

To Whom Was Epicurus' Last Letter Addressed?

Post by “Eikadistes” of December 30, 2024 at 10:58 AM

Both Cicero (1st-century BCE) and Diogenes Laërtius (3rd-century CE) preserve Epicurus' final letter:

"Epicurus **Hermarcho** S. Cum ageremus, vitae beatum et eundem supremum diem, scribebamus haec. Tanti aderant vesicae et torminum morbi ut nihil ad eorum magnitudinem posset accedere. Compensabatur, tamen cum his omnibus animi laetitia quam capiebam memoria rationum inventorumque nostrorum. Sed tu, ut dignum est tua erga me et philosophiam voluntate ab adolescentulo suscepta, fac ut Metrodori tueare liberos." Cicero (*On Ends* 2.30.96)

"Τὴν μακαρίαν ἄγοντες καὶ ἅμα τελευταίαν ἡμέραν τοῦ βίου ἐγράφομεν ὑμῖν ταυτί. στραγγουρία τε παρηκολουθήκει καὶ δυσεντερικὰ πάθη ὑπερβολὴν οὐκ ἀπολείποντα τοῦ ἐν ἑαυτοῖς μεγέθους. ἀντιπαρετάττετο δὲ πᾶσι τούτοις τὸ κατὰ ψυχὴν χαῖρον ἐπὶ τῆ τῶν γεγονότων ἡμῖν διαλογισμῶν μνήμη. σὺ δ' ἀξίως τῆς ἐκ μειρακίου παραστάσεως πρὸς ἐμὲ καὶ φιλοσοφίαν ἐπιμελοῦ τῶν παιδῶν Μητροδώρου." Diogenes Laërtius (*Lives* 10.22)

Cicero says that it was written from Epicurus to *Hermarkhos*. Diogenes says it was to *Idomeneus*.

Do we have any additional support either way?

Post by “Cassius” of December 30, 2024 at 11:03 AM

Great catch!

Post by “Eikadistes” of December 30, 2024 at 11:39 AM

Also, worth reading, is [Bitsori, Maria. "Epicurus' Death". *World Journal of Urology*, 2004.](#)

I've attached it, in the event it gets removed from Academia.edu.

Post by “Eikadistes” of December 30, 2024 at 12:01 PM

In particular, "The diagnosis of [urolithiasis](#) alone does not explain the [dysentery](#). [Haemolytic uraemic syndrome](#) explains both gastrointestinal and renal symptoms leading to death, however this syndrome is almost exclusively a childhood disease, inconsistent with the clinical picture, and particularly with [strangury](#), which indicates obstruction. Apart from [lithiasis](#), causes of [urinary obstruction](#) in an elderly person of 71 years could include infection, hypertrophy or malignancy of the prostate, bladder tumour or disseminated abdominal malignancy. The philosopher's amazing productivity until his very last days points against a diagnosis of a serious and debilitating chronic disease such as disseminated malignancy. Interestingly, physicians at these times appeared to have been unaware of the existence of the [prostate](#). The diagnosis of a [prostatic disease](#) might thus have been easily missed as symptoms could easily have been attributed to [lithiasis](#). **All his three brothers had succumbed to [hydrops](#), a term used to define generalised [oedema](#), mostly secondary to [heart failure](#), but also suggestive of [chronic renal](#) or [liver disease](#).** All the fragments of evidence indicate that Epicurus had for a prolonged period of years had a balanced [urinary tract lithiasis](#) or, less possibly, [prostatic hypertrophy](#) and this underlying condition was acutely deteriorated during a [gastrointestinal infection](#)."

Nonetheless, I'm still curious to whom the letter was addressed. 🤔

Post by “Cassius” of December 30, 2024 at 12:43 PM

Would it make sense that Hermarchus was present and would not need a letter, while Idomeneus may have lived somewhere else?

Post by “Don” of December 30, 2024 at 2:39 PM

Good catch! For ease of reference...

Cicero

30 96 "But I must not digress too far. Let me repeat the dying words of Epicurus, to prove to you the discrepancy between his practice and his principles: 'Epicurus to Hermarchus, greeting. I write p189 these words,' he says, 'on the happiest, and the last, day of my life. I am suffering from diseases of the bladder and intestines, which are of the utmost possible severity.' Unhappy creature! If pain is the Chief Evil, that is the only thing to be said. But let us hear his own words. 'Yet all my sufferings,' he continues, 'are counterbalanced by the joy which I derive from remembering my theories and discoveries. I charge you, by the devotion which from your youth up you have displayed towards myself and towards philosophy, to protect the children of Metrodorus.'

Diogenes L

10.22 And when near his end he wrote the following letter to Idomeneus :

"On this blissful day, which is also the last of my life, I write this to you. My continual sufferings from strangury and dysentery are so great that nothing could augment them ; but over against them all I set gladness of mind at the remembrance of our past conversations. But I would have you, as becomes your life-long attitude to me and to philosophy, watch over the children of Metrodorus."

Post by "Don" of December 30, 2024 at 5:46 PM

First thoughts...

Cicero is earlier than Diogenes, so he would take precedence?

Hermarchus was Epicurus' successor, so addressing it to him makes sense?

Two letters?? Least likely in my mind

Post by "Eikadistes" of December 30, 2024 at 5:57 PM

[Quote from Don](#)

First thoughts...

Cicero is earlier than Diogenes, so he would take precedence?

I believe so. His textual resources were superior. Additionally, he was a pupil of a Scholarch, and friends with numerous Epicurean philosophers, and, unlike Diogenes, he includes Epicurus' greeting in the letter. I am inclined to agree with Cicero that this was addressed to to Hermarkhos.

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Would it make sense that Hermarchus was present and would not need a letter, while Idomeneus may have lived somewhere else?

I question *who* was *where* and *when*. Do we know that Idomeneus stayed in Lampsakos? If so, it *does* seem more likely to me that he would have been writing to someone non-present.

[Quote from Don](#)

Hermarchus was Epicurus' successor, so addressing it to him makes sense?

This would seem to be the most prudent, especially because Hermarkhos' managerial control over Garden funds would have affected the children of Metrodoros, whereas Ideomeneus was just a financier, and Epicurus' was intimately closer with Hermarkhos than Idomeneus.

I'm flirting with the idea that it was to Hermarkhos, but I'd like more advocates for the devil.

Post by “Eikadistes” of December 30, 2024 at 6:27 PM

Per the [Last Will](#), "**Let them make Hermarchus trustee of the funds along with themselves, in order that everything may be done in concert with him, who has grown old with me in philosophy and is left at the head of the School [...]** And if anything should happen to Hermarchus before the children of Metrodoros grow up ...", so it seems that exhorting one to "watch over the children of Metrodoros" would have been received by their guardian(s), "Hermarchus", and possibly Aynomachus and Timocrates (to whom we know the letter was not addressed).

That's at least one additional bit of support for Cicero's position!

Post by “Eikadistes” of December 30, 2024 at 6:41 PM

Then again, upon review, Epicurus directly explains that is is writing the letter to [ὄμῖν](#) (plural pronoun in the accusative) meaning "to y'all", so perhaps the letter was to a non-present group (the Garden in Lampsakos vis-a-vis Idomeneus?) It seems unlikely he would have been writing to "y'all" if that group were in his presence, or just sitting in another room, or down the street.

Post by “Don” of December 30, 2024 at 7:18 PM

[Quote from Eikadistes](#)

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Unless it was literally his last will and testament addresses to "the Garden" with Hermarchus the incoming leader.

Post by “Eikadistes” of December 30, 2024 at 7:31 PM

I speculate that Hermarkhos would have made himself available, *at least*, or even as much as managing the legal transition. In any case, there would have been several, pressing reasons for him to remain at the Garden in Athens. On the other hands, I note that Epicurus wrote numerous letters to Idomeneus and "Friends at Lampsakos" suggesting to me a trend in referring to "Idomeneus & Co.".

Post by “Cassius” of December 30, 2024 at 9:18 PM

This would be one instance where I might not give Cicero's proximity in time quite so much credit. I am with DeWitt that Cicero probably had superior "knowledge" of Epicurus, on issues

like prolepsis and images, given the proximity in time and probably number of teachers. But something like the name of an addressee of a letter doesn't require philosophic attention, and could more likely be a "slip of the pen" that wouldn't be reviewed so closely. \

But reading the comments above I am very strongly in the middle on what the real answer is and i have no confidence which is the right answer.

Post by “Don” of December 30, 2024 at 9:26 PM

[Quote from Cassius](#)

Cicero probably had superior "knowledge" of Epicurus, on issues like prolepsis and images, given the proximity in time and probably number of teachers.

Ah, but he was also more likely to have access to primary texts through his friends and his personal connections than Diogenes may have had. Remember:

- Epicurus 341–270 BCE
 - Hermarchus c. 325-c. 250 BC
 - Cicero 106 - 43 BCE (Garden continued to thrive in his time)
 -~250+ years
 - Diogenes Laertius fl. 3rd century CE
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Post by “Don” of December 30, 2024 at 10:25 PM

I also just remembered this in my Internet Archive favorites. No idea if it'll be helpful, but here it is:

[Der Epikureer Hermarchos \[microform\] : Krohn, Karl, 1895- : Free Download, Borrow, and Streaming : Internet Archive](#)

Greek texts with commentary in German and notes in Latin
archive.org

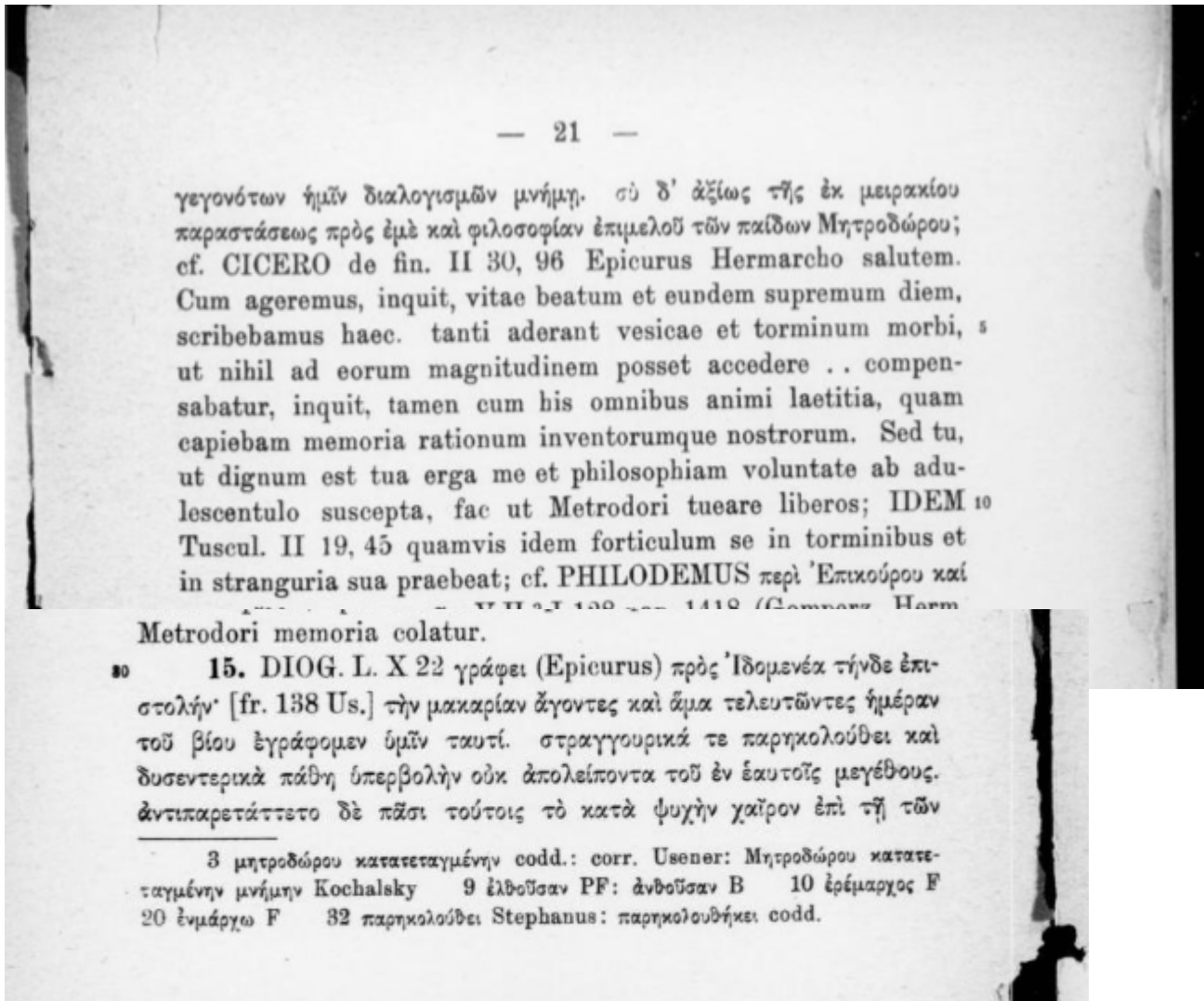
Post by “Eikadistes” of December 31, 2024 at 12:26 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

I also just remembered this in my Internet Archive favorites. No idea if it'll be helpful, but here it is:

<https://archive.org/details/derepi...age/n7/mode/1up>

Interestingly, on pages 20-21 of that archived document, the author notes the same discrepancy without providing a particular reasoning as to the the justification thereof.



Post by “Eikadistes” of December 31, 2024 at 12:43 AM

This section on Page 2 seems to assume Hermarkhos as the addressee:

"...diese Wahl fiel ihm um so leichter, als Metrodor und Polyän, unzweifelhaft bedeutendere Köpfe als Hermarch, bereits vor ihm gestorben waren. Hermarchs Bestallung zum Vormund der Kinder seiner beiden toten Freunde (fr. 14) und **Epikurs letztes vertrauliches Rundschreiben an alle überlebenden Schüler, deren erster Hermarch nun war (fr. 15)**, sind zwei überzeugende Beweise für das enge Verbundensein und den vertrauten Verkehr der Mitglieder des Gartens."

"...this choice was all the easier for him because Metrodor and Polyene, undoubtedly more important minds than Hermarch, had already died before him. Hermarch's appointment as guardian of the children of his two dead friends (fr. 14) and **Epicurus' last confidential circular all the surviving students, whose first was Hermarch** (fr. 15), are two convincing proofs of the close connection and familiar intercourse of the members of the garden" (*a rough rendering from Google Translate*).

Post by "Joshua" of December 31, 2024 at 1:25 AM

I don't have an answer, but I would like to point out that there is good reason to think that Hermarchus was the first friend and scholar to join Epicurus apart from the latter's own brothers.

Epicurus' course brought him through the following places:

Born on Samos -> Colophon -> Mytilene -> Lampsacus -> Died in Athens

--His brothers may have gone with him, or they may have joined him later.

--Hermarchus was from Mytilene.

--Metrodorus, Polyaeus, Colotes, Idomeneus, Batis, Leonteus, and Themista were all, if the meagre evidence is to be relied upon, from Lampsacus.

Post by "Don" of December 31, 2024 at 7:29 AM

I need to go "back to the books" before sharing half-baked ideas!

I've been under the mistaken idea that the Hermarchus/Idomeneus letter was Epicurus' will. Egads! I got that wrong. To cement this in my mind: The will is DL 10.16-21. The letter in question is just a short section of DL 10.22.

The will lays out, in detail, what Epicurus wants done, including (emphasis added):

19 And let Aynomachus and Timocrates take care of Epicurus, the son of Metrodorus, and of the son of Polyaenus, *so long as they study and live with Hermarchus*. Let them likewise provide for the maintenance of Metrodorus's daughter,³² *so long as she is well-ordered and obedient to Hermarchus*; and, when she comes of age, give her in marriage to a husband *selected by Hermarchus* from among the members of the School ; and out of the revenues accruing to me let Aynomachus and Timocrates *in consultation with Hermarchus* give to them as much as they think proper for their maintenance year by year. ... *Let them make Hermarchus trustee of the funds*³³ along with themselves, in order that everything may be done in concert with him, who has grown old with me in philosophy and is left at the head of the School. And when the girl comes of age, let Aynomachus and Timocrates pay her dowry, taking from the property as much as circumstances allow, *subject to the approval of Hermarchus*. ... *And if anything should happen to Hermarchus* before the children of Metrodorus grow up, Aynomachus and Timocrates shall give from the funds bequeathed by me, so far as possible, enough for their several needs, as long as they are well ordered. "

The letter in question in 10.22 just says: *watch over the children of Metrodorus*.

Throughout the will, Hermarchus is assigned the care of Metrodorus' son and daughter in the third person: ie, Hermarchus should do this. In the letter in 22, the addressee of the letter is asked "to watch over Metrodorus' children." It seems to me that it would make perfect sense for Epicurus to write a personal message to Hermarchus in the end asking him to watch the kids as a last personal memento for his trusted friend and student to keep.

In my opinion, this points to Cicero having the addressee correct.

There was a letter to Idomeneus, U130 (emphasis added):

Plutarch, *Against Colotes*, 18, p. 1117D: But if, Colotes, you had met with expressions of Socrates' such as Epicurus pens in *a letter to Idomeneus*: "So send us for the care of our sacred body an offering of first-fruits *on behalf of yourself and your children* - so I am inspired to put it;" to what more unmannerly terms could you have resorted? {Traditionally, first-fruits were offered to a god - support for Epicurus' bodily needs is so depicted.}

Athenaeus, Deipnosophists, VII p. 279F: It was in fact, for the sake of the belly and the pleasures of the flesh in general that *this man flattered Idomeneus* and Metrodorus. ... Epicurus, in fact, was the teacher of these men.

Note that there are children mentioned in the letter to Idomeneus, but they're Idomeneus' children. Diogenes *could* have mixed up the letters in his piles of documents or a copyist confused them or any number of other misattributions.

For those reasons, I'm giving the point to Cicero... As much as it pains me to do it 😊

PS. Having reread the text of the letters, it seems to me that Diogenes Greek text rings more personal and thus sounds more like a last note to a dear friend. Plus, Diogenes doesn't actually include the salutation to Hermarchus but only says there's also this letter "to Idomeneus". So right now:

1 point to Cicero for the salutation

2 points to Diogenes for a more authentic sounding text

Post by “Eikadistes” of December 31, 2024 at 8:52 AM

[Quote from Don](#)

1 point to Cicero for the salutation

I noticed that as well. Epicurus' Epistles (per Diogenes) all include introductory greetings, except for the *Last Letter*. Cicero provides us with that stylistic consistency, but with a surprising name.