



eCOMMONS

Loyola University Chicago
Loyola eCommons

Classical Studies: Faculty Publications and
Other Works

Faculty Publications and Other Works by
Department

1977

A Papyrus Letter about Epicurean Philosophy Books

James G. Keenan

Loyola University Chicago, jkeen@luc.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://ecommons.luc.edu/classicalstudies_facpubs



Part of the [Ancient Philosophy Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Keenan, JG. "A Papyrus Letter about Epicurean Philosophy Books" in *The J. Paul Getty Museum Journal*, Volume 5, 1977. 91-94.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Publications and Other Works by Department at Loyola eCommons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Classical Studies: Faculty Publications and Other Works by an authorized administrator of Loyola eCommons. For more information, please contact ecommons@luc.edu.



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 License](#).
© 1977 J. Paul Getty Trust.

A PAPYRUS LETTER ABOUT EPICUREAN PHILOSOPHY BOOKS

The J. Paul Getty Museum is housed in a successful recreation of the Villa dei Papyri in Herculaneum. Of the various types of artwork and artifacts bequeathed to the modern world by antiquity and now among the Museum's holdings, however, there was until recently a gap whose filling would have made the correspondence between the two buildings even more nearly complete. There were no papyri in the Museum's collection even though the original Villa was named after its rich library of papyrus rolls, containing mostly Epicurean texts. The first step to improve the situation in Malibu was taken by Mrs. Lenore Barozzi who generously presented the J. Paul Getty Museum with two papyri. One of them, the subject of this note, is particularly appropriate in that its contents concern Epicurean philosophy books.¹

As is the case with most of the papyri that have survived the centuries, the physical appearance of this one is unimposing. There is one large fragment, 5.8 cm.

1) It provided the subject matter for a paper I delivered at the 107th Annual Meeting of the American Philological Association in Washington, D.C. J. Paul Getty Museum, 76.AI.27

2) Not without raising difficulties and doubts; for which see Commentary, notes to lines 3-5 and 15. The fragment at the upper left (see Figure) measures 3.0 x 1.7 cm.; that at the lower left, 1.6 x 1.7 cm.

3) Though less regular and calligraphic and not identical in all its

in width by 10.7 cm. in height, to which two small fragments have been placed in alignment.² Three tiny bits have broken off from the main piece and have defied attempts to replace them in their proper positions. One bears the trace of a letter (not enough survives to establish its identity), the others bear respectively the letters *ad* and *ou*. The hand that wrote the body of the text is regular and easily legible, certainly belonging to the Roman period and within that period, with some likelihood, to the latter half of the second century.³ A salutation and what has been read as a date were added at the bottom (apparently) by a different hand,⁴ thinner and more rapid than the first hand.

Remains of a left-hand margin are preserved in one of the two small fragments. Although that piece cannot be joined cleanly to the main piece, it appears to have broken away from the upper left-hand part of the text. It has therefore been positioned close to, but not flush

letter shapes, the hand in many respects resembles that which transcribed the Berlin copy of the Gnomon of the Idios Logos (*B.G.U.* V 1210, prob. A.D. 161/180). See R. Seider, *Paläographie der griechischen Papyri*, vol. I (Stuttgart, 1967), pl. 37, or O. Montevocchi, *La Papirologia* (Torino, 1973), pl. 57.

4) Not inconceivably, it is the same hand writing more quickly.

against, the main fragment. If that positioning is right, or nearly so, it means that not too much has been lost at the left side of the papyrus. There is no way, however, to estimate the loss on the right side. The result is that the papyrus is nearly complete from top to bottom, with only a line or two of address missing at the top; but its width has suffered losses, modest on the left, inestimable on the right, and of such an extent generally as to preclude attempts to establish with precision the flow of thought in the text.

Luckily, what has remained of the papyrus clearly indicates its form and subject matter: it is a letter about books, and more precisely, about Epicurean philosophy books. As many as six Epicurean works are mentioned, most with their titles preserved in whole or in part. Most, as would be expected, are works by Epicurus himself, but at least one may be from the corpus of writings by Epicurus's most beloved disciple, Metrodorus.⁵ As far as judgement is possible, it is these books that constitute the primary and perhaps, apart from the usual formalities, sole subject matter of the letter. What was to be done with them? The answer to this question is probably supplied by the verb forms ἀναπέμψω and ἀπέστειλα, preserved respectively in lines 7 and 8 of the text. They suggest that the sender of the letter is also a sender of books: he will send, and has already sent, a selection of Epicurean tracts to his addressee. He is possibly an older adherent providing pertinent literature to a younger devotee or more recent convert. The circumstances may therefore reflect those of a roughly contemporary but far better known Epicurean letter, that of Diogenes of Oenoanda to Antipater, preserved in fragments 15 and following of the former's famous inscription. There, at one point, Diogenes affirms: "I

have sent, as you requested, the (books) 'On the Infinity of Worlds'."⁶

It is unfortunate that the names of the correspondents of the papyrus letter are lost. If not scholars, they were, as just suggested, presumably adherents to Epicurean philosophy. The exact provenance of the letter is also unknown. All that can be said is that it must have come from the Egyptian *chôra*. It was certainly sent there after being written, possibly even written there if not in Alexandria. There is only one clue toward greater precision on this point: the verb ἀναπέμψω. If, as frequently in Egyptian *Koinê*, the prepositional element indicates relative position with respect to the Nile, then the recipient of the letter was "upriver" (ἀνα-) with respect to its sender, a circumstance consistent with the letter's having been written in Alexandria, a city where such books as those mentioned in the letter might more readily have been found.

Whatever the case, in its concern for philosophy books, this papyrus is a precious bit of testimony for the existence of an interest in Epicureanism in the Egyptian countryside in the Roman period.⁷ In its concern for books it invites comparison with *P.Oxy.* XVIII 2192, a letter of the second century A.D. in which the writer asks that copies of books 6 and 7 of Hypsicrates' *Comic Characters* be made and sent to him,⁸ and with *P.Berol.* 21849, a fifth-century letter in which the writer urges the return of books he had lent the addressee, namely Alexander Claudius's commentary on Demosthenes and three works by Menander Rhetor.⁹

Only one side of the papyrus is inscribed. No trace of writing (an address, for example) has survived on the reverse side. The text of the letter, written as is usual with the fibers, is as follows:¹⁰

5) The work by Metrodorus: line 2 and Commentary note. For the other works: lines 3, 4, 5, 6 and 11 with notes.

6) *Diogenis Oenoandensis Fragmenta*, ed. Chilton (Teubner, Leipzig, 1967), Fr. 16, col. I.4-6: τὰ περὶ ἀπειρίας κόσμων, ὡς ἠξίωσας, ἀπέστειλά σοι. Cf. col. II.12 ff.

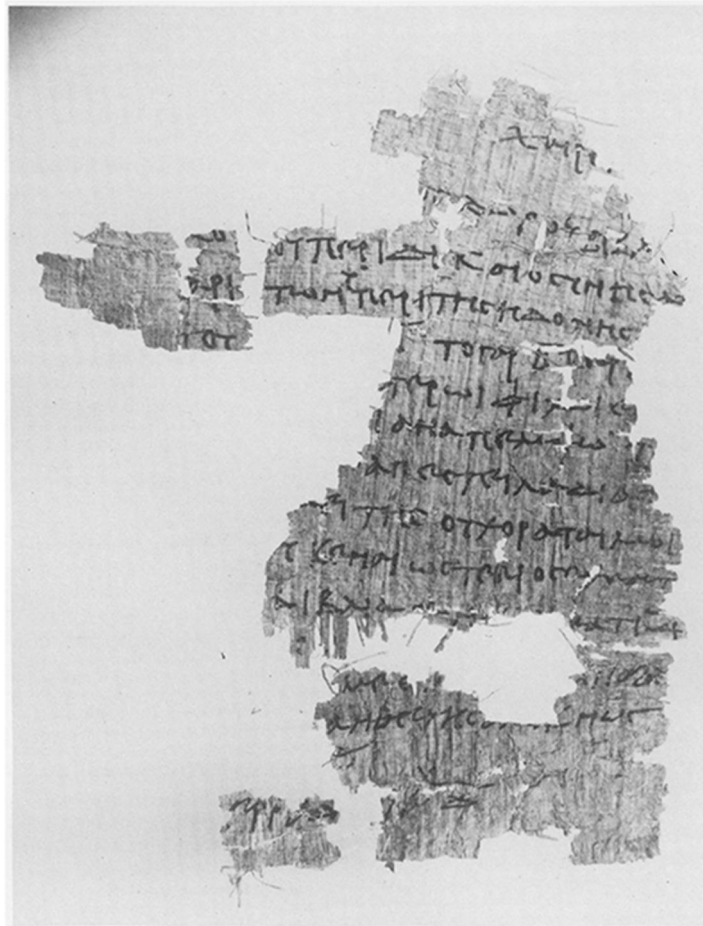
7) Evidence thereto is otherwise exceedingly scarce. For example, only a handful of Epicurean texts are listed in Roger A. Pack, *The Greek and Latin Literary Texts from Greco-Roman Egypt* (2nd edn., Ann Arbor, 1965). They are nos. 2574-2579, two of which at least are of Ptolemaic vintage.

8) Reproduced in E. G. Turner, *Greek Manuscripts of the Ancient World* (Oxford, 1971), as no. 68. The letter also mentions *inter alia* certain "prose epitomes of Thersagoras's work on the myths of tragedy." The papyrus is listed by Pack as no. 2091.

9) H. Maehler, "Menander Rhetor and Alexander Claudius in a Papyrus Letter," *GRBS* 15 (1974), 305-311. Also pertinent is *P.Primi*

(= *P.Mil.Vogl.*) I 11, a letter of the second century listing works by Antipater, Boëthus, Chrysippus, Diogenes and Posidonius; Pack no. 2093. Incidentally, the Berlin letter and the letter edited in the present paper should both be added to Pack's list of "Book Catalogues" (*op.cit.* nos. 2087-2093).

10) Because of doubt as to the spacing and position of the small fragment at the upper left (see earlier comments in this introduction and below, note to lines 3-5) with respect to the main fragment, I have not included in the transcription estimates on the extent of the lacunas at the beginning of the lines. If the fragment is rightly positioned and spaced, then the lacuna in the first half of line 5 may be set at roughly six letters, with about eight letters missing at the beginnings of lines 6 and 7, seven at the beginning of line 8, five at the beginnings of lines 9 through 11, and so forth. I take line 15 to be complete—but only if the fragment at the lower left is correctly placed (see note ad loc.).



TRANSLATION

1	<i>vacat</i> χαίρει[ν Μητ]ροδώρου βιβλ[ί- χο[ύ]ρου περὶ δίκαιοσύνης α.[ἀρί[σ]των ὑπὲρ[[ι]]τῆς ἡδονῆς [5 γου[]. τὸ γὰρ β̄ περὶ [] ἑτέρωι φίλωι ε.[] ἀναπέμψω τ.[]. ἀπέστειλα διὰ .[] λειτῆς οὐχ ὄραταί μοι[10]υκέναι ὥστε πρὸς ἑμαυτ[όν] βιβλία εν ματι \'. . .[] μερ . . [.] ἀπάξου [] ανδετησα . . ενως []. 15 (2nd hand) ἔρρωφ(σο) L δ' [Χο]λάχ' δ.	'Επι-]	“. . . greetings. . . . book(s) of(?) Metrodorus . . . Epicurus's (book) 'On Justice' . . . best 'On Pleasure' . . . For the 2nd book 'On . . . ' . . . (to?) another friend . . . I will send . . . I sent through the hand of . . . -leites does not seem to me . . . so that to me . . . books . . . Greet . . . "Farewell. Year 4, Choiak 4."
---	---	--------	---

COMMENTARY

2. Μητ]ροδώρου: the broken letter is far more likely to be *rho* than *lambda*. Accordingly, another attractive possibility, that the name should be restored as Ἀπολλ]λοδώρου, can be dismissed. Apollodorus was a voluminous Epicurean writer, responsible for more than

400 books, including a biography of Epicurus. See Diogenes Laertius X.2 and 25. For a listing of titles by Metrodorus: *ibid.* X.24. Yet another possibility, raised by Jørgen Mejer (letter of 25 April 1976), is that this line does not refer to a work by Metrodorus but to one entitled Περί Μητροδώρου, somehow equivalent to Epicurus's work whose title is given simply as Μητροδώρος in Diogenes Laertius X.28.

βιβλί: βιβλίον or βιβλία. Accusative is likely; whether singular or plural is uncertain.

3-5. It is certain from the position of the small fragment prior to mounting that it comes from the upper left-hand portion of the papyrus. In three successive lines it bears the following: κο[, αρι[, γου[. Whether the fragment's alignment with lines 3-5 is right is open to question; it might also have been aligned with lines 2-4 or with lines 4-6. In defense of the alignment with lines 3-5, it may be said that this positioning produces the most attractive readings, particularly in suggesting the restoration 'Επι]χο[ύ]ρου in lines 2-3, and less significantly, though still importantly, ἀρ[σ]των in line 4. But, of course, by very reason of these results, the fragment's position may come under suspicion. The reader should therefore exercise caution in accepting or using the readings at the beginnings of lines 3-5.

3. The letter after δίκαιοσύνης is certainly *alpha*; *kappa* cannot be read; therefore καλί cannot be restored. It is still likely that this line refers, though in shortened fashion, to the treatise περί δικαιοσύνης καὶ τῶν ἄλλων ἀρετῶν, listed by Diogenes Laertius (X.27-28) as being among Epicurus's best productions.

a[: if the letter after *alpha* is *lambda* (a distinct possibility) then restore, as Mejer suggests, something like ἀλ[λο].

4. ὕπερ[[ι]]τῆς ἡδονῆς: περί, the usual preposition in book titles, was written first, then emended to ὑπέρ. *Upsilon* was squeezed in above the line, *iota* canceled with a short oblique stroke. The work that is meant is presumably Epicurus's book *De voluptate*, cited by Cicero, *De divinatione* II.27.59 (cf. H. Usener, *Epicurea* [Stuttgart, 1966; repr. of 1887 edn.], p. 101), but not to be found in Diogenes Laertius's list at X.27-28. For the frequent interchange of ὑπέρ and περί in *Koinê*, see E. Mayser, *Grammatik der griechischen Papyri aus der Ptolemäerzeit*, II.2 (Berlin and Leipzig, 1934; repr. 1970), pp. 450-54; Blass, Debrunner, and Funk, *A Greek Grammar of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago, 1961), §§ 229(1) and 231.

5. γου: perhaps restore λό]γου, running over from the

preceding line.

τὸ γὰρ β̄ περὶ[: "The 2nd book 'On . . .'" Several of Epicurus's works are known to have run to two or more "books," i.e. papyrus rolls. This was presumably one of them. See again Diogenes Laertius X.27-28, *passim*.

6. ε[: perhaps restore 'Επ[ικούρου, ἐπ[ιστολήν, or ἐπ[ιστολάς. The reference could be to a work, a letter or letters, addressed to a friend of Epicurus's other than Metrodorus (line 2).

9. λ̄ειτης: broken *lambda*, or perhaps *mu*. My original inclination was to take this as the ending of a personal name; but I have found few examples of names ending in this manner. If the broken word does refer to an individual, a more reasonable conjecture is that this is part of a word giving the man's place of origin, i.e., the man was a Hermopolite, Antinoopolite or the like. Therefore restore, *exempli gratia*, something like 'Ερμουπο]λείτης (- πολείτης = -πολίτης, an example of the most common type of *iotacism*).

οὐχ ὀράται: seems unusual, but the word division appears correct and the reading of the individual letters is certain.

10. ἔμαυτ[όν: or ἔμαυτ[ῶ].

11. Between εν and ματι the line is badly damaged; only the very tops of the letters are visible. The traces at the end of the line are puzzling, possibly (far from certainly) marred by cancelation. There appears to be a fragmentary letter, written above the line, to the upper right of the *iota*.

15. The small fragment at the lower left poses difficulties of placement and, accordingly, of establishing a correct text. Because it carries the letter's salutation, the fragment must belong to the bottom of the papyrus; moreover, the handwriting style, more rapid than that of the first hand (though see above, fn. 4), matches that found at the bottom of the main fragment. The main issue is whether the small fragment, which contains only one broken line of writing, should be set against line 14 or line 15 of the main fragment. The latter alternative is adopted here.

L δ' = ('Ετου) (τετάρτου), i.e. the fourth regnal year of an emperor, or of emperors, whose name is not given.

[Χο]ίαχ': read Χοίαχ. The final *chi*, as opposed to the more usual *kappa*, and the suspension of the letter above the line (usually indicating an abbreviation), cast some doubt on this reading. The superlinear stroke over the following *delta* make its status as a cipher clear.

Choiak 4: normally November 30; in leap years December 1.

James G. Keenan
Loyola University, Chicago