

Save Ancient Studies Alliance

Summer 2022 Texts-in-Translation Reading Group

Secret Communication in the Ancient World



When thinking of communication security, you probably think of banks, computer systems and secret services like the FBI and CIA. Yet, communication security is as old as the hills! The Greeks, Romans, and Near Eastern people knew dozens of ways to hide confidential communication from the enemies. This is known as cryptography and steganography. Cryptography and steganography form part of contemporary studies of mathematics and computer science – but also play significant roles in studies of military history, both ancient and modern. Scholars working in these fields have written numerous works in which ancient methods of secret communication – or cryptography and steganography – are referred to in passing as the early (which, in these studies, typically signifies ‘primitive’) precursors to modern cryptographic methods. However, none of these modern works focus in depth and detail upon the ancient history of ancient cryptography and steganography, nor does any such study offer a comprehensive account of all the extant ancient sources in which secret communication is mentioned. What is more, there is a dominant trend amongst the current scholarship to underestimate the complexity and practical utility of the earliest forms of cryptography and steganography. One of the likely reasons for this is because of the unfamiliarity of some historians of cryptography with the original sources.

In this course we will explore ancient methods of secret communication by going back to the original Greek and Latin sources (read in English translation) to find out what secrets the Greeks, Romans, and Near Eastern people sent to each other and in what context. We will discuss if the methods used 2500 years ago were as simple as cryptographers say. Could they have been useful to the Greek and Romans after all?





Your SASA Educational Ambassador:

Martine Diepenbroek

PhD Classics and Ancient History - University of Bristol

Current affiliation: Research Associate - University of Johannesburg

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Dates (3 weeks):

Mondays at 11 AM EST

-Session 1: June 6th

-Session 2: June 13th

-Session 3: June 20th

Location:(Provided by SASA)

Zoom Meeting Link

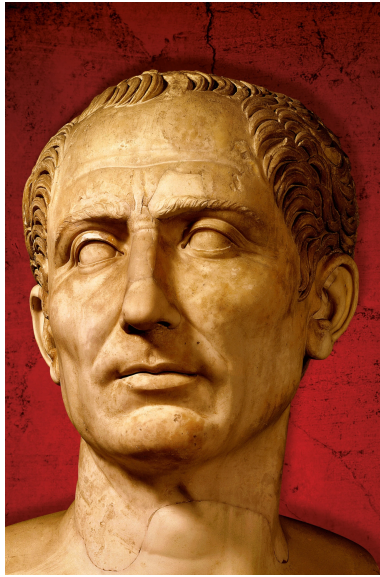
<https://us02web.zoom.us/j/87566275858?pwd=Z256SkNidGlyTnZ0UzIRV0ZRaEVHdz09>

Zoom Meeting ID

875 6627 5858

Zoom Meeting Password

371413



Week 1:

If you are unable to read everything, then please read the pieces marked as **'PRIORITY'**.

Homer: Bellerophon's tablet (**PRIORITY**):

<https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0134%3Abook%3D6%3Acard%3D116> (part 1)

<https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0134%3Abook%3D6%3Acard%3D156> (part 2)

Herodotus: Message in a hare:

<https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0126%3Abook%3D1%3Achapter%3D123> (part 1)

<https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0126%3Abook%3D1%3Achapter%3D124> (part 2)

Herodotus: The tattooed slave (**PRIORITY**):

<https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0126%3Abook%3D5%3Achapter%3D33> (part 1)

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Herodotus: Letters on arrows

<https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0126%3Abook%3D8%3Achapter%3D126> (part 1)

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Herodotus: A message hidden under the wax of a wax tablet (**PRIORITY**):

<https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus%3Atext%3A1999.01.0126%3Abook%3D7%3Achapter%3D239>

Background and discussion: *Myths and Histories of the Spartan scytale*

Page 66-75 (Start: Paragraph 1.2.2: Harpagus to Cyrus: the message in the hare (page 66) -

End: What is more, one of these stories also shows that the oriental weapon of letter writing was now imagined as being used by the Spartans (page 75)

https://research-information.bris.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/263833703/Myths_and_Histories_of_the_Spartan_scytale_29_11_2020.pdf

Readings for week 2 and 3: TBC (discuss with the groups)

Suggestions week 2 and 3:

-The Spartan *scytale*

-The Caesar cipher

-Fire signaling

-Aeneas Tacticus: 21 methods to send secret messages during sieges

-Invisible ink used in love letters

-How did ancient method of secret communication develop into modern systems (cipher wheels; Polybius square; Enigma machine)

Week 1 (Introduction + the oldest examples: Homer and Herodotus)

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