herc. 2, I.118: After having given a sheep to a young boy from an enclosed pen: "Take care of the toy that I have gifted to you."

**I may have a feast.**

**40. You have looked after me wonderfully generously in sending me food, and have given proofs heaven-high of your good will to me.**

**41. The only contribution I require is that which . . . ordered the disciples to send me, even if they are among the Hyperboreans. I wish to receive from each of you two a hundred and twenty drachmae a year and no more.**

**Ctesippus has brought me the annual contribution which you sent for your father and yourself.**

λεύσασθαι δύνωμαι.

40. Δαιμονίως τε καὶ μεγαλοπρεπῶς ἐπεμελήθητε ἡμῶν τὰ περὶ τὴν τοῦ σίτου κομιδὴν, καὶ οὐρανομήκη σημεῖα ἐνδέδειχθε τῆς πρὸς ἐμὲ εὐνοίας.

41 [Τὴν σύνταξιν ἦν . . . συνε]τάξατο ἐμαυτῶ[ι κ]ἂν ἐν Ὑπερβ[ορ]είοις ὧσιν ἀποστε[λε]ῖν, ταύτην καὶ μόνην ἐπιτάττω. [ἐ]κατὸν γὰρ κα[ὶ ε]ἴκοσι [δ]ρ[αχ]μὰ[s μόν]ας κατ' ἐνιαυτὸν βούλομα[ι] παρ' ἑκατέρου λαμβάνειν.

5 Ἦνευγέ μοι Κτήσιππος τὴν κα[τ'] ἐ[ν]μαυτὸν σύνταξ[ι]ν ἦν ἀπέστειλας ὑπέρ τε τοῦ πατρὸς καὶ σεαυτοῦ.

42 Τιμίαν μὲν ἔξει ἀντίδοσιν τὴν [ὑπ' ἐ]μοῦ δοθεῖσαν αὐτῷ

§ 11 6: see note there on *κυθριδίου*.

40 (Usener 183). A reference to the contributions made by the disciples for the support of Epicurus: see *fr* 26

1. *δαιμονίως* seems a safer correction of the MS *δαίως* than Cobet's *δαψίλως*: it is also more in accord with the phraseology of the fragment.

2. *οὐρανομήκη*. an intentionally poetic word.

41 (Usener 184). Another reference to the *σύνταξις*, which shows that it was a well-organized subscription of a substantial amount levied on all disciples. It would presumably be required for the upkeep of the house and gardens in Athens and for the sustenance of Epicurus and the disciples who lived there. The opening of the fragment looks as though some official of the community was authorized to assess the amount.

42 (Usener 185) Another fragment from Philodemus said to be in

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Post by "Joshua" of December 1, 2024 at 1:09 AM

The reference to the mythical Hyperboreans is somewhat strange. It reads like an allusion to this passage from Herodotus;

Quote

But the persons who have by far the most to say on this subject are the Delians. They declare that certain offerings, packed in wheaten straw, were brought from the country of the Hyperboreans into Scythia, and that the Scythians received them and passed them on to their neighbours upon the west, who continued to pass them on until at last they reached the Adriatic. From hence they were sent southward, and when they came to Greece, were received first of all by the Dodonaeanes. Thence they descended to the Maliac Gulf, from which they were carried across into Euboea, where the people handed them on from city to city, till they came at length to Carystus. The Carystians took them over to Tenos, without stopping at Andros; and the Tenians brought them finally to Delos. Such, according to their own account, was the road by which the offerings reached the Delians. Two damsels, they say, named Hyperoche and Laodice, brought the first offerings from the Hyperboreans; and with them the Hyperboreans sent five men to keep them from all harm by the way; these are the persons whom the Delians call "Perpherees," and to whom great honours are paid at Delos. Afterwards the Hyperboreans, when they found that their messengers did not return, thinking it would be a grievous thing always to be liable to lose the envoys they should send, adopted the following plan:- they wrapped their offerings in the wheaten straw, and bearing them to their borders, charged their neighbours to send them forward from one nation to another, which was done accordingly, and in this way the offerings reached Delos.

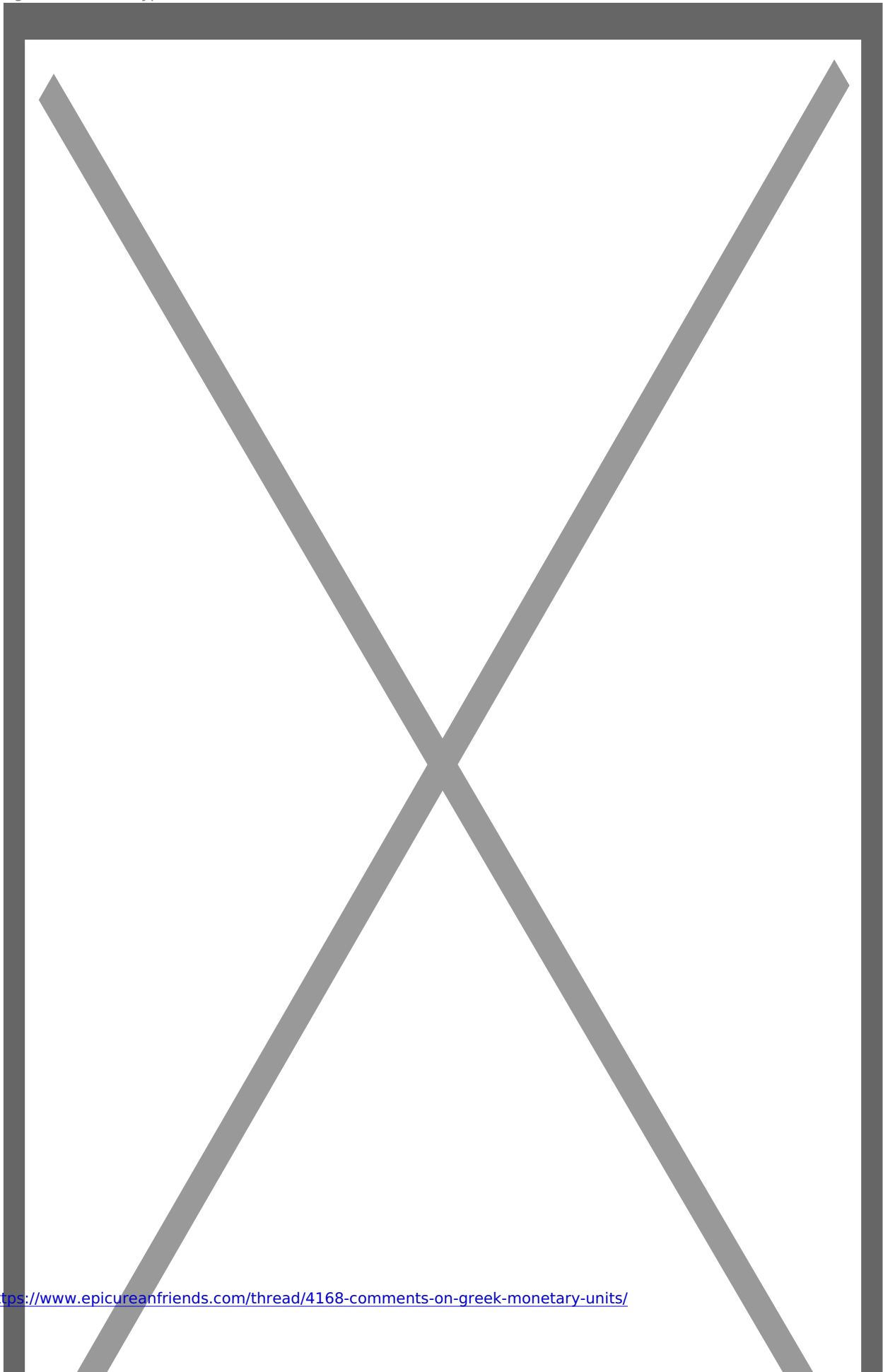
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**Post by "Don" of December 1, 2024 at 7:25 AM**

FYI

Image not found or type unknown



[Hyperborea - Wikipedia](#)

en.wikipedia.org

I took this to mean simply that even *if* there were students of Epicurus as far away (literally at the ends of the Earth) as Hyperborea, they'd still be expected to send the annual "donation" to the Garden of Athens of 220 drachmae.

I will point out that this amount is evidently a reconstruction of a text:

.κατον γαρ κα- -ικοσι -ρ--μ- ---ας

With the lacunae, I find εἴκοσι (20) easy enough to see, but I wonder if the reconstruction isn't missing something to do with the annual birthday 20th somehow. I'll have to dig a little more, but I could imagine "donations must be received by the annual 20th celebration" but I would have to dig into finding a manuscript image or examine the Greek MUCH MORE closely. That's just all idle speculation right now! Reader beware.

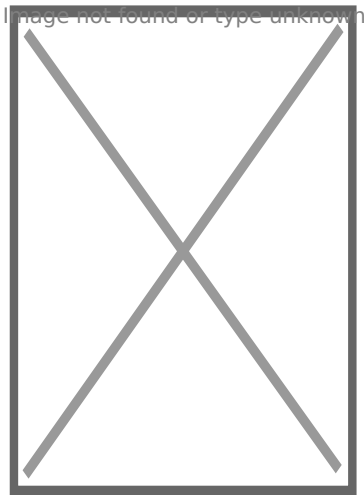
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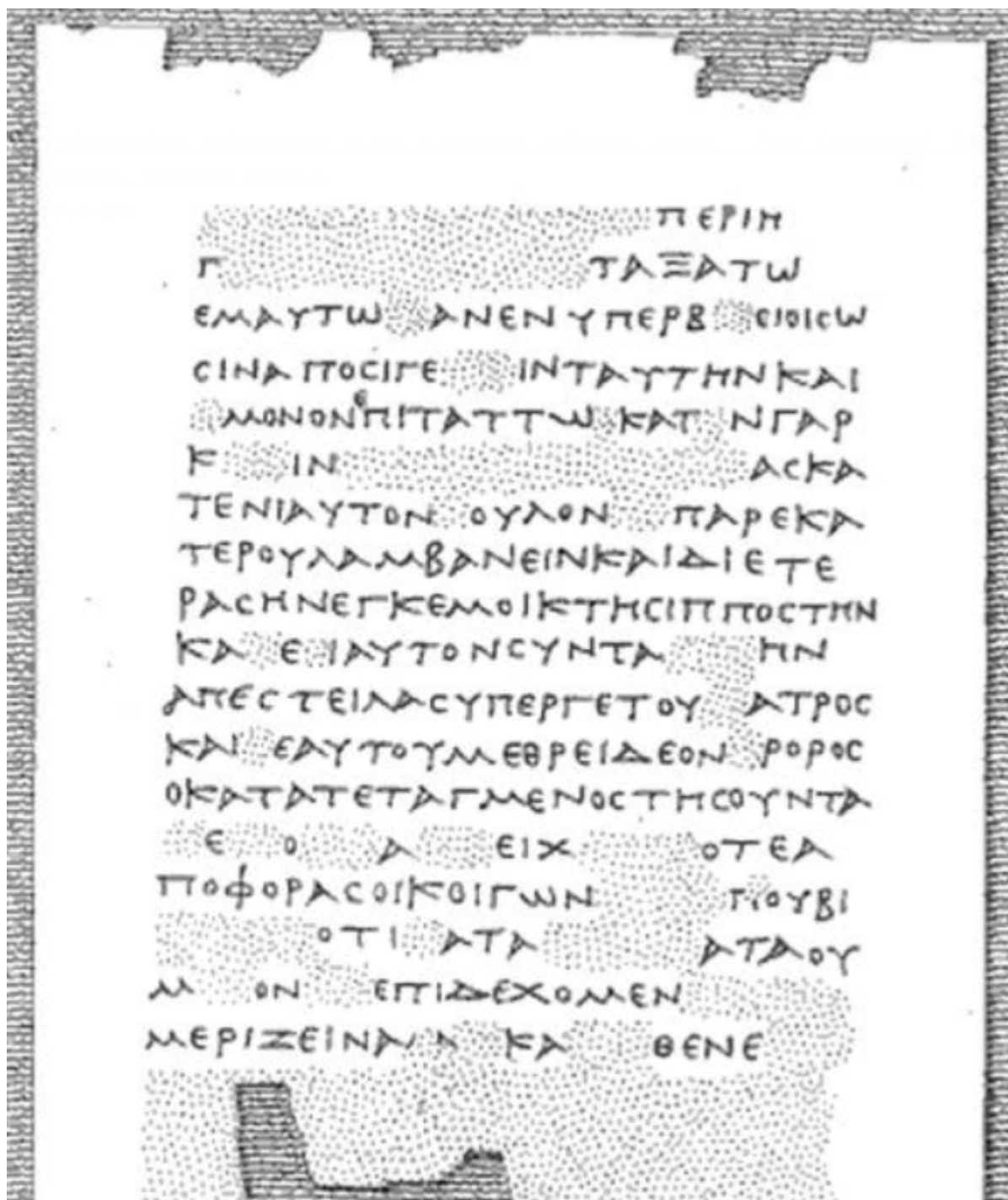
### Post by “Bryan” of December 1, 2024 at 10:22 AM

And I think a person in Athens at the time could live off 220 drachmae (2.2 minae) a year — I think it would feel like it was perhaps between \$15,000 to \$30,000 today.

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### Post by “Don” of December 1, 2024 at 12:18 PM





By Zeus!! It took me *forever* to remember what the Usener citation Vol. Herc. 2, I.127 referred to! I'm placing this here for future reference:

Vol. Herc. 2 or simply VH<sup>2</sup> refers to *Herculanensium voluminum quae supersunt collectio altera* in at least 8 volumes. The I is the volume number (ie, volume 1), 127 is the image/plate number. Here is the archive link to all volumes:

[Internet Archive: Digital Library of Free & Borrowable Texts, Movies, Music & Wayback Machine](#)

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### Post by “Bryan” of December 1, 2024 at 12:49 PM

Is it P.Herc. 1418?

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### Post by “Don” of December 1, 2024 at 12:59 PM

[Quote from Bryan](#)

Is it P.Herc. 1418?

Sorry, is what P. Herc.1418? U184? Yes. It looks like column 30:

[DCLP/Trismegistos 62469 = LDAB 3645](#)

But Papyri.info doesn't have the images for PHerc1418! And that drachma line has A LOT of holes.

Where's that image from in your post?

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### Post by “Bryan” of December 1, 2024 at 1:34 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

P. Herc.1418? U184? Yes.

Ok, great. Yes I am not that far in Epicurea, so I was just testing how the *Glossarium Epicureum* matched up (which was the source of my previous image listing some of the *Collectio Altera*).

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## Post by “Don” of December 1, 2024 at 2:12 PM

Using a combo of the *Glossarium*, VH2, and Papyri.info, we should be able to find images and transcriptions of almost any of the extant papyri. I am always curious to see the source material for even scholarly reconstructions or "corrections." Call me a skeptic 😊 Granted, the images are already interpretations of what's on the physical papyri in many cases, but you gotta work with whatcha got.

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## Post by “Kalosyni” of December 2, 2024 at 8:54 AM

### [Quote from Don](#)

Call me a skeptic

If we don't have a complete text (ie we just have fragments with missing lines and missing words) then we should hold off on making judgements because the evidence is incomplete -- and an incorrect understanding of what was written could arise, because missing words change the meaning.

At most we can state a label of the subject matter.

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## Post by “Kalosyni” of December 2, 2024 at 8:59 AM

### [Quote from Don](#)

And that drachma line has A LOT of holes.

In all studies, when there are so many holes, I think it is important to categorize which texts are complete and can be trusted vs. which are incomplete and therefore not to be trusted. (I am saying this in regard to all found ancient texts).

## Post by “Bryan” of December 3, 2024 at 1:12 PM

[Quote from Kalosyni](#)

At most we can state a label of the subject matter.

Yes, this seems to be the case, for example, for all of *On Nature Book 10*. Although only a few sentences can be formed, there are many places where *the topic*, at least, is clear.

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## Post by “Kalosyni” of December 3, 2024 at 4:03 PM

[Cassius](#) posted this over in another thread:

Quote

I wish we had some shorthand way of indicating a reasonable level of confidence for a particular passage of text. Maybe we ought to create a thread to explore some kind of ranking system that would include factors like:

....

Thread

[\*\*Possibilities For Shorthand Rating System For Indicating Reliability Of Texts\*\*](#)

I doubt that I will pursue this myself much further, but since I wrote this up as a comment to graphic I thought I would post it separately in case someone thought it was helpful for their own thinking. I'm not at all sure that such a thing would be practical, but thinking about the factors that would go into any such system is probably a good exercise:

I wish we had some shorthand way of indicating a reasonable level of confidence for a particular passage of text. Maybe we ought to create a...



Cassius

September 21, 2024 at 7:01 AM

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**Post by “Bryan” of December 9, 2024 at 12:34 AM**

Adding this for some scale of a mina bar.