

## ***Lucretius, De Rerum Natura - Introductory Lecture***

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More on [Lucretius](#) (from the Middlebury "Latin Authors" series).

### Introduction: Historical Context

The Hellenistic world created by Alexander's conquests was very different from the classical Greek world of the 6th and 5th centuries BCE, as it grafted Greek culture, which had been nourished in the *polis*, onto quite different political and economic systems. Instead of small *poleis* w/ an ideal of self-sufficient and equal citizens (remember, even w/in an oligarchy, all the oligarchs thought themselves equals: thus the distinction btw oligarchy and democracy is merely number of citizens, dictated by wealth threshold for citizenship, self-sufficiency staying the *sine qua non*: even a rich slave {and there were such} could not be a citizen), the Hellenistic world had huge kingdoms linked together in a common economic "world system" linked by trade routes.

Thus the classic Greek middle class male, the independent man, the citizen/soldier, was squeezed out: his political rights/duties taken over by kings and administrations dictating from above (rather than persuading from the side) and his military rights/duties taken over by mercenaries (fighting from below as it were).

However, even with the change of political structure from *polis* to kingdom and/or empire, the basic economic split of the ancient world between farming and trading remained in force. Recall the prestigious self-sufficient land-owners vs the disreputable traders dependent on customers. Now there was a certain stability to the *polis* system when it incorporated a good number of small farmers (remember how Solon's reforms freed the small farmers from debt to help triangulate the power struggle between big farmers and traders [often metics]). This stability was lost with growth of even larger farms due to war & renewed debt, so that as the small farm lost its viability [Romans had peasants: almost "land slaves"], social conflict intensified between farm and city.

Thus the "middle class" designation shifted from small farmers to traders: money people rather than land and stuff people. These urban trading people became the "progressive" force that allied themselves with tyrants to break the power of landed oligarchies, rather than the small farmer oppressed by debt, as had been the case in Solon's time.

Thus the urban middle class found itself at the leading edge, the very point of social conflict. A split in opinion developed: go for the gold and glory, or pull back to the "garden of earthly delights" and lead lives of individual cultivation, keeping a low profile and avoiding the lures of politics and freebooting glory. A major expression of the latter ethos was developed by Epicurus (341-271) in Athens. His followers formed one of the four major "schools" of philosophy in the Hellenistic world, the others being Academicians (= Platonists), Peripatetics (= Aristotelians), and Stoics. (There were also Sceptics and Cynics.)

Epicurus' arguments were taken up by our author, Lucretius (@100 - @ 55 BCE). Now the first century BCE was a time of a particularly fierce struggle between the basic social forces, "progressive" traders and their people's champion, the tyrant, (in this case, Caesar), versus the landed oligarchs. The first century BCE in Rome was a time of quite regular terror and chaos, with private armies and death squads running about. Lucretius mentions "this evil hour of my country's history" (1.39).

After this historical context, let's see what Lucretius himself has to say.