

INTELLIGENCE IN THE ANCIENT WORLD

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When I wrote my dissertation on Roman intelligence gathering, there was little literature on the subject of intelligence in the ancient world, and it was hopelessly scattered throughout professional journals generally unknown to the general public.¹ The only survey on the subject was Francis Dvornik's, The Origins of Intelligence Services, which was already out of print.² Although intelligence activities were prolific in the ancient world, and a few scholars had written books and articles on aspects of these activities, there didn't seem to be a field called "ancient intelligence studies."³ I decided to see if one could be started. I began by pulling together the secondary sources in an attempt to answer the question most frequently asked of me by audiences when I lectured: "Where do you get your information?" Of course, the answer must be "the ancient texts themselves," but most people cannot read these in the original languages and are looking instead for something that summarizes what we know, preferably in English. As a result of my collecting, I published Espionage in the Ancient World: An Annotated Bibliography, in 2003.⁴ Now I could at least send people to a single volume where they could find books and articles on all aspects of intelligence activities in Greece, Rome, the Ancient Near East and the Medieval World.

Intelligence activities are much more common than even most specialists think. There has never been a period in history when people were not spying on each other, therefore, we can
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search for intelligence history in any period as long as there are texts that survive. Since my first attempt at writing the intelligence history of Rome, other surveys have begun to appear.⁵ On the Romans, for example, Norman Austin and Boris Rankov published Exploratio on military and political intelligence in the Roman World.⁶ A.D. Lee added Information and Frontiers, which concerned Roman foreign relations in late antiquity.⁷ On the Greek side there is Frank Russell's excellent book on Information Gathering in Classical Greece,⁸ which went beyond Chester G. Starr's Political Intelligence in Classical Greece to also include military intelligence.⁹

There are still gaps in the coverage of the ancient world. There is a need for a good survey book on intelligence gathering in the Ancient Near East that can pull together the diplomatic and military texts archaeologists have discovered in the last century. No one has done a comprehensive study of intelligence in the Medieval World, either in the West or the Byzantine East.

Besides surveys there is a need for studies on the different activities we now list under the heading of "tradecraft." In 1987 I was chastised by one of the readers on my dissertation committee for using that word. I was told not to use government "jargon" and cheapen the English language! Since then, I'm happy to say, the word has gained more general acceptance. I subsequently published an article on "Tradecraft in Ancient Greece."¹⁰ One of the institutions which existed only in ancient Greece, but played an important part in the movement of clandestine information was the proxenia. These diplomats were studied by Andre Gerolymatos in his Espionage and Treason. A Study of the Proxenia in Political and Military Intelligence Gathering in Classical Greece.¹¹

Intelligence activities, 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 is much to be done on the use of codes and ciphers, political assassination, escape and evasion, creating disguises, using disappearing ink, reading other people's mail (flaps and seals), and even fluttering (lie detecting).¹² They all occurred, in some form or another 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, Vegetius all contain snippets of information on ancient signalling. There are more than fifty references from all of antiquity, most are Greek, but slightly less than half are Roman. Both have been collected by David Woolliscroft in his book Roman Military Signalling where he lists all the references and demonstrates how Roman frontier systems worked.¹³

Disguising what one writes was also a skill known to the ancients. There are numerous articles on cryptography and secret writing.¹⁴ There is even one cryptogram that is so enigmatic, the so-called Sator Rebus, that it has spawned a literature all its own.¹⁵ Having a government classify a document is so old we have examples from the second millennium B.C.¹⁶ No ancient author tells us more about sending secret messages than that Greek general, Aeneas Tacticus. He provides us with the first instructional text on communications security, and describes in detail 18 different methods of sending messages, some of them ciphers.¹⁷

Ancient tricks for collecting information and concealing messages seem amusing to us because of their quaintness, and are simplistic by modern standards of technology. Their 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.¹⁸

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 the Teutoburg Forest,¹⁹ Trajan's dubious foray into Parthia,²⁰ or Caesar's near disaster in Britain,²¹ intelligence gathering, or a lack thereof, was an integral part of what went wrong. Every ambush in antiquity relied on advanced intelligence on the enemy's whereabouts so the trap could be sprung. In my latest book, Ambush. Surprise Attack in Ancient Greek Warfare,²² I have showed what intelligence could help to accomplish with irregular warfare.

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 done clandestinely, 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.

The history of intelligence should start at the beginning, and incorporating ancient examples is no longer so difficult. Yet, we may still turn to the index on any recent book on ancient military history, look under "I" for intelligence or "E" for espionage and still find no entry. With a little bit of digging into the ancient sources we can find enough evidence to show

that the ancients understood that intelligence activities were an integral part of their statecraft. 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, rulers needed a means to collect the intelligence that enabled them to make informed decisions.

ENDNOTES

¹ My dissertation was published as Tinker, Tailor Caesar Spy: Espionage in Ancient Rome, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 1987).

² Francis Dvornik, The Origins of Intelligence Services, (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1976).

³ Chester G. Starr, Political Intelligence in Classical Greece, (Leiden: Brill, 1974), Mnemosyne Supplement 31.

⁴ R.M. Sheldon, Espionage in the Ancient World: An Annotated Bibliography, (Jefferson: North Carolina, McFarland, 2003).

⁵ R.M. Sheldon, Intelligence Activities in Ancient Rome: Trust in the Gods, but Verify, (London: Frank Cass, 2005).

⁶ N. J. E. Austin, 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).

⁷ A.D. Lee, Information and Frontiers. Roman Foreign Relations in Late Antiquity, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

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- ⁸ Frank Santi Russell, Information Gathering in Classical Greece, (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999).
- ⁹ Chester G. Starr, Political Intelligence in Classical Greece, (Leiden: Brill, 1974) See also J.A. Richmond, J.A., "Spies in Ancient Greece," G&R 45 (1998), pp. 1-18.
- ¹⁰ 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.
- ¹¹ André Gerolymatos, Espionage and Treason. A Study of the Proxenia in Political and Military Intelligence Gathering in Classical Greece, (Amsterdam: Gieben, 1986)
- ¹² R.M. Sheldon, "The Polygraph, Adultery and the Romans or Fluttering in Antiquity," Foreign Intelligence Literary Scene 5, 2 March/April (1986), p. 2.
- ¹³ D. J. Woolliscroft, Roman Military Signalling, (Stroud, Gloucestershire: Tempus, 2001).
- ¹⁴ Albert C. Leighton, "Secret Communications among the Greeks and Romans," Technology and Culture, 10, 2 (April 1969), pp. 139-154; E.C. Reinke, "Classical Cryptography," CJ 50 (October 1962-May 1963), pp.113-121; Louise Dodge, "Cipher in Cicero's Letters to Atticus," American Journal of Philology 22 (1901), pp. 439-41.
- ¹⁵ R.M. Sheldon, "The Sator Rebus. An Unsolved Cryptogram?" Cryptologia, 27, 3 (July, 2003), pp. 233-287.
- ¹⁶ R.M. Sheldon, "Spying in Mesopotamia: The World's Oldest Classified Documents," Studies in Intelligence, 33, 1 (Spring, 1989), pp. 7-12.
- ¹⁷ The best translation with commentary is still: Aeneas Tacticus, Aineias the Tactician, D. Whitehead trans. with commentary, (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1990).

¹⁸ On secret communication see: Albert C., Leighton, "Secret Communications among the Greeks and Romans," Technology and Culture 10,2 (April 1969), pp. 139-154. C.H.M. Millar, "Some Escapes and Escapers in the Ancient World," Greece and Rome 5 (1958), pp. 57-61. On biological and chemical warfare, see Adrienne Mayor, Greek Fire, Poison Arrows & Scorpion Bombs: Biological and Chemical Warfare in the Ancient World, (New York: Overlook Press, 2003) and her most recent book The Poison King: The Life and Legend of Mithradates, Rome's Deadliest Enemy, (Princeton: Princeton University Press 2009).

¹⁹ R. M. Sheldon, R.M., "Slaughter in the Forest: Small Wars and Insurgencies, Vol. 12, No. 3 (Autumn, 2001), pp. 1-38.

²⁰ R.M. Sheldon, Rome's Wars in Parthia: Blood in the Sand, (London: Vallentine Mitchell, 2010).

²¹ R.M. Sheldon, "To the Ends of the Earth: Caesar, Intelligence and Ancient Britain," International Journal of Intelligence and Counterintelligence, 15,1 (Spring 2002), pp. 77-100.

²² R. M. Sheldon, Ambush. Surprise Attack in Ancient Greek Warfare, (London: Frontline Books, 2012).