Save Ancient Studies Alliance

January 2023 Reading Group

Secret Carvings: Creating Secret Messages With Ancient Scripts

Needed during session:
   - Powerpoint to check scripts/ alphabets for the activity
   https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/17aOjqHb8kdN3GEfLT4LlqM1zjD2gAfmH1j
   -lyxiyQWI/edit#slide=id.g1413f06a582_0_1319
Your own 'writing tablet' = bar of soap

Links to the readings
If you cannot read everything, then please read the part 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)
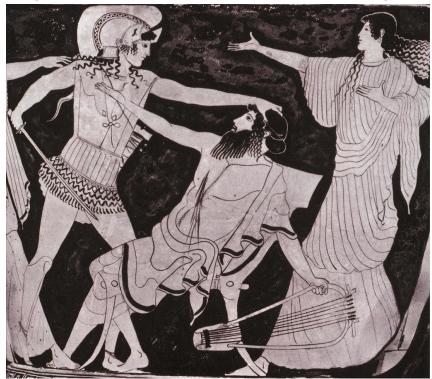
Background on Bellerophon's story:
https://research-information.bris.ac.uk/ws/portalfiles/portal/263833703/Myths_and_Histories_of_the_Spartan_scytale_29_11_2020.pdf
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What we need from the class leader
-A headshot

-Images related to the topic that can be used for advertising

Full Name: Martine Diepenbroek

What you study & where you are getting your degree: Martine Diepenbroek is a Dutch Classicist and Ancient historian with a PhD in Classics and Ancient History from the University of Bristol. She is currently working on secret communication in the Ancient World, and is affiliated to the University of Johannesburg as a Postdoctoral Research Fellow.

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-Time and dates for the group: Saturday, January 7th, 11AM (EST); 5PM (Netherlands)

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Useful websites:

Background on wax tablets:
https://itsallgreektoanna.wordpress.com/2021/04/26/wax-tablets-in-the-ancient-world/

The Writing on Wax project:
https://osf.io/urpuf/wiki/home/?view

English Heritage: Make your own Roman Tabula:
https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/members-area/kids/roman-england/make-your-own-roman-tabula/

CREWS Project: 'Write Your Name in an Ancient Writing System':
https://crewsproject.wordpress.com/write-your-name-in-an-ancient-writing-system/

Roman Wax Tablets (YouTube):
https://youtu.be/L-lnCoEHuXs

Blurb about the topic

- **Question to the person viewing the ad**: Do you want to solve a secret murder mystery from

800 BCE and carve your own secret messages into bars of soaps (as if they were ancient

Greek wax tablets)?

- **Statement of importance of this topic in general**: 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.

- Examples of this theme in your field:
In Homer's *Iliad* we find the oldest known secret message from Greco-Roman history. This is a message containing instructions to kill someone! The mythical hero Bellerophon was sent from King Proetus of Argos to King Iobates of Lycia carrying a tablet which contained instructions to kill Bellerophon. So, in a way Bellerophon was carrying his own death sentence without knowing. There is discussion in scholarship about what exactly Proetus wrote to Iobates and in which language/signs. Can we solve the mystery of what Proetus sent to Iobates and why? And can we find out why Bellerophon was carrying his own death sentence?

- **Connection of the theme between ancient times and today**: Solving a murder - on a professional basis, or as part of a game (murder mystery) is still something we hear about everyday. You watch the news or read a newspaper, and there is a big chance you'll see anything about a death or even a murder.

- **What we'll study in this reading group**: In this masterclass we will discuss Homer's passage. We will take a look at different kinds of scripts and types of messages used in the Near East 2800 years ago, to try to find out what Proetus exactly wrote to Iobates and in what language. In that way we will try to solve the murder mystery! Can we solve the mystery of what Proetus sent to Iobates and why? And can we find out why Bellerophon was carrying his own death sentence?
Then we will write our own secret messages into bars of soap. What will you write? And in what language?

- **What participants will get out of joining the group**: Participants will get insight into the oldest secret message known in history. They will learn about Homer and his work, and the myth of Bellerophon. They will also find out that secret messaging is much older than they might think.

Your SASA Class Leader:

Full Name: Martine Diepenbroek

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