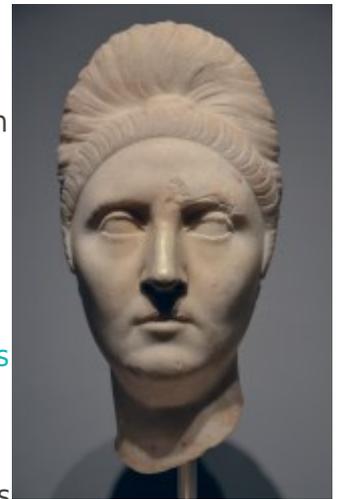


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In the early year of AD 121, Pompeia Plotina, the greatly respected widow of the emperor Trajan, sent Hadrian a letter asking him to help the Epicurean school in Athens solve an issue regarding the rights of succession. According to Roman law, the head of the school was obliged to appoint a new leader from among Roman citizens only with a will written in Latin. This restriction made the number of candidates too limited and prevented the best members of the school from being appointed.

The head of the Epicurean school (scholarch) at the time was a man called Popillius Theotimus, a Roman citizen. As he could not legally name as his successor (*diadochus*) any foreigner (*peregrinus*), nor could the will be written in Greek, he enlisted the Dowager Empress to petition the Emperor for a change in the law on his behalf. The relevant letters ([JG II<sup>2</sup> 1099](#)) were preserved in a series of inscriptions discovered in Athens in 1890. They consist of three separate sections. The first section contains the letter from Plotina addressed to Hadrian in Latin in the consulship of [Marcus Annius Verus](#) with Gnaeus Arrius Augur as his colleague, which gives the year of AD 121 (before April when two new consuls were elected). The second section contains Hadrian's brief reply in Latin to Popillius Theotimus, whilst the third is a long letter in Greek from Plotina to "all her friends" at the Epicurean school. The letters were inscribed on slabs of Pentelic marble in Athens in AD 121.



*Pompeia Plotina*

Hadrian agreed to Plotina's request and granted Popillius Theotimus and his successors permission to extend the succession rights to Greek *peregrine* and draw up their testaments in Greek.

Plotina wrote to Hadrian as follows: (Translation by R. van Bremen, 2005)

*How greatly I favor the school of Epicurus you know full well, my lord. The succession therein needs your help, for since none but a Roman citizen may be elected head of the school the choice is narrowly limited. I pray therefore on behalf of Popillius Theotimus, who is now the head at Athens, that you will allow him to provide by will in Greek concerning that part of his instructions which pertains to the regulation of the headship, and to name a successor to himself of non-citizen status if he is so persuaded by the attainments of the person; and that future heads of the school may hereafter exercise with the same right the privilege you grant to*

*Theotimus, all the more so because the practice is that whenever an error has been made by the testator concerning the choice of a head, he who will be best is, by common consent, selected by the students of the school, and this will be easier if he can be chosen from a larger number.*

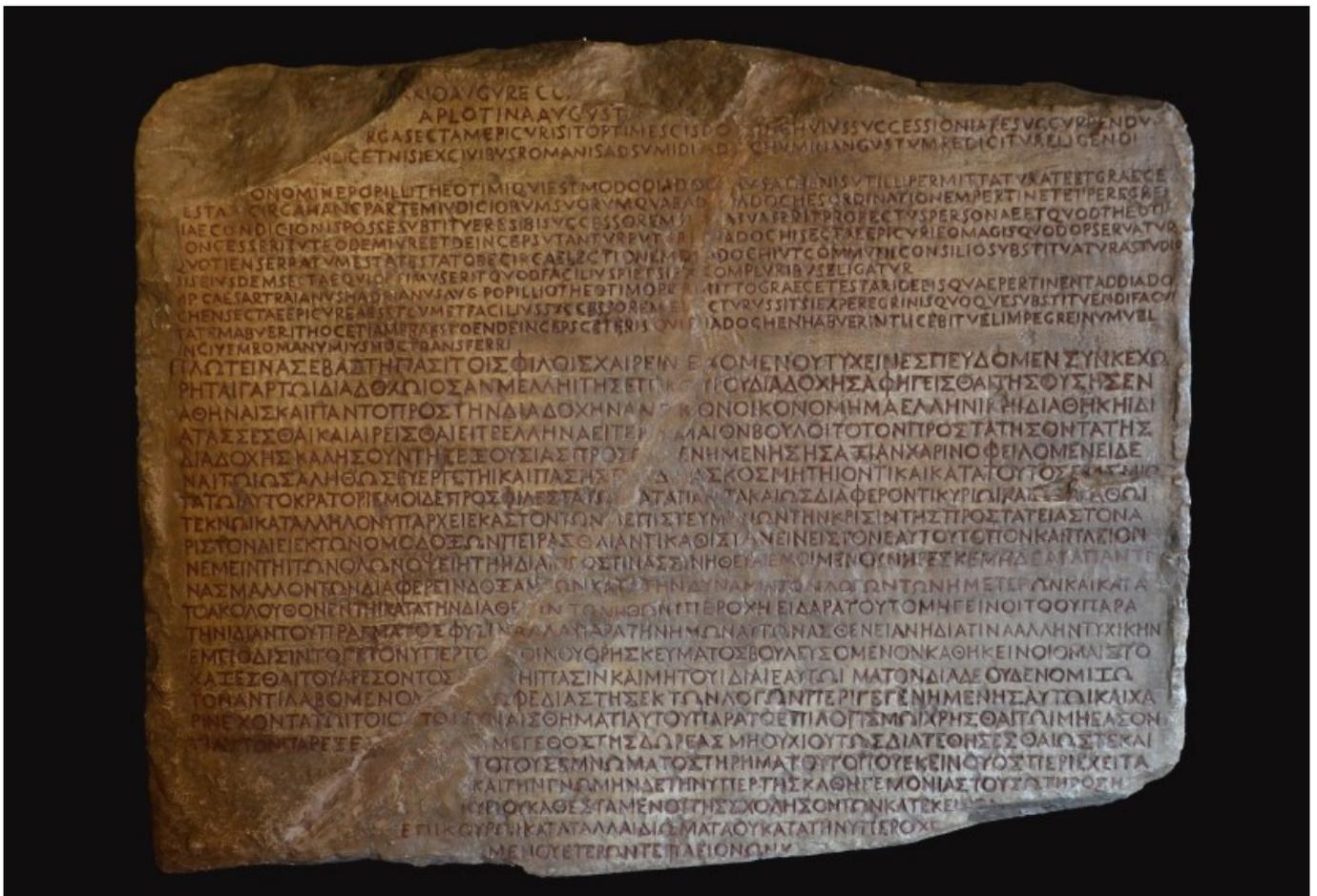
The Emperor answered: (Translation by R. van Bremen, 2005)

*I, Imperator Caesar Traianus Hadrianus Augustus permit Popillius Theotimus to testate in Greek concerning those matters which pertain to the succession of the Epicurean sect, and since it will be easier for him to select a successor if the option exists also to appoint from among the peregrine I guarantee this too and it will be permitted from now on to those who have obtained the succession that this right be transmitted either to a peregrine or to a Roman citizen.*

Plotina then passes on the news that her request has been granted to all the Athenian Epicureans: (Translation by R. van Bremen, 2005)

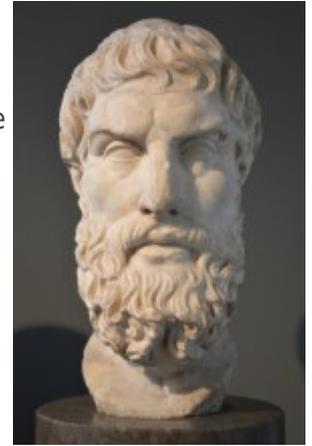
*Plotina Augusta to all her friends, greetings. We now have what we were keen to achieve. For it has been granted to each Successor who will lead the School of Epicurus in Athens, both to make dispositions about the entire administration concerning the School by means of Greek testament, and to choose at will, either a Greek or Roman Head of the School. Because this excellent extension of authority has been granted to us - which binds us to express true gratitude to him who is verily a benefactor and guardian of all culture and therefore a most venerable emperor; to me personally also most dear in all respects as both an outstanding master and a good son - it is proper that each of those who have been trusted with the decision concerning the headship always tries to appoint in his own place the best of those who share in the doctrine and to attach more importance to the view of the community as a whole than to his own predilections for particular individuals. It would therefore please me if he did not show preference to anyone over those who are acknowledged as outstanding in the power of our doctrines and, accordingly, in the superiority of their moral conduct. If this were not to be the case, not because of the particular nature of the matter, but because of our own weakness, or through some other accidental impediment, I consider it proper that he who will plan ahead for the common observances will aim for that which will please all in common and not that which will please him personally. But, by Zeus, I do not think that he who has grasped the benefit which has come to him from the teachings and is grateful for the wonderful insight it brings, by*

virtue of his adhering to a reasoned principle which does not permit him to abuse the magnitude of that gift, will fail to dispose by testament in such a way that both the preservation of the dignity of that place which contains the (...) will be firmly secured and equally the opinion concerning the successor of our saviour, which... when... became master of the school, since Epicurus... according to other specific qualities, not according to the pre-eminence of...



Letter from Plotina to the Epicureans of Athens, cast of the original in pentelic marble from the Epigraphical Museum of Athens (inv. EM 1040), dated to AD 121.

Epicureanism is the philosophy taught by Epicurus (341 BC - 270 BC), an Athenian philosopher who identified the goal of human life as pleasure and happiness and who maintained that the universe consisted of nothing but space and atoms. Epicurus was born on the island of Samos in 341 BC to Athenian parents who later moved to Colophon in Asia Minor. He began teaching in Mytilene on the island of Lesbos when he was around thirty years old and soon proceeded to Lampsacus on the nearby mainland, where he founded a school, taught and gathered followers. In 307/6 BC, Epicurus purchased a house with a large walled garden (kēpos) just outside Athens and established a school that became known as the "Garden". There, amidst the lush and pleasure groves of his Garden, Epicurus taught his hedonistic and materialistic philosophy until his death in 270 BC at seventy-two.



*Epicurus*

At this time, the two other established Athenian philosophical schools which attracted students from throughout the Greek world were Plato's Academy and [Aristotle's Lyceum](#). First founded at the beginning of the 4th century BC was the Academy, located outside Athens' walls to the north. It remained open until AD 83. Next came the Lyceum in 335 BC to the east of the city. Then came Epicurus' Garden. In [De Finibus V](#), Cicero places the Garden's location on the way to Plato's Academy and indicates that the Academy is situated three-quarters of a mile (1,100 meters) from the [Dipylon Gate](#), the main entrance to the city. Candace H. Smith, in *The Hellenistic Philosophers Volume I*, provides an illustration in accordance with this portrayal (see [here](#)).



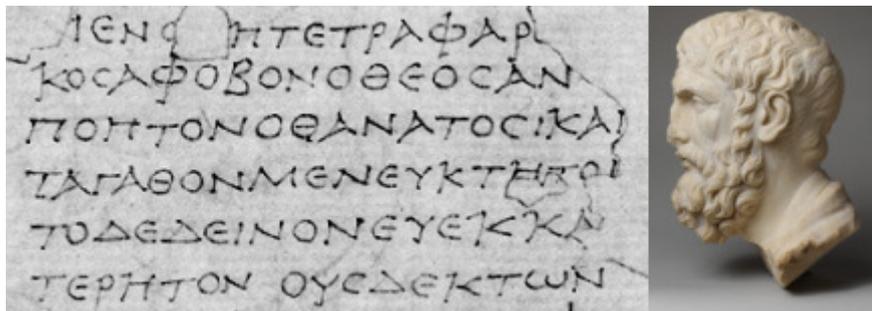
*Fragment of a mosaic from a Roman villa at Autun (France) depicting Epicurus' most distinguished pupil Metrodorus of Lampsacus, contemplating the wisdom of [Vatican Saying 14](#) of Epicurus which is repeated around the sitting figure.*

We have been born once and there can be no second birth. For all eternity we shall no longer be. But you, although you are not master of tomorrow, are postponing your happiness. We waste away our lives in delaying, and each

## of us dies without having enjoyed leisure – Epicurus, Sententiae Vaticanae 14

Much of what is known about Epicurus’s principles come from the writings of his later followers. Diogenes Laertius (3rd century AD) is the primary source for the original letters of Epicurus to his disciples (Herodotus, Menoeceus and Pythocles) and the brief sayings called “Principal Doctrines” (*Kuriai Doxai*). Diogenes gives a somewhat sympathetic account of Epicurus in the tenth and final book of his *Lives of Eminent Philosophers*. Also preserved is a collection of eighty maxims of ethical content in what is best known as the *Vatican Sayings*. In addition, Titus Lucretius Carus, an Epicurean poet of the late Roman republican era (1st century BC), wrote a Latin hexameter poem *On the Nature of Things* devoted to Epicurean physics. Short citations of Epicurus’ works also appear in other writers such as Seneca, Plutarch who were very knowledgeable about Epicurean teachings.

Among the most important later sources for Epicurean philosophy are two remarkable sets of texts discovered in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. The first texts were recovered in carbonized condition from the Villa of the Papyri library just outside Herculaneum, which was buried in the eruption of Vesuvius in AD 79. They are books by the Epicurean philosopher and epigrammatist Philodemus of *Gadara* (ca. 110 – ca. 30 BC), who studied in the Epicurean school at Athens under Zeno of Sidon (c. 150 – c. 75 BC) and later moved to Italy. The majority of the burnt papyri scrolls found in the Villa of the Papyri were written in Greek and contained Philodemus’ philosophical works, including books that reflect upon the fundamental aspects of Epicurean doctrine (PHerc. 1232, 1289), including Epicurus’ lost magnum opus, *On Nature*.



*The tetrapharmakos (a four-line recipe for leading the happiest*

*possible life) as found in the Herculaneum papyrus in the Villa  
of the Papyri (P.Herc.1005 col. 5).*

Don't fear god,  
Don't worry about death;  
What is good is easy to get,  
What is terrible is easy to endure

The second set of texts is from the monumental [Epicurean inscription](#) from Oinoanda in Lycia (modern Turkey) erected in the AD 120s by a wealthy notable named Diogenes. The surviving fragments of the inscription (about 305 to date), originally extending onto a portico wall about 80 metres in length and 4 metres in height, sets out Epicurus' teachings on physics, epistemology, and ethics. The inscription was discovered at the end of the nineteenth century, but research gained momentum only after 1968 when British scholar [Martin Ferguson Smith](#) investigated the site and the inscription. Diogenes, who was an old man when he had the inscription set up, addresses his fellow citizens and visitors from all over the world. He reminds them that happiness (*eudaimonia*) gained by pleasure is the aim of all human endeavour, that fear of the gods, death and pain is a particular obstacle of happiness, and warns them of the dangers of unfettered desires.



A block of the philosophical inscription of Diogenes of Oinoanda, recorded in 2012. The text (New Fragment 207) is part of the preface to his Ethics.

Author: Odoxo ([Wikimedia](#))

Having already reached the sunset of my life (being almost on the verge of departure from the world on account of old age), I wanted, before being overtaken by death, to compose a [fine] anthem [to celebrate the] fullness [of pleasure] and so to help now those who are well-constituted. – Diogenes

To these sources, we must also add an inscription from Apamea on the Orontes in Syria, dated to Hadrian's era or a little later (Smith, 1996). It is a Greek dedication made by one Aurelius Belius Philippus, who appears as *diadochus* of the Epicureans in Apamea.

On the order of the greatest holy god Bel, Aurelius Belius Philippus, priest and *diadochos* of the Epicureans in Apamea.

The Epicurean inscription from Oinoanda and the correspondence between Plotina, Hadrian and the Epicurean community at Athens show that Epicureanism continued to have a considerable following during the 2nd century AD, in Athens, but also in other parts of the Roman Empire, such as Asia Minor and Syria.

We do not know when Plotina adhered to Epicureanism, at any rate towards the last years of her life (she died in late 122 or early 123). Her letter to Hadrian reveals that she acted as an intermediary for the Athenian Epicureans with whom she appears to have enjoyed a personal relationship. Furthermore, the favour she obtained for them by her mediation with Hadrian sheds light on the respect she received from the man she helped put on the throne. Their relationship was a very close one, and the two surely had an intellectual bond. Hadrian honoured her on coins and commented that “though she asked a great deal of me, I refused her nothing.”

Her requests were of such a character that they neither burdened me nor afforded me any justification for opposing them. Dio 69.10-3

After her passing, Hadrian honoured her memory by wearing black for nine days. He then had her deified (like Matidia, her mother-in-law), commemorated her with a basilica in her native city

(Nemausus in Gaul) and rededicated the temple he had built for Trajan to the Divine Trajan and the Divine Plotina.



*Gold coin bearing the images of Plotina and Matidia. Issued by Hadrian in 117-118.*

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As a Hellenophile, Hadrian was familiar with the work of the philosophers Epictetus, the famous stoic, and a certain Heliodorus, an Epicurean, both of whom he considered intimate friends (*HA Had.* 16.10). The philosophy of the Garden may have appealed to Hadrian himself, although it is difficult to assert that Hadrian had Epicurean interests of his own (Birley, 1997 & Brennan, 1998). The Heliodorus mentioned in the *Historia Augusta* is said be the same philosopher named on another Epicurean document at Athens; a set of letters written by Hadrian four years later in AD 125 ([SEG III 226](#) + [IG II<sup>2</sup> 1097](#)), which was again engraved on marble. The epigraphic document consists of two fragmented and poorly preserved texts, reconstructed by Simone Follet (1994). The first text is addressed to the Epicureans, in which Hadrian confirms the decision he made in 121 to grant them the right to choose a successor regardless of citizenship with a will written in either Greek or Latin. The second text is addressed to Heliodorus, the current head of the school and possibly the successor of Popillius Theotimus of our AD 121 letter. In this case, however, Hadrian refuses a request to construct new

buildings and expensive offerings, judging them superfluous (Follet, 1994). According to Anthony Birley, there is a good chance that this Heliodorus was in fact C. Avidius Heliodorus, a Syrian from Cyrrhus, who served as Hadrian's *ab epistulis Graecis* (secretary for Greek correspondence) and was prefect of Egypt between AD 138 and 142, and who is further known as the father of the usurper [Avidius Cassius](#).



*Epicurus on the mosaic from Autun (France).*

This was not the only favour which Hadrian bestowed on the philosophers. Immediately after his accession, the Emperor granted philosophers, but also rhetors, grammarians and doctors a wide

range of privileges, including exemptions from taxes, and freedom from the burdens of civic offices and liturgies (*Dig. 27,1,6,8*). Hadrian granted similar privileges to the association of Dionysiac Artists (professional actors and musical performers who presented the great dramas and comedies everywhere in the Greek world).

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