

Occupational Titles and Attitudes Toward Labor in Ancient Greece

Ancient Greek attitudes toward work and workers have become a subject of scholarly reexamination in recent years. Whereas scholars have traditionally emphasized Greek cultural prejudice against various forms of professional activity, some scholars have recently advocated a more positive appraisal of work in antiquity (e.g., Bourriot 2015, Stewart et al. 2020, Flohr and Bowes 2021). The traditional view—which stressed the statements of ancient authors decrying menial and “banausic” occupations—is now sometimes dismissed as an outdated artifact of nineteenth-century scholarship.

This paper will examine a type of evidence rarely brought to bear on this debate: occupational titles. In epigraphic and literary sources from the Archaic, Classical, and Hellenistic periods, we find Greeks using occupational titles for varying effects, ranging from expressions of professional pride in one’s own work (inscribed on gravestones or dedicatory inscriptions) to insults directed at humble occupations. I will suggest, however, that the latter use case is far more prevalent than the former; in our available sources, individuals use occupational terminology as a form of invective far more often than as a marker of personal pride.

Of course, the idea that Greek occupational titles often served as insults is nothing new; such a practice is familiar to any reader of Aristophanic comedy. But I will urge that this practice had remarkably deep roots, stretching back to the earliest texts of the Greek literary tradition. Such invective occurs in the *Theogony* (line 22) when the Muses appear to Hesiod and address him with harsh words: “field-dwelling shepherds, wretched disgraces, mere stomachs!” Much the same sentiment occurs in interactions between various Homeric characters. For example, in her commentary on the Homeric *Odyssey*, De Jong observes of the swineherd Eumaeus, “Only

the narrator, Odysseus, Telemachus, and Penelope address the swineherd by name; the Suitors refer to him as ‘swineherd’” (2001, p. 345). In such passages, the occupational title is usually accompanied by additional terms of abuse; e.g., “wretched swineherd” (ἀμέγαρτε σὺ βῶτα, Odyssey 21.362).

All told, the evidence of occupational titles should serve as a rallying cry for nuance in the debate over attitudes toward work in Greek antiquity. On balance, however, I will argue that occupational titles are especially revealing of prejudices toward working people. Such prejudices persisted through centuries of Greek civilization, with ordinary working people subjected to derision on account of their humble station in life.

Works Cited

- Bourriot, Félix. 2015. *Banausos – Banausia: et la situation des artisans en Grèce classique* (Spudasmata 164). Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag.
- De Jong, Irene J. F. 2001. *A Narratological Commentary on the Odyssey*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Flohr, Miko and Bowes, Kim (eds.). 2021. *Valuing Labour in Greco-Roman Antiquity* (Mnemosyne Supplement 481). Leiden and Boston: Brill.
- Stewart, Edmund, Harris, Edward, and Lewis, David (eds.). 2020. *Skilled Labour and Professionalism in Ancient Greece and Rome*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.