



A Guide to Intelligence from Antiquity to Rome

by Col. Rose Mary Sheldon, PhD

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 espionage serve as introductory guides to the subject.¹

Other studies have focused on specific cultures. Two major studies have appeared on the intelligence activities of ancient Rome² and several more have been published on the ancient Greeks.³

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 opera-

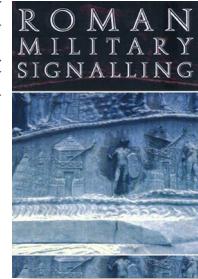
1. Dvornik, Francis, *The Origins of Intelligence Services*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1974, and Rose Mary Sheldon, *Espionage in the Ancient World: An Annotated Bibliography*, Jefferson: North Carolina, McFarland, 2003.

2. Austin, N. J. E. and N.B. Rankov, *Exploratio. Military and Political Intelligence in the Roman World from the Second Punic War to the Battle of Adrianople*. New York: Routledge, 1995, and R.M. Sheldon, *Intelligence Activities in Ancient Rome: Trust in the Gods, but Verify*, London: Frank Cass, 2005.

3. Starr, Chester G., *Political Intelligence in Classical Greece*, Brill Leiden, Mnemosyne Supplement 31, 1974; J.A. Richmond, "Spies in Ancient Greece," *G&R* 45 (1998), pp. 1-18; R. M. Sheldon, "Tradecraft in Ancient Greece," *Studies in Intelligence* 30, 1 (1986), pp. 39-47. Revised version with notes in *International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence* 2, 2 (1988), pp. 189-202; Frank Santi Russell, *Information Gathering in Classical Greece*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999; R.M. Sheldon, *Ambush! Surprise Attack in Ancient Greek Warfare*, Frontline Books, London. (Forthcoming); Andre Gerolymatos, *Espionage and Treason. A Study of the Proxenia in Political and Military Intelligence Gathering in Classical Greece*, Amsterdam, 1986.

tions, 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."⁴ 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, Polyaenus, Sextus Julius Africanus, and Vegetius⁵ 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.⁶



Disguising one's written message was also a skill known to the ancients.⁷ 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?"⁸ Governments classifying documents was also a practice known to the ancients.⁹

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. Polyaenus, 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.

6. Wooliscroft, David, *Roman Military Signalling*, Stroud: Gloucestershire: Tempus, 2001.

7. Texts on cryptography and secret writing include: Leighton, Albert C., "Secret Communications among the Greeks and Romans," *Technology and Culture*, 10, 2 (April 1969), pp. 139-154; Reinke, E.C., "Classical Cryptography," *CJ* 50 (October 1962-May 1963), pp. 113-121; Dodge, Louise, "Cipher in Cicero's Letters to Atticus," *American Journal of Philology* 22 (1901), pp. 439-41; and Ezov, Amiram, "The 'Missing Dimension' of C. Julius Caesar," *Historia* 45 (1996), pp. 64-94.

8. Sheldon, R.M., "The Sator Rebus. An Unsolved Cryptogram?" *Cryptologia*, 27, 3 (July, 2003), pp. 233-287.

9. Sheldon, R.M., "Spying in Mesopotamia: The World's Oldest Classified Documents," *Studies in Intelligence*, 33, 1 (Spring, 1989), pp. 7-12.

and describes in detail eighteen different methods of sending messages, some of them ciphers. The best translation with commentary is still by David Whitehead.¹⁰ Another article on secret communication is Albert Leighton's "Secret Communications among the Greeks and Romans."¹¹

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.¹²

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,¹³ Trajan's dubious foray into Parthia (modern day Iran),¹⁴ or Caesar's near disaster in Britain.¹⁵ Intelligence gathering was

10. Aeneas Tacticus, *Aineias the Tactician*, D. Whitehead trans. with commentary, Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1990.

11. Leighton, Albert C., "Secret Communications among the Greeks and Romans," *Technology and Culture* 10,2 (April 1969), pp. 139-154.

12. Millar, C.H.M., "Some Escapes and Escapers in the Ancient World," *Greece and Rome* 5 (1958), pp. 57-61; Mayor, Adrienne, *Greek Fire, Poison Arrows & Scorpion Bombs: Biological and Chemical Warfare in the Ancient World*, Overlook 2003; and Mayor, Adrienne *The Poison King: The Life and Legend of Mithradates, Rome's Deadliest Enemy*, Princeton University Press 2009.

13. Sheldon, R.M., "Slaughter in the Forest" *Small Wars and Insurgencies*, Vol. 12, No. 3 (Autumn, 2001), pp. 1-38.

14. Sheldon, R.M., "Trajan's Parthian Adventure: With Some Modern Caveats," in Eunan O'Halpin, Robert Armstrong and Jane Ohlmeyer, (eds.) *Intelligence, Statecraft and International Power*. Historical Studies XXV. Papers read before the 27th Irish Conference of Historians Held at Trinity College, Dublin, 2005, pp. 153-174; and Sheldon, R.M., *Rome's Wars in Parthia: Blood in the Sand*, London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2010.

15. Sheldon, R.M., "To the Ends of the Earth: Caesar, Intelligence and Ancient Britain," *International Journal of Intelligence*

and Counterintelligence

15,1 (Spring 2002), pp. 77-100; Belfiglio, Valentine J., "Roman Amphibious Operations against Britain in 55 B.C.," *Military and Naval History Journal* (March, 1998), pp. 3-13; and Belfiglio, Valentine J., "The Roman Amphibious Assault against Britain in 54 B.C.," *Military and Naval History Journal*, (March 2000), pp. 15-21.

16. Sheldon, R.M., "The Odysseus Syndrome: Ambush and Surprise in Ancient Greek Warfare," in *European History: Lessons for the 21st Century*, Essays from the 3rd International Conference on European History, Edited by Gregory T. Papanikos and Nicholas C.J. Pappas, Athens: ATINER, 2007, ch. 8.

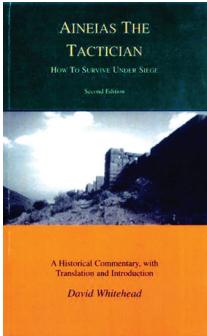
Ancient spies, unlike their modern counterparts, did not retire and write memoirs. The ancient intelligence officer, if he were not successful, might draw the historian's notice indirectly, because his failure meant his execution or a major military disaster. On the other hand, when an ancient intelligence officer succeeded, he remained unheralded and faded into obscurity, unnamed and unrewarded, at least publicly.

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

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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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The Roman praetors were first established in 367 B.C. They evolved into the Praetorian Guard that came to exercise great power, making and unmaking emperors and allowing political and military action outside of the law.

What rules that were observed were announced by the issuance of edicts. The Guard was characterized by corruption and political venality and was closed down by Constantine in 312 A.D.

♦♦

Who shall guard the guardians?

— A Roman philosopher

♦♦

**A nation can survive its fools and even the ambitious.
But it cannot survive treason from within.**

— Cicero (106-43 B.C.)

♦♦

It is essential to seek out enemy agents who have come to conduct espionage against you...

— Sun Tzu, *Art of War* (circa 500 B.C.)

♦♦

Few great Intelligence Officers could pass Personnel.

♦♦

If you want a career in Intelligence Operations – in the cold – prepare for frostbite.

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