People have always spied on each other. There is no period in which we cannot search for intelligence history, as long as there are texts that survive. One reason that people do not know about intelligence in the ancient world is that the information is scattered in specialty journals. Another is the information is in languages other than English. Fortunately this situation has begun to change. Books and articles in English on intelligence in the ancient world have increased over the last twenty-five years. Francis Dvornik’s textbook and my bibliography on ancient intelligence serve as introductory guides to the subject. 

Other studies have focused on specific cultures. Two major studies have appeared on the intelligence activities of ancient Rome and several more have been published on the ancient Greeks.

What I refer to as intelligence activities, in fact, includes a whole range of subjects that are only loosely bound by the fact that modern intelligence services practice them. Besides intelligence gathering, counterintelligence, covert action, and clandestine operations, there are tradecraft techniques such as the use of codes and ciphers, political assassination, escape and evasion, creating disguises, using disappearing ink, and breaking in to other people’s mail (“flaps and seals”), and even “fluttering.” These all occurred, in some form, in the ancient world.

Targeting an enemy and collecting intelligence must go hand in hand with the ability to transmit the information to those who need it most. Texts of the ancient writers like Aeneas Tacticus, Polybius, Polyaeus, Sextus Julius Africanus, and Vegetius all contain snippets of information on ancient signaling. There are more than fifty references from all of antiquity, most are Greek; others are Roman. They have been collected by David Wooliscroft in his book Roman Military Signalling where he lists all the references and demonstrates how Roman frontier systems worked.

Disguising one’s written message was also a skill known to the ancients. The bibliography on one of the most enigmatic and unsolved cryptograms in antiquity is collected in my Cryptologia article “The Sator Rebus. An Unsolved Cryptogram” Governments classifying documents was also a practice known to the ancients.

No ancient author tells us more about sending secret messages than Aeneas Tacticus. He provides the first instructional text on communications security

4. “Fluttering” is a modern term related to being hooked up to a polygraph, which is often used to detect deception and lies. While the ancients did not have modern devices, they were interested in the same outcomes.

5. Aeneas Tacticus in the 4th Century B.C. wrote several treatises on the art of war. Polybius was a Greek military and political historian. Polyaeus, a Macedonian, wrote “Stratagems in War.” Sextus Julius Africanus was a 3rd Century Christian historian and one-time soldier. Vegetius (full name: Publius Flavius Vegetius Renatus) wrote “De Re Militari,” which was much translated and concerned military organization and how to manage troops and military situations.


and describes in detail eighteen different methods of sending messages, some of them ciphers. The best translation with commentary is still by David Whitehead. Another article on secret communication is Albert Leighton’s “Secret Communications among the Greeks and Romans.”

Ancient tricks for collecting information and concealing messages seem amusing to us because of their quaintness and simplicity by modern standards of technology. Ancient cryptograms would hardly deceive a modern military censor, but could well have fooled a simple-minded gatekeeper or a barbarian policeman in an age when reading and writing were uncommon.

Tricks with vowels and consonants, for example, were unheard of even among educated people. Like other elements of great inventions now part of our thought and action, the ideas behind these ancient practices still apply. Other ancient tradecraft techniques are described in the texts in the footnote.

Intelligence failures resulted in disasters much as they do today. Several Roman debacles might have been prevented with better intelligence gathering. Whether it be the slaughter of Varus’ three legions in Germany’s Teutoburg Forest, Trajan’s dubious foray into Parthia (modern day Iran), or Caesar’s near disaster in Britain. Intelligence gathering was an integral part of what happened. Every ambush in antiquity relied on advanced intelligence on the enemy’s whereabouts so the trap could be sprung.

The study of intelligence activities cuts across all chronological and cultural barriers, but its study presents historians with certain problems. Intelligence activities are supposed to be clandestine; they are not routinely recorded. For this reason, studying intelligence has become, in the words of one writer, “the missing dimension” of much political and diplomatic history. Ancient spies, unlike their modern counterparts, did not retire and write memoirs. The ancient intelligence officer, if he were not successful, might draw the historian’s notice indirectly, because his failure meant his execution or a major military disaster. On the other hand, when an ancient intelligence officer succeeded, he remained unheralded and faded into obscurity, unnamed and unrewarded, at least publicly.

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Roman Signal Fire

The history of intelligence should start at the beginning, and incorporating ancient examples is no longer so difficult. With a little bit of digging into the ancient sources we find that enough evidence remains to show that the ancients understood that intelligence activities have always been an integral part of statecraft and warfare, and no one could have run a city-state or an empire without some attention being paid to intelligence gathering. In order to control their populations, to keep abreast of political developments abroad, and for the internal security of their own regimes, they needed a means to collect the intelligence that enabled them to make informed decisions.

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