

## Χηνοβοσκοί, *Foie Gras*, and the Price of a Good Goose

P.CtYBR inv. 694 is an unpublished fragment of a letter regarding the care of a goose dating from the 1<sup>st</sup> – 2<sup>nd</sup> c. AD. Starting with this text as the focal point, this paper explores some of the essential questions concerning geese in early imperial Roman Egypt. For example, who raised them, what was the role of geese in society, and what did it cost to care for them?

The extant portion of this text comes from a fragmentary letter, in which an unnamed person is dispatching a similarly unnamed messenger to pick up a goose currently being kept by Germanus, son of Tiberius, who is perhaps a χηνοβοσκός (on which, see Drexhage, 2001, 17ff.). Hellenistic precedents exist in epistolary literature in which the purchase of geese or transportation of them is mentioned in passing (*UPZ* 1.68; *PSI* 5.534), but there is a relative scarcity of imperial sources from Roman Egypt regarding geese (Drexhage, 2001, 14, n. 2 and 1991, 311). In P.CtYBR inv. 694 the messenger is asked to make an account of food that has been provided for the goose, pay the amount owed, buy a second goose (presumably from the same person), send it along with the first, and finally at some later point disclose the cost to the author of this letter.

Unfortunately, we are never told why the author is buying two geese nor what price he initially paid for them. Given the fact that Germanus is charging a *per diem* expense to keep the geese, it is possible that they are being fattened to be eaten. We know, for example, that goose livers (χήνεια ἥπατα, i.e. *foie gras*) were a favorite Roman delicacy. For a general explanation of the process, see Var. *R.* 3.10.7 and Col. 8.14.10; see also Thompson, *Glossary of Greek Birds*<sup>2</sup>, 1936, 326-327. At the same time, in ancient literary sources one finds geese being depicted in a variety of contexts including as sacrificial animals to Osiris and Isis; a healthy and gourmet food source; birds sacred to Priapus and Juno/Hera; good “watchdogs”; pets; a renewable source of

feathers; and ingredients for medicines (fat as part of an aphrodisiac; blood as an antidote for poisons; gall mixed with duck's blood for bruised eyes) and for magical rites.

P.CtYBR inv. 694 provides an important piece of information in that it tells us the *per diem* rate (one obol) in early Roman Egypt for hiring a person to keep and care for a goose. Given this *per diem* rate, the amount to be tallied into an account of food is possibly substantial, though we are not told exactly how many days Germanus has been keeping the goose. If he has been fattening it up, this is a process that takes between forty and sixty days (Varro, *R.* 3.10.7; Col. 8.14.11), which in this case would total between 40 and 60 obols (or at 6-7 obols per drachma, 5.7 to 10 drachmas), not including the unspecified price initially paid for each goose. Yet even so, we cannot know if the cost here would approximate the 40 drachma price for a goose in *PSI* 8.961 (176/8 A.D.), the only known price for a goose in documentation from Roman Egypt (cf. also Petr. 136-137, where the sacred goose of Priapus is valued at two gold coins or 50 silver denarii). Drexhage, 2001, 15-16 concludes that this was most likely not the going price, given the fact that one could buy approximately 20 chickens for this amount. It should also be noted that in examining prices for other animals, one finds significant fluctuations over short periods of time.

Although P.CtYBR inv. 694 itself perhaps raises as many questions as it answers, it allows us to utilize a previously unpublished text to explore broader issues in Roman Egypt related to *χηνοβοσκοί*, the widespread use of geese within this context, and the cost of caring for such birds.

## Bibliography

Drexhage, "Einige Bemerkungen zu Geflügelzucht und – handel im römischen und spätantiken

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