

Sextus Empiricus

Complete Works

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Ancient Classics Series

The Complete Works of
SEXTUS EMPIRICUS

(fl. mid-late 2nd century AD)



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Version 1

The Complete Works of
SEXTUS EMPIRICUS



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Complete Works of Sextus Empiricus



First published in the United Kingdom in 2025 by Delphi Classics.

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ISBN: 978 1 80170 285 0

Delphi Classics

is an imprint of

Delphi Publishing Ltd

Hastings, East Sussex

United Kingdom

Contact: sales@delphiclassics.com

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www.delphiclassics.com

The Translations



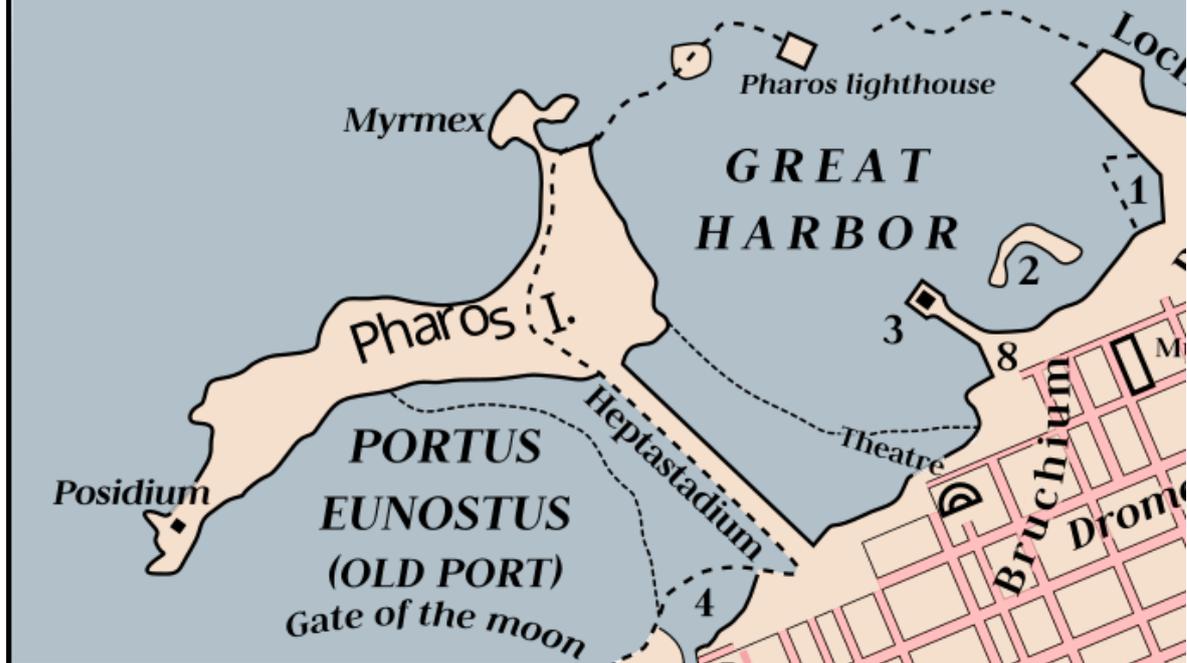
Alexandria, Egypt — possible birthplace of Sextus Empiricus

Plan of Alexandria c. 30 BCE

according to Otto Puchstein (c. 1890)

Scale 1:100,000

0 $\frac{1}{2}$ 1 Mile



Plan of Alexandria in c. 30 BC



Ancient ruins at Alexandria

Outlines of Pyrrhonism



Translated by R. G. Bury, Loeb Classical Library, 1936

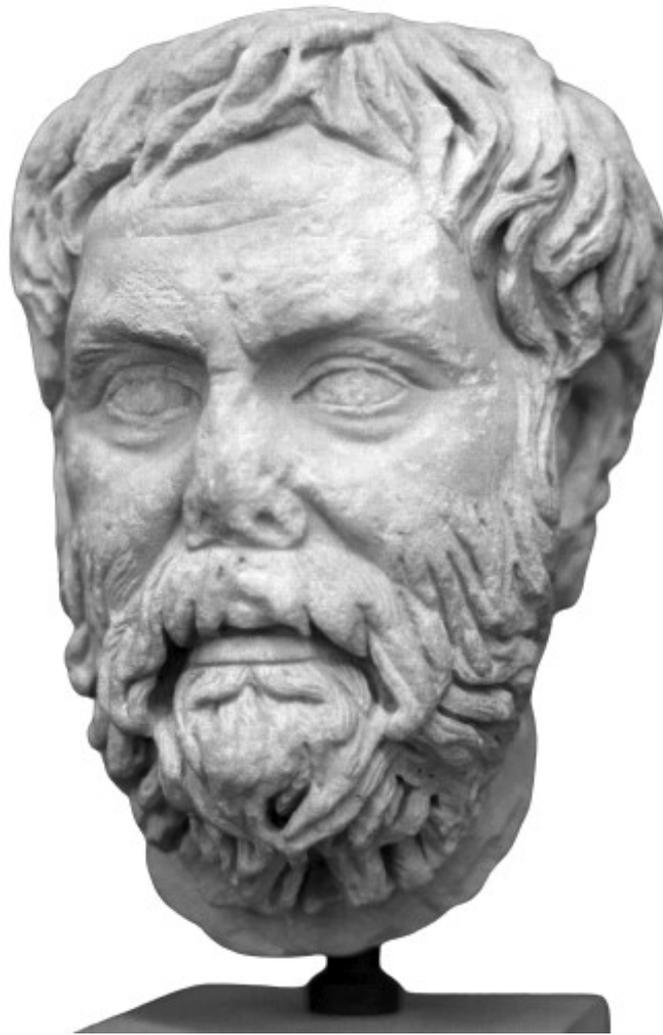
A Greek Pyrrhonist philosopher of the mid-late second century AD, Sextus Empiricus produced a body of works that provide the most complete surviving account of Greek and Roman Pyrrhonism. Very little is known about his life. He likely lived in Alexandria, Rome or Athens. The name ‘Sextus’ implies that he was a Roman citizen. The Suda, the tenth-century Byzantine encyclopaedia, states that he was the same person as Sextus of Chaeronea, as do other pre-modern sources, though this identification is commonly doubted. In his medical work, as reflected by his name, tradition maintains that he belonged to the Empiric school in which Pyrrhonism was popular. However, at least twice in his writings he seems to place himself closer to the Methodic school.

Pyrrhonism was an Ancient Greek school of philosophical skepticism that rejects dogma and advocates the suspension of judgement over the truth of all beliefs. It was founded by Aenesidemus in the first century BC and is said to have been inspired by the teachings of Pyrrho of Elis and Timon of Phlius in the fourth century BC. Pyrrho (c. 360-275 BC) was credited by the later Pyrrhonists with forming the first comprehensive school of skeptical thought. Yet, ancient testimony about the philosophical beliefs of the historical Pyrrho is minimal and often contradictory.

Along with Anaxarchus, Pyrrho travelled with Alexander the Great on his Indian campaign, “so that he even went as far as the Gymnosophists in India and the Magi” in Persia. Pyrrho’s teachings were recorded by his student Timon, but those works have been lost and only survive in fragments quoted by later authors, such as Cicero. Pyrrho’s own philosophy, as recorded by Timon, may have been much more dogmatic than that of the later school that took his name. While Pyrrhonism would become the dominant form of skepticism in the early Roman period, in the Hellenistic period, the Platonic Academy was the primary advocate of skepticism until the mid-first century BC, when Pyrrhonism as a philosophical school was founded by Aenesidemus.

Writing as a skeptic, Sextus Empiricus raised concerns that applied to all types of knowledge, casting doubt on the validity of induction. This view is known as Pyrrhonian skepticism, which Sextus differentiated from Academic skepticism as practiced by Carneades, which (claims Sextus) denies the possibility of knowledge altogether. Sextus criticises this approach as being an affirmative belief. Instead, he advocates simply giving up belief; in other words, suspending judgment (*epoché*) about whether or not anything is knowable. Only by suspending judgment can we attain a state of *ataraxia* (‘peace of mind’). There is some debate as to the extent to which Sextus advocated the suspension of judgement. According to some scholars, he advises that we should suspend judgment about virtually all beliefs, neither affirming any belief as true nor denying any belief as false, since we may live without any beliefs, acting by habit. Others suggest Sextus felt that beliefs are permissible so long as they are not grounded in reason, philosophy or speculation. E.g. a skeptic may accept commonly held views within their society. The key distinction between the skeptic and the dogmatist lies in the source of belief: the skeptic does not arrive at beliefs through rigorous philosophical inquiry.

The ancient biographer Diogenes Laërtius and the Suda report that Sextus wrote ten books on *Pyrrhonism*. The Suda also states that he wrote a book entitled *Ethica*, now lost. An influential Latin translation of Sextus' *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* was published by Henricus Stephanus in Geneva in 1562, which was followed by a complete Latin text, with Gentian Hervet serving as translator in 1569. Petrus and Jacobus Chouet published the Greek text for the first time in 1621. *Outlines of Pyrrhonism* was widely read in Europe during the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, having a profound effect on Michel de Montaigne, David Hume and Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, among many others. Another source for the circulation of Sextus' ideas was Pierre Bayle's Dictionary. Since the Renaissance, French philosophy has often been influenced by Sextus: Montaigne in the sixteenth century, Descartes, Blaise Pascal, Pierre-Daniel Huet and François de La Mothe Le Vayer in the seventeenth century.



Pyrrho of Elis, marble head, early Roman copy, second century BC, Archaeological Museum of Corfu

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Sixteenth century depiction of Pyrrho by Girolamo Olgiati

BOOK I.



CHAPTER I.

OF THE MAIN DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PHILOSOPHIC SYSTEMS



THE NATURAL RESULT of any investigation is that the investigators either discover the object of search or deny that it is discoverable and confess it to be inapprehensible or persist in their search.

So, too, with regard to the objects investigated by philosophy, this is probably why some have claimed to have discovered the truth, others have asserted that it cannot be apprehended, while others again go on inquiring.

Those who believe they have discovered it are the “Dogmatists, “ specially so called — Aristotle, for example, and Epicurus and the Stoics and certain others; Cleitomachus and Carneades and other Academics treat it as inapprehensible: the Sceptics keep on searching.

Hence it seems reasonable to hold that the main types of philosophy are three — the Dogmatic, the Academic, and the Sceptic. Of the other systems it will best become others to speak: our task at present is to describe in outline the Sceptic doctrine, first premising that of none of our future statements do we positively affirm that the fact is exactly as we state it, but we simply record each fact, like a chronicler, as it appears to us at the moment.

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