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THE FUNCTION OF THE ΣΗΜΑΣΙΑ-TEXTS, P.OXY. XXXIV 2719 AND SB
XVI 12550

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THE FUNCTION OF THE ΣΗΜΑΣΙΑ-TEXTS, P.OXY. XXXIV 2719 AND SB XVI 12550

P. Oxy. XXXIV 2719 is a third century text containing detailed instructions for the delivery of letters to a person perhaps named Lusius.¹ Information within the text indicates that the recipient was to be found in Hermopolis and the letters were to be delivered to him there. The papyrus itself was found at Oxyrhynchus. The provenance requires explanation since the text of the papyrus reads as instructions to the courier.² One asks why the papyrus was found at Oxyrhynchus and not Hermopolis, if it was a set of instructions to assist the delivery of the letters. Moreover, as the back of the papyrus is presumably blank, one cannot appeal to a later usage to account for its place of find.

SB XVI 12550 is a third century text which contains instructions apparently for the delivery of an unspecified item or items to a person named Theon, son of Ammonas. Again the papyrus reads as instructions to the courier³ and its back is blank. Information in the text indicates that Theon was to be found in Alexandria. However, the papyrus, whose provenance is otherwise unknown, could not have been found there. Again one must ask why the papyrus was found outside Alexandria.

The editors of *P. Oxy. XXXIV 2719* suggest two possible explanations for the provenance of their papyrus: 'the directions were discarded in Oxyrhynchus, perhaps by the letter-carrier after he had finished with them; or perhaps Rufus himself sent this note to his friends in Oxyrhynchus, who instructed their messenger by word of mouth.' The likelihood of the first suggestion proving correct was diminished by the subsequent publication of *SB XVI 12550*. The reason for this is simple. As it must be considered more probable that a courier would dispose of his instructions at the time of delivery, the multiplication of examples where this was not the case makes the suggestion improbable. In this regard a third example may also be cited. *P. Cair. Zen. IV 59653* is a much earlier (third century BC) papyrus containing instructions for the delivery of an unspecified item or items to a person named Orilaos who was to be found in Hermopolis. Again the text reads as instructions to the courier — ἀπόδος Ὀριλάωι καταπλέων ἐν Ἑρμοῦ πόλει. The interpretation is further supported by the heading of the papyrus, ὑπόμνημα (= written reminder, *LSJ*, II). The collocation of ὑπόμνημα and ἀπόδος only makes sense if the reminder was carried by the bearer of the item(s). Though the recipient of the item(s) was located in Hermopolis, the papyrus itself was found at Philadelphia. Thus the three extant examples of written instructions to a courier were all found elsewhere than the place of delivery.

We turn to the second suggestion, namely, that the texts represent the addressee's written instructions for the forwarding of letters or other items which were then to be communicated orally to the courier by the sender. More recently this suggestion has found further supporters.⁴ There are, however, numerous difficulties with it:

(a) The imperatives which constitute the instructions are addressed by the sender to the courier rather than by the addressee to the sender. Indeed, when an addressee does communicate

¹ The editors of *P. Oxy. XXXIV 2719* assume that the letters were to be delivered to Rufus. I see no justification for this assumption. The genitive is better understood as possessive.

² Note especially the imperatives περι[πά]τησον, κάμψον, ἐλθέ, κατάβα, ἀνάβα καὶ κάμψον etc.

³ Note again the imperative ἐπιζήτησον.

⁴ R.W. Daniel, *ZPE* 54 (1984), 86 n.1, and D.P. Fowler, *ZPE* 59 (1985), 45-46.

his location to a sender, he neither uses imperatives nor even the second person. See εὐρήσει⁵ in *P. Lond.* III 897 (AD 84), ξενίζομαι in *PSI XII* 1241 (AD 159) and μένω in *P. Mich.* VIII 514 (third century). The most natural way, then, to construe *P. Oxy.* XXXIV 2719, *SB XVI* 12550 and *P. Cair. Zen.* IV 59653 is as instructions given by the sender to the courier. The subsequent question is whether these were given orally and the written copy retained by the sender or whether the written instructions were themselves handed over together with the items to be delivered.

(b) The headings of *P. Oxy.* XXXIV 2719 and *SB XVI* 12550 suggest that they were handed over together with the items to be delivered.⁶ All other *σημασία*-texts, of which *P. Oxy.* XXXIV 2719 and *SB XVI* 12550 are only two examples, accompanied the items to be delivered. *SB VI* 9126 (third/fourth century) is a mummy label which was presumably attached to the corpse.⁷ Though its provenance is unknown, it can reasonably be assumed to be the same as the address contained in the text, i.e. Philadelphia.⁸ Indeed, as a mummy label it must have accompanied the corpse. The remaining *σημασία*-texts are all written on the back of letters and give instructions on their delivery; cf. *P. Oxy.* XIV 1678 (third century), *P. Oxy.* XIV 1773 (third century), *P. Laur.* I 20 (first half of the third century), *P. Meyer* 20 (first half of the third century) and *P. Ross. Georg.* III 6 (end of the fourth century). The question naturally follows as to why if *P. Oxy.* XXXIV 2719 and *SB XVI* 12550 were instructions for the delivery of letters, they were not written on the back also. The reason, no doubt, was that the length of the instructions could not be fitted on the folded letter. In the case of *P. Oxy.* XXXIV 2719 the possibility that a bundle of letters – note the plural in *l. 1* – was being sent may have also played a part.

It may be appropriate here to note a few peculiarities of *σημασία*-texts which help one to understand their function. First, whereas until and including the third century instructions for delivery were included in the address of letters, e.g. *BGU IV* 1079 (AD 41), *P. Oxy.* II 300 (late first century), *P. Oxy.* VIII 1155 (AD 104) and *PSI XIII* 1331 (third century), the use of the term *σημασία* in connection with these instructions dates from the third and fourth centuries and functions to separate the address from the instructions. *SB III* 6222 (end of third century), though it does not use the term, has the address written in the reverse direction to that of the instructions for delivery and thus also separates the two. It is unclear why this innovation should have arisen when it did. Whatever the reason, one should understand that after separation had occurred it was only a short step to write the instructions on a separate sheet of papyrus such as *P. Oxy.* XXXIV 2719 and *SB XVI* 12550.

Second, *σημασία* should be understood as a heading which describes the instructions which follow. Formally, we find that the term is always followed by a preposition, i.e. εἰς (*P. Oxy.* XIV 1773, *P. Laur.* I 20, *P. Ross. Georg.* III 6, *SB VI* 9126 and *SB XVI* 12550), ἀπό (*P. Meyer* 20 and *P. Oxy.* XXXIV 2719) and ἐν (*P. Oxy.* XIV 1678). However, only the editors of *P. Laur.* I 20 and *P. Meyer* 20 mark the heading by punctuation. That the term is a heading may be inferred from the lack of any syntactic connection between it and the instructions which follow, e.g. *P. Oxy.* XIV 1773, *P. Oxy.* XXXIV 2719, *SB VI* 9126 and *SB XVI* 12550. Further support is found in

⁵ The verb is active with the courier to be supplied as the assumed subject. So *P. Lond.* III, 207 (note to *l. 18*) and B. Olsson, *Papyrusbriefe aus der frühesten Römerzeit* (Uppsala 1925), 147. It seems illogical to construe εὐρήσει as middle, especially in view of the preceding verb, πέμπεις.

⁶ *P. Cair. Zen.* IV 59653 and the significance of its heading have already been noted above.

⁷ From *WChr* 499 (Thebes?, second or third century) we learn that such labels were placed on the neck of the deceased.

⁸ P. Aström, *Eranos* 49 (1951), 115.

parallels to our σημασία-texts which do not use the term, e.g. *SB* III 6222 (par. σημασία-texts on the backs of letters) and *SB* I 2639 and 3815 (par. *SB* VI 9126).

We next come to the question of the meaning of σημασία. Preisigke, *Wörterbuch der griechischen Papyrusurkunden*, and *LSJ* give the meaning ‘address’. However, the editors of the various papyri prefer ‘directions’. In a sense both are correct. Σημασία-texts which require an action (expressed as an imperative or second person indicative) on the part of the courier are better seen as directions for delivery. Texts which lack a verb (*P.Oxy.* XIV 1678 and *P.Laur.* I 20) contain information similar to that in the addresses of earlier letters (examples cited above) and are better understood as such. The question therefore is whether there is a better word to translate the term. The clue is given by *SB* I 5538 (first or second century). In this text the body of Thaisis is sent to her son-in-law that he might deliver it the undertaker who in turn should mark it to the burial place of Bouchis (σημαίνει εἰς τὸ Βοῦχιν) to Pseneoueris, the *pastophoros*. If now we place this together with *SB* VI 9126 (a mummy label headed as a σημασία), it follows that this latter text represents such a marking. In view of the procedure I translate σημαίνω by ‘consign’ and σημασία by ‘consignment’. In further support of this I point to the first line of *P.Oxy.* XXXIV 2719 — σημασία τῶν ἐπιστολίων Ῥούφου. In view of the instructions which follow, σημασία can hardly mean ‘address’. Difficulties also surround the translation ‘directions’; Sijpesteijn⁹ has pointed out that the editors translate the genitive as if it were a dative: ‘Directions for letters to Rufus’. Daniel¹⁰ translates the expression as though there was an ellipsis: ‘Directions (for the delivery) of Rufus’ mail’. No such difficulty surrounds the expression when it is understood to mean ‘consignment of Rufus’ letters’. Now returning to the matter under investigation here, we see that the above considerations of form, function and meaning further indicate that the σημασία-texts accompanied the items to be sent. The two papyri were written instructions carried by the courier and were marked as such by the heading, σημασία.

I have argued above that *P.Oxy.* XXXIV 2719 and *SB* XVI 12550 accompanied the items and were used by the courier to locate the recipient. It remains to explain why the papyri were not abandoned at the place of delivery, after they had served their purpose. It needs to be pointed out at this point that any explanation is necessarily conjectural. Be that as it may, I suggest that *P.Oxy.* XXXIV 2719 and *SB* XVI 12550 were returned to their respective sender together with the recipient’s letter of reply. As such the instructions could be used again, thus saving time, energy and paper as well as providing a safeguard against erroneous or misleading directions being issued in the future. But is there any indication to support the suggestion? One indication is by analogy with *P.Cair. Zen.* IV 59653, which was found with the Zenon archive. Such a provenance suggests that the instructions were returned and kept for future use.

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⁹ Reported by R.W. Daniel, *ZPE* 54 (1984), 86 n. 1.

¹⁰ R.W. Daniel, *ZPE* 54 (1984), 86 n. 1.