

Oliver Berck

# Riding for the Powerful

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Buccellarii and the Ideal of Retainer Loyalty

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Tectum Verlag

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*To my dearest Timmi—in love, gratitude, and allegiance firm*



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Herschbach, November 2013

Oliver Berck



## ***Introduction***

*Many things are formidable, and none more formidable than man!*

—Sophocles *Antigone* 332

*Man is unpredictable. In dealing with him you must be prepared for everything. There is nothing that could not be expected from him, nothing that should not be feared from him. [...] Just there, where his will rises to highest power, in war, beside culminating values [...] abysses of most bestial wretchedness yawn. There, where a human being has reached the nearly divine degree of perfection, the unselfish dedication for an ideal up to self-sacrifice, there can be found another man willing to greedily ransack the pockets of a deceased who has hardly become cold.*

—Ernst Jünger *War Diary 1914–1918*<sup>1</sup>

“I am the servant of my lord”—the credo of a retainer has something threatening about it. Whoever hears this must reckon with not enjoying the loyalty, solidarity, and sympathy of the emitter, i.e., he must basically expect to become his victim. A risk that is ultimately true even for comrades in the retinue. He who devotes his life to a leader has to give and accept death at the leader’s instigation. A

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<sup>1</sup> E. Jünger (2010) 432. Translation by the author.

military retinue, in turn, is the sum of its swords. The followers are held together by loyalty to the lord, they are destined for armed conflict. Such a community of warriors gives power to its patron. Consequently, retinues do not get along with an established state that is characterised in particular by securing the monopoly on force. Therefore, retinues can especially be expected to appear where the state has not yet fully acquired power or where its power is already declining.

In the light of these basic considerations the negative assessment of *buccellarii*, those personal guardsmen who emerge in the entourage of officers, civil servants, and private persons in the Roman Empire towards the end of the fourth century, is of little surprise. Historians consider them to be one of the factors contributing to the disintegration of the Western Roman Empire.<sup>1</sup> In the present paper this view is not denied. The study is not about if, but, among other things, about how buccellarians contributed to the end of the Western Roman Empire. The equation: the greater the retinue, the greater the power vis-à-vis the emperor is too simple. The Augusti's scope for decision-making was no variable dependent on the satellites of others. The governments in Ravenna and even more in Constantinople knew to avail themselves of buccellarians. Retainers, like all other people, strive to maximise their benefits within the framework of their possibilities and in accordance with their preferences. Exactly this rational behaviour provides third parties with opportunities to take action; yet it also produces deviations from the ideal of a retinue culminating in betrayal.

Here, in this book, buccellarians and their deeds are viewed against this backdrop. Furthermore, attention is addressed to their origins as well as to the time beyond so as to provide a history of this type of warrior. Thus, in a broader sense, the book is about retinues and the archetypical attribute that distinguishes them—fidelity.

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<sup>1</sup> For an overview of the literature see O. Schmitt (1994) 147 ff.

## CHAPTER I

### *The Term*

*Maybe that's why they call themselves grunts, 'cause a grunt can take it, can take anything.*

—From the movie *Platoon*

It is not possible to determine clearly the meaning, origin, and background of the term *buccellarii* on account of the limited and also inconsistent sources. According to Olympiodorus, who wrote around 425, it is a nickname for soldiers deriving from *buccellatum*, the military biscuit.<sup>1</sup> Buccellarians hence were “biscuit eaters”. According to another source, a *scholion* in the *Basilica*, i.e. a note in the ninth-century reworking of Justinian’s codification, the term derives from *bucca*, meaning a small loaf of bread, i.e. a roll. The author explains that certain soldiers were called *buccellarii* as they devotedly served him whose bread or rolls they ate.<sup>2</sup> In the *Codex Theodosianus* (xiv. 17. 5) *buccella*, a derivation of *bucca*, appears as fine bread (*buccellis... mundis*). O. Seeck therefore infers that buccellarians ate the higher quality bread of their lords rather than the army bread.<sup>3</sup> In this sense, they might be called “white bread eaters”.<sup>4</sup> O. Schmitt expresses two reservations against this derivation. For one thing, the mentioned law states only the *buccella*’s weight (six Roman ounces) but not its quality. Had it generally been a fine roll the attribute would undoubtedly have been unnecessary. Thus, the *buccella* is likely to have been available in a lesser quality as well.<sup>5</sup> For another

<sup>1</sup> Olympiodorus Fragment 12 (Blockley).

<sup>2</sup> P. Sarris (2006) 170–171.

<sup>3</sup> O. Seeck (1897) 936–937. H. Wolfram (2009) 242 also holds this view.

<sup>4</sup> In connection with this inference it is not without interest that Roman writers mention the “barley” rhetor. Like, for instance, Hermogenes of Tarsus (about 160–230 AD) with respect to Deinarchos [*On Ideas* ii. 11]. This attribute aimed at expressing that the rhetorical skills of the person in question fell short of the reference (here Demosthenes) who was seemingly equated with fine wheat [W. Stroh (2009) 240, 294].

<sup>5</sup> O. Schmitt (1994) 149.

thing, as will be explained later, the officers probably did not pay for their bucellarians' food themselves. Rather they were provided with food by the government as part of the *annona militaris*—the tax paid in kind designed to maintain the army and the civil servants.<sup>1</sup>

There is another consideration against the translation of *buccellarii* into “white bread eaters”. As late as the second half of the third century, a distinction was made regarding military bread between *panis militaris castrensis*, common army bread, and *panis militaris mundus*, a type of white bread.<sup>2</sup> This suggests that also in the Late Roman Empire, ordinary soldiers would have received white bread, at least from time to time. If this were the case, it is questionable whether the rank and file of the army considered a possible permanent provision of the members of an officer's retinue with this type of bread a privilege at all. If not, there would have been no reason to call the latter “white bread eaters”.

The etymology is additionally impeded by the fact that the term first appears in the name of an armoured elite cavalry unit of the Eastern Roman army, the *comites catafractarii bucellarii iuniores*. The source, the *Notitia Dignitatum* (Or. vii. 25), represents the state of the Eastern army in the year 394.<sup>3</sup> The regiment, however, might have existed earlier. Some authors, such as R. Grosse and H.-J. Diesner, maintain that this formation had originally been a private mercenary unit before it was absorbed into the imperial army.<sup>4</sup> According to D. Hoffmann, who studied the units listed in the *Notitia* thoroughly, this is doubtful.<sup>5</sup> Yet if the *Comites catafractarii bucellarii iuniores* were at no time private soldiers but were in government service from the beginning, it is obvious that the term changed its meaning over time. O. Schmitt and before him H. Delbrück, who translated *buccellarii* into “bread people”, are of the opinion that *buccellarii* had initially been a nickname for soldiers before it became a terminus technicus for personal guardsmen in the fifth century.<sup>6</sup> To explain his thesis, O. Schmitt points out that bread was the principal component of military rations. Since the inhabitants of Rome received bread in the form of *buccella* from 369 onwards, according to the already cited law in the *Codex Theodosianus* (xiv. 17. 5), he assumes that this also applied to the soldiers. The *buccella* will then have characterised their everyday life. Reason enough to make fun of this fact.

<sup>1</sup> O. Schmitt (1994) 157.

<sup>2</sup> *Scriptores historiae Augustae, The deified Aurelian* ix. 6.

<sup>3</sup> D. Hoffmann (1969) i. 52.

<sup>4</sup> R. Grosse (1920) 287, H.-J. Diesner (1972) 322.

<sup>5</sup> D. Hoffmann (1969) i. 274.

<sup>6</sup> O. Schmitt (1994) 149–150, H. Delbrück (1921) 416, 483.