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ΤΑΞΕΩΤΗΣ ON THE MOVE
(GLOSSA AD P. GISS. 56)

Ταξεώτης is a generic name, applied in Later Antiquity to a large category of lower functionaries. Their usual role of *apparitores* or *officiales* in the service of the prefect is the reason of their appellation of ἐπαρχικοί¹. Distinction must be made between those officials and the *milites praesidarii* also called ταξεῶται².

In the papyri there are some instances of their activities. As low ranking public servants who were certainly sometimes entrusted also with compelling the observance of law, they were certainly not very popular with the common people.

The ταξεῶται played the part of assistants of higher officers in various official business circumstances. Their typical function is the role of messengers³.

Their mobility on business purposes is attested on papyrus. In *P. Giss.* 56⁴ we have a testimony to a service journey of an officer of the τάξις ἡγεμονική. In the case recorded in the much damaged Giessen text which dates to IVth century A.D. an *officialis* had to make a rather long travel from the Thebaid to Alexandria.

¹ Instances in DU CANGE, *Gloss. med. inf. Graec.*, s.v. ταξεῶται 1529; cf. Palladius, *Hist. Lausiaca*, 63.

² DU CANGE, s.v., 1530.

³ E.g., *P. Grenf.* I 64.3.

⁴ A. ŁUKASZEWICZ, 'Two Papyri from Giessen (P. Giss. inv. 56 and 147)', *JJP* 22, 1992, pp. 37-42.

The travelling of low ranking *officiales* in the bureaucratic empire most certainly involved, not unlike the journeys of higher officials, a burden to the population.

The following note concerns a piece of literary evidence to the reputation of the *ταξέωται* contained in the *Philogelos* (no 145)⁵:

Εὐτράπελος κάπηλος εὐρῶν ταξέωτην ἐπὶ τῇ γυναικὶ αὐτοῦ εἶπεν· Εὐρον, ὃ οὐκ ἐζήτουν.

Andreas Thierfelder translates:

‘Ein witziger Krämer fand einen Polizisten (?) auf seiner Frau und sagte: “Ich habe gefunden, was ich nicht suchte”’.

That translation justifies Thierfelder’s own remark: “das ergibt keinen Witz, da die Unerwünschtheit des Vorfalles selbstverständlich ist”⁶.

If in fact the statement of the *κάπηλος* meant only “I found an undesirable situation”, it would not be a joke, but a simple matter of fact constatation and a concise repetition of the contents of the earlier words of the anecdote: *κάπηλος εὐρῶν ταξέωτην ἐπὶ τῇ γυναικὶ αὐτοῦ εἶπεν· Εὐρον κτλ.* A *résumé* of a previously described situation may in some cases be the gist of a joke. That, however, necessitates a surprising paradox.

Thierfelder in his commentary mentions the meaning of *ζητέω* in the commercial language: “Nun bedeutet in der Kaufmannssprache *ζητεῖν* ‘einen Preis fordern’ (no. 124⁷), das komplementäre *εὐρίσκειν* ‘einen Preis erzielen’... Hiernach könnte die Phrase wohl bedeuten: ‘ich habe Geld eingenommen, das ich (oder soviel Geld wie ich) nicht gefordert hatte’. Sie würde also auf ein *günstiges εὔρημα* gehen, und ihre hiesige entgegengesetzte Anwendung wäre witzig”⁸.

The “*salve lucrum*” attitude of the *κάπηλος* is — under the circumstances — a paradoxical joke.

It seems that the situation described in the anecdote is an intentional mixture of the typical with the surprising. The *κάπηλος* appears here in his typical quality. Otherwise the fact of giving the name of his trade would be senseless. In the common opinion a tavern-keeper was certainly also a kind

⁵ *Philogelos. Der Lachfreund* von Hierokles und Philagrios, griechisch-deutsch, hrsg. von Andreas THIERFELDER, München 1968 (Tusculum), pp. 80-81.

⁶ *Philogelos*, ed. THIERFELDER, p. 244.

⁷ *Philogelos* no. 124: Ἀβδηρίτης κατ’ ὄναρ χοιρίδιον ἐπώλει καὶ ἐζήτει δηνάρια ἑκατόν, ed. THIERFELDER, p. 74.

⁸ THIERFELDER, *op. cit.*, p. 244.

of procurer, the inn being often a *fornix*. Procuring women for gratification of his guests' lust is therefore a part of the inn-keeper's normal trade. He earns a part of his money (= *εὐρίσκω*) in that way.

When he finds his own wife with a *taxeotes*, he meets the unpleasant surprise in cold blood and gives a cynical (or self-ironical) comment in which he interprets the obvious nuisance as an unexpected advantage. That kind of humour is not beside the mark in a joke belonging to a series of sayings or deeds of witty persons (*εὐτράπελοι*).

Since the tavern-keeper's "Berufsangabe" is obviously not "ohne Funktion", why should *ταξέωτης* be only a casually mentioned profession or rank? Thierfelder, aware of the low rank of the *ταξέωτης*, takes nevertheless very seriously the official quality of that lower "Staatsbeamte" ("Gerichtsdieners" or "Polizist"). He says: "Jedenfalls soll das Amt in erstaunlichem Gegensatz zu der illegalen Handlung stehen"⁹. His opinion seems to be entirely erroneous. In actual fact it is the opposite that is true: *ταξέωτης* is exactly the one who is expected to appear in such a situation. Therefore his profession is mentioned without any further explanation. It was probably common knowledge that *ταξέωται* travelled to and fro, were frequently customers of inns and consequently also beneficiaries of services of all kind offered there. A functionary of a *τάξις* was probably a welcome customer, whose readiness to spend some money on little pleasures could be taken for granted.

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⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 244.