DECEPTION, COMMUNICATION AND MILITARY MANUALS IN CLASSICAL GREEK AND ROMAN WARFARE

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This article examines how Greek and Roman military manuals codified deception and the concealment of information as a central element of warfare. Authors, including Xenophon, Aeneas Tacticus, Frontinus and Polyaenus, provide systematic instructions for hiding messages, exploiting perception, and securing communication. From steganography and signalling systems to inventive devices such as water clocks and *astragali*, these manuals show that concealment was not ad hoc but operationally essential. By focusing on prescriptive texts rather than narrative histories, the study highlights the practical sophistication of ancient military strategy and the enduring cross-cultural continuity of information as a decisive resource in warfare.

Keywords: stratagems; military manuals; Xenophon; Aeneas Tacticus; Frontinus; Polyaenus.

Introduction

Twentieth-century scholarship often framed Classical Greek warfare through a formalised hoplite model that privileged open, symmetrical battle and downplayed deception, most influentially articulated by Victor Davis Hanson (1989:4–8).[1] Although often contested, this paradigm shaped interpretations of Greek military ethics for much of the twentieth century. More recent work has revised this view. Studies by Krentz (2000) and Van Wees (2004:3–18; 153–198) emphasise the diversity and opportunism of Greek warfare, while Konijnendijk (2016:1–12; 2018:39–71; 95–120) shows that normative ancient statements about battle function rhetorically, obscuring routine reliance on asymmetry, terrain, and surprise. This reassessment is consolidated in Konijnendijk, Kucewicz, and Lloyd (2021:1–16), who highlight the breadth of Greek military practice across periods and regions. Despite this shift, most modern discussions of deception in Greek warfare remain anchored in narrative sources, especially Herodotus, Thucydides, and Xenophon's historical works. These studies tend to catalogue instances of ambush, feigned retreat, or surprise attack, often treating deception as an episodic

[1] On condemning practices that violate the ideal of open, face-to-face combat, see Hdt. 1.211–212; Lys. *Andoc.* 6.7; Xen. *Anab.* 3.1.10; 5.7.5–11; 7.6.21; *Hell.* 6.5.16; *Smp.* 4.10; Thuc. 4.86.6; 4.126.

tactic rather than as a systematically theorised practice. While this approach has been effective in demonstrating that deception occurred, it has been less successful in explaining how Greek commanders learned, evaluated, and transmitted deceptive techniques, or how such practices were integrated into broader military thinking (cf. Waters 1985:1–12; 136–151).

Military manuals offer a different and still underutilised perspective. Unlike historiographical narratives, tactical treatises were explicitly prescriptive and instructional, addressing commanders directly and outlining methods for securing advantage under conditions of uncertainty. Xenophon's technical writings, including *On the cavalry commander* and *On horsemanship*, Aeneas Tacticus' *How to survive under siege*, Polyaenus' *Strategemata*, and Frontinus' collection of stratagems (also known as *Strategemata*) collectively reveal a sustained interest in deception, particularly in the management and concealment of information and communication. These texts do not merely record successful ruses; they systematise them, presenting deception as a transferable skill that could be taught, refined, and adapted across different military contexts. This article therefore departs from studies that survey deception broadly across Greek warfare and instead concentrates on how deception, especially communicative secrecy, was conceptualised in military manuals. By narrowing its scope to prescriptive texts, it seeks to clarify the relationship between theory and practice and to show that deception was not an ad hoc response to circumstance but a recognised component of military expertise. Moreover, by incorporating the later Roman works of Polyaenus and Frontinus alongside Greek authors, the study highlights the continuity and transmission of Greek tactical ideas into Roman military thought, reinforcing the centrality of Greek manuals to later traditions of strategic deception.

Deception as doctrine: Military manuals as prescriptive sources

In contrast to narrative historiography, deception appears in prescriptive military not as an occasional or morally ambiguous expedient but as a deliberate, teachable component of effective command. Tactical manuals provide direct insight into how ancient commanders were expected to manage secrecy, misdirection, and the control of information under operational conditions. Within this tradition, Xenophon occupies a pivotal position. Beyond his historical writings, his technical treatises articulate a coherent and practical tactical outlook in which deception, surprise, and the manipulation of perception are integral to military success. Xenophon's works therefore offer an especially suitable point of departure for examining how deception was conceptualised, systematised, and transmitted within Greek military thought.

Xenophon and the normalisation of deception in military command

Xenophon's military writings occupy a distinctive position between narrative history and technical manuals. As several scholars have noted, Xenophon's works combine experiential authority with didactic intent, offering insight into how elite Greek commanders conceptualised warfare as a problem of leadership, discipline, and information management rather than brute force alone (Anderson 1970, esp. 91–110; see also 1–12; 67–83; Dillery 2015:3–52). While the *Anabasis* famously illustrates deception in action,[2] Xenophon's explicitly prescriptive treatises, most notably *On the cavalry commander* (*Eq. mag.*) and *On horsemanship* (*Eq.*), articulate a coherent tactical outlook in which deception, surprise, and the manipulation of appearances are fundamental tools of command. Modern scholarship has increasingly emphasised Xenophon's concern with uncertainty and perception in warfare. Azoulay (2004:1–5) stresses that Xenophon presents successful command as grounded in *pronoia* (foresight), flexibility, and the capacity to anticipate changing circumstances. Related studies of Xenophon's military thought have shown that these qualities often involve managing uncertainty and shaping the expectations of allies and enemies alike, even when this entails concealment or calculated misdirection (Azoulay 2018:1–5; Flower 2012:13–39; Gray 1995: 185–211). In *On the cavalry commander*, Xenophon repeatedly warns commanders against predictability, advising them to vary routes, formations, and schedules so that opponents cannot infer intentions in advance (Xen. *Eq. mag.* 1.22–23; 7.1–3). As Dillery (2015:3–5; 10–52) observes, such advice reflects an implicit theory of information withholding: victory depends on controlling what the enemy can know, not merely on tactical superiority. Feigned actions play a particularly prominent role in Xenophon's thinking. He explicitly recommends simulated retreats and sudden reversals, especially for cavalry forces whose mobility makes deception practicable (Xen. *Eq. mag.* 7.4–6). Scholars have noted that these manoeuvres rely on psychological manipulation, creating the

[2] The *Anabasis* famously illustrates deception in action. Xenophon repeatedly depicts stratagems such as the use of misinformation and controlled display to manipulate enemy expectations. For example, Xenophon describes how the Greeks deliberately exaggerated their confidence and military readiness to deter Persian attacks (*Anab.* 2.5.32–33), and how false signals and feigned movements were employed to mask intentions during marches and encampments (e.g., *Anab.* 3.4.15–18). Xenophon also records tactical deception through feigned retreats and sudden reversals, exploiting enemy overconfidence (*Anab.* 4.3.26–34), as well as the deliberate use of silence and secrecy to conceal plans from both enemies and unreliable allies (*Anab.* 5.2.11–13).

appearance of panic or disorder in order to provoke genuine confusion and overreaction among enemy forces (Wheeler 2007:121–172; Konijnendijk 2018:31–71). Deception here is neither opportunistic nor ad hoc; it requires training, cohesion, and disciplined execution, reinforcing Xenophon's broader emphasis on command structure and unit reliability.

Xenophon's sensitivity to communication further reinforces this point. In both *On the cavalry commander* and *Cyropaedia*, the author stresses that signals, formations, and movements simultaneously convey information to allies and enemies alike (Xen. *Eq. mag.* 3.6–9; *Cyr.* 3.3.48–50). In fact, Xenophon treats visibility as a double-edged sword: what reassures one's own troops may also reveal intentions to hostile observers. Commanders must therefore ensure clarity internally while cultivating ambiguity externally. In the *Cyropaedia*, we read how Cyrus repeatedly succeeds by orchestrating displays of strength, false deployments, and unexpected manoeuvres that mislead enemy observers and distort their decision-making (Xen. *Cyr.* 2.4.1–6; 6.3.22–26). These episodes illustrate what can be described as Xenophon's 'theatre of war', in which deception operates through staged appearances rather than hidden texts (cf. Wheeler 2007:121–170).

Importantly, Xenophon does not frame deception as morally suspect. In *Memorabilia*, we read how Socrates explicitly defends deception against enemies as just and beneficial when used to secure safety or advantage (Xen. *Mem.* 4.2.15–17). Scholars have highlighted this passage as evidence that Xenophon distinguishes sharply between deceit within the civic community and deception directed against external enemies (Azoulay 2004:1–5; cf. Gray 1995:185–211). This ethical framing legitimises deception as an expected component of competent command rather than an exceptional moral compromise. Xenophon's relevance to the present study lies not in providing a systematic treatment of cryptography or covert messaging, but in normalising deception as a core element of military expertise. His manuals assume that commanders must actively manage information, expectations, and interpretation. As such, they form a crucial conceptual precursor to Aeneas Tacticus' *How to survive under siege*, where these concerns are translated into detailed technical instructions for concealed communication, message transmission, and counterintelligence. Xenophon thus represents an early stage in a broader manual tradition that treats deception not as episodic cleverness but as a disciplined, teachable, and ethically acceptable dimension of warfare.

Aeneas Tacticus and the systematisation of deceptive communication

Where Xenophon normalises deception as an attribute of competent command, Aeneas Tacticus represents a decisive shift toward the technical systematisation of

deception, particularly in the sphere of military communication. Writing in the middle of the fourth century BCE, Aeneas Tacticus' *How to survive under siege* is the earliest surviving Greek military manual devoted entirely to internal security, intelligence control, and the concealment of information, all during sieges. As such, it offers unparalleled insights into how deception was operationalised at the level of procedure rather than principle. Aeneas Tacticus represents the earliest comprehensive Greek author to treat military communication as a technical and strategic discipline. Unlike the narrative-focused Xenophon, Aeneas writes explicitly as a practitioner, producing a manual for commanders that details systematic methods for conveying messages securely under siege conditions (*How to survive under siege* 31). His treatise demonstrates that Greek warfare recognised communication itself as a contested space, and that controlling information could be as decisive as controlling terrain (Oldfather 1928:1–25; Bengtson 1962:458–468; Whitehead 1990:22–24; Chlup and Whately 2021:1–16; Whately 2021:17–38).

Aeneas' work is primarily concerned with steganography, that is, the concealment of messages so that their very existence would remain hidden, rather than with complex cryptography, whereby messages are enciphered (Bartlett 2002:3; Mollin 2005:1; Bauer 2007:25–30; 2013:xix; Cox, Miller *et al.* 2008:2). Aeneas presents an extensive catalogue of techniques ranging from the simple to the highly inventive. At the most basic level, messages could be concealed in clothing, footwear, armour, jewellery, and even dog collars (Aen. Tact. 31.4–9; 31.23–27; 31.31–32). Some examples exploit human or animal instincts: a message could, for example, be bound to a wound on a man's leg (31.6), or a dog transported away from its home could carry a message in its collar back to its owner (31.31–32). Other techniques involve the use of unwitting messengers, such as inserting a secret letter into a messenger's sandals while the messenger carries a plausible, non-secret cover letter (31.4–5). In this method, both the sender and the intended recipient are aware of the concealed message and the agreed method of transmission, but the messenger himself remains unaware of it. Upon arrival, the messenger delivers the ordinary letter, while the recipient, knowing where to look, retrieves the hidden communication from the sandals. The technique was particularly valuable in siege conditions, where messengers might be captured, interrogated, or forced to betray their mission, and where minimising the risk of compromised information was essential to secure communication.

More sophisticated methods include hidden writing on wax tablets. A plaintext message could be written on the wood beneath a tablet's wax surface, with an innocuous open message inscribed above. The recipient, aware of the stratagem, could scrape off the wax to reveal the hidden text (Aen. Tact. 31.14). Here Aeneas innovates beyond Herodotus' account of Demaratus' warning to the

Spartans, written under the wax of a wax tablet (Hdt. 7.239). Aeneas proposes that messages could be written on the base of a whitewashed tablet or on a hero's plaque, revealing them only when soaked in water (31.14–16). Similarly, Aeneas preserves Herodotus' story of Histiaeus' tattooed slave (Hdt. 5.35.2–4; Aen. Tact. 31.2–29, cf. Blamire 1959:144–150; Chapman 1972:566–568; Evans 1976:31–37; Brown 1981:385–393), illustrating how earlier Greek narratives were adapted into practical methods. Aeneas also devises technically inventive methods that combine ingenuity with domestic materials. In one remarkable example, a message is written on an inflated bladder coated with ink and glue, deflated, inserted into a flask, reinflated, and then immersed in oil to render the text invisible. The recipient would pour out the oil, reinflate the bladder, and read the message (31.10–13). While elaborate, this method exemplifies Aeneas' emphasis on practical problem-solving under siege conditions, demonstrating the creativity demanded when conventional communication channels are blocked (Pretzler 2018:80–90; Rihll 2018:280–289; Shipley 2018:49–67; Whately 2021:20–38; cf. Wrightson 2021:99–120.).

Although Aeneas' emphasis is overwhelmingly on concealment, he occasionally integrates cryptography. Two minor systems used for writing encrypted text, a vowel-dot substitution (31.30–31) and alternate letters or symbols (31.31), functioned as secondary safeguards should steganography fail. More sophisticated techniques combined steganography with rudimentary ciphers, such as marking selected letters in a document or book with inconspicuous dots for the recipient to transcribe (31.1–3). Here, the text is both hidden and partially encoded, illustrating that Aeneas understood multi-layered security without making encryption the central focus. Furthermore, Aeneas experimented with mechanical or structural devices, such as a water clock signalling system described by Polybius (10.44–45). This method involved two precisely calibrated vessels, rods marked in equal sections, and pre-arranged symbols to transmit messages over distance. While ingenious, practical limitations (especially the difficulty of synchronising water clocks) meant only pre-arranged messages could be sent, highlighting the challenges of long-distance communication in antiquity (Woolliscroft 2001:32; cf. Whitehead 1990:22–24). Another noteworthy device that Aeneas discussed is the use of *astragali* (knucklebones) for sending confidential communication. Twenty-four holes were pierced in a knucklebone (or a wooden disk), each corresponding to a letter of the Greek alphabet. A thread was passed through the holes to encode a message, and unthreading revealed the letters in reverse order (Aen. Tact. 31.16–22). While ingenious, this method was extremely laborious, illustrating Aeneas' awareness of the trade-off between secrecy and practicality.

Across all these methods, Aeneas' guiding principle is risk management. Messages frequently had to cross enemy lines, bypass observation, or traverse hazardous terrain. Ordinary objects, animals, and natural elements all become vehicles for covert communication. He treats message concealment as an integral component of military planning, not as an exceptional improvisation. This approach influenced later Roman authors, including Frontinus and Polyaenus. They would inherit Aeneas' combination of practical ingenuity and systematic organisation, adapting Greek methods to new operational and cultural contexts (cf. Dahm 2017:1–24; König 2018:160–178; Wrightson 2021:99–120). In sum, Aeneas Tacticus demonstrates that Greek military manuals were more than mere compilations of clever stories. They were technical, systematic, and prescriptive, emphasising concealment, adaptability, and the careful calibration of communication in warfare. By systematising these techniques, Aeneas bridges the gap between narrative historiography and applied military instruction, establishing principles that would resonate in Roman manuals for centuries.

Frontinus and the Roman transmission of Greek military deception

Roman military writers did not merely inherit Greek ideas of deception: they actively adopted, adapted, and systematised these ideas. Sextus Julius Frontinus (c. 40–103 CE) provides a prime example of this continuity (cf. Bennett and McElwain 1925:xxvii–xxxii; Dahm 2017:1–24; König 2018:160–170). Best known for his *Strategemata*, Frontinus assembles a systematic handbook of practical tactics, many of which are explicitly or implicitly drawn from Greek military thought. In Book 3, Chapter 13, Frontinus focuses on the concealment and transmission of messages, treating communication itself as a tactical domain. Where Aeneas offers experimental techniques and case-derived innovations, Frontinus organises such material into an instructive, replicable Roman framework, transforming anecdotal and narrative examples into standardised lessons for commanders.

Frontinus' examples display remarkable ingenuity and draw heavily on their Greek precedents. Messages could be concealed in everyday objects or natural elements: letters written on animal skins could be attached to carcasses of livestock, exploiting enemy assumptions that such animals were harmless (*Strat*. 3.13.3–5) or hidden beneath the tails of mules and inside scabbards, turning ordinary equipment into covert communication channels. These methods resonate closely with Aeneas' steganographic recommendations (Aen. Tact. 31.4–9; 31.23–27; 31.31–32) and Xenophon's emphasis on exploiting the ordinary and unexpected in warfare (*Eq. mag.* 5.3–12). More elaborate methods illustrate both technical ingenuity and environmental manipulation. During the siege of Cyzicus (73 BCE), the Roman general Lucullus had letters sewn into inflated animal skins with which a soldier swam across enemy-held waters using the bladders as rafts (*Strat*. 3.13.6).

Similarly, the consul Hirtius sent letters inscribed on lead plates to Decimus Brutus, who was besieged by Antonius at Mutina. The letters were fastened to the arms of soldiers, who then swam across the Scultenna River (*Strat*. 3.13.7). These cases echo Greek examples of covert communication, including the wax-tablet methods of Aeneas Tacticus (Aen. Tact. 31.14–16) and the tattooed-messenger story from Herodotus (Hdt. 5.35.2–4; cf. Aen. Tact. 31.28–29), showing how Frontinus consciously adapted long-established Greek stratagems to Roman operational contexts.

Frontinus furthermore preserves the use of animals as carriers of military intelligence in another story on Brutus and Hirtius. Carrier pigeons fitted with messages tied around their necks were released by Hirtius near besieged Mutina. The birds instinctively searched for high points within the city where they could find food, where Brutus received Hirtius' messages (*Strat*. 3.13.8). This mirrors both Xenophon's attention to natural behaviour (*Eq. mag.* 5.5–12) and Aeneas' dog-collar messaging system (Aen. Tact. 31.31–32), underscoring the shared Greek-Roman insight that successful communication relies as much on behavioural expectations (human or animal) as on concealment itself.

Across these examples, Frontinus' work consistently emphasises the careful anticipation and mitigation of operational risk. Messages frequently had to traverse enemy lines or dangerous terrain, and each anecdote illustrates adaptive problem-solving comparable to that found in the works of Aeneas and Xenophon. Yet Frontinus' distinctive contribution lies in his comprehensive organisation of earlier material. Whereas Greek authors begin to systematise deceptive practices by presenting them as instructive techniques, Frontinus compiles a much broader range of Greek and Roman precedents into a structured reference handbook designed for consultation. In doing so, he transforms earlier tactical observations into an explicitly historical and didactic corpus. In this respect, Frontinus complements Aeneas Tacticus: the latter experiments with and refines practical techniques, while Frontinus preserves, expands, and formalises them for a Roman audience. Both, however, share the underlying conviction that the concealment, secure transmission, and timely delivery of information could be as decisive as troop strength or armament. Their works together reveal the enduring cross-cultural continuity of ancient stratagem theory and the Roman adoption, adaptation, and further systematisation of Greek approaches to the art of deception.

Polyaenus and the strategic use of stratagems

Where Frontinus systematised earlier military knowledge for a Roman readership, Polyaenus (second century CE) offers another important example of how Greek tactical traditions were preserved and transmitted. In his *Stratagems*, Polyaenus

compiles a wide range of examples, predominantly Greek but also Roman and drawn from the wider Mediterranean world. These focus explicitly on deception, cunning, and ingenuity as means of achieving military advantage. Like Frontinus, Polyaenus treats the manipulation of information, perception, and environmental conditions as central to operational success. Unlike Aeneas Tacticus or Xenophon, however, Polyaenus writes retrospectively, often centuries after the events he describes, prioritising exemplary narratives rather than technical instruction. His work nevertheless forms an important bridge between earlier Greek tactical thinking and later Roman military culture, demonstrating the enduring prestige of stratagem traditions (Konijnendijk 2018:31–50).

Polyaenus' examples frequently emphasise communication and deception in siege warfare, closely paralleling the concerns of Aeneas Tacticus and Frontinus. For instance, he recounts how the Carthaginians employed fire signals to transmit urgent information rapidly across long distances, a system comparable to Aeneas' water clock signalling mechanism and later Roman signalling practices (*Strat.* 6.16.2; Sheldon 1987:28; Woolliscroft 2001:32; 2005:205). As in Aeneas and Frontinus, the effectiveness of such systems depended on prearranged codes and mutual understanding between sender and receiver, enabling essential information to be conveyed when direct observation or verbal communication was impossible.

Polyaenus also preserves numerous accounts of covert message transmission and psychological manipulation. He describes episodes in which messengers were disguised or misdirected and messages concealed within everyday objects, reflecting a recurring tactical principle shared with Aeneas and Frontinus: the exploitation of ordinary materials and routines to disguise extraordinary or sensitive information (*Strat.* 1.24; 6.16.2). Similarly, he records instances in which commanders manipulated environmental signals, including fires, banners, and troop deployments, to create misleading impressions of strength, movement, or intention (2.1–2.5). Such examples demonstrate the long term continuity of Greek strategic thought, particularly the emphasis on concealment, misdirection, and the deliberate shaping of enemy expectations. A distinctive feature of Polyaenus' collection is his sustained attention to human and animal behaviour as instruments of tactical deception. Several anecdotes illustrate how couriers, animals, or civilians could be used to transmit information through mechanisms that relied on instinct, routine behaviour, or psychological expectation (6.16.2; 1.24). While Polyaenus presents these episodes in an anecdotal and often moralising style, they convey practical lessons regarding the relationship between operational security and the predictability of human and animal responses. In this respect, his work reinforces principles already visible in Aeneas' technical discussions and Frontinus' historical case studies.

Polyaenus thus complements Aeneas Tacticus and Frontinus by arranging Greek and Hellenistic stratagem traditions into thematically structured exempla centred specifically on deception. Rather than presenting formal doctrine, he selects and groups episodes according to recurring tactical patterns such as ambush, misinformation, feigned retreat, and covert communication. This organisation transforms dispersed historical narratives into a readily consultable archive of strategic precedents. Positioned between narrative historiography and technical military manuals, Polyaenus preserves and reshapes Greek strategic knowledge in a format designed for reflection, instruction, and emulation.

Comparative analysis: Concealment and information control in military manuals

Taken together, the four authors examined in this study demonstrate a shared concern with deception as a structured and teachable component of military practice. Yet they differ markedly in how they conceptualise, categorise, and operationalise deceptive methods. A comparative analysis reveals three recurring domains: the management of perception, the concealment of communication, and the codification of precedent.

Xenophon approaches deception primarily through command psychology and expectation management. In his technical treatises and didactic narratives alike, deception is rarely isolated as a mechanical technique; instead, it emerges from the commander's ability to anticipate enemy reactions and manipulate appearances. Surprise attacks, feigned withdrawals, controlled displays of strength or weakness, and deliberate misinformation all function to shape how the enemy interprets the situation. Importantly, Xenophon embeds these practices within a broader ethical and pedagogical framework: deception is legitimate when it serves order, discipline, and foresight (*pronoia*). Concealment here is cognitive rather than material – the hiding of intentions rather than messages (Anderson 1970:91–99; Azoulay 2004:1–5; 2018:4–5; Flower 2012:15–20).

Aeneas Tacticus, in turn, represents a decisive shift toward material and technical concealment, especially under siege conditions. His treatise focuses exclusively on the mechanics of secure communication when interception is assumed to be inevitable. Messages are hidden in clothing, equipment, animals, containers, and even human bodies; cryptography plays only a marginal role. For Aeneas, deception is infrastructural rather than psychological: success depends on removing information from visibility altogether. His emphasis reflects the realities of siege warfare, where control over communication networks could determine the survival of the polis (Dahm 2017:1–15; König 2018:160–165; Chlup and Whately 2021:1–16).

Polyaenus complements Aeneas Tacticus and Frontinus by organising Greek and Hellenistic stratagem traditions into thematically structured exempla centred specifically on deception. Unlike Aeneas, who provides detailed technical guidance, or Xenophon, who embeds deception within broader reflections on leadership and command, Polyaenus occupies an intermediate analytical position. His *Strategemata* abstracts deceptive practices into recurring tactical patterns, frequently reducing historical detail in order to highlight their adaptability across different military contexts. Communication concealment appears regularly in his collection, but typically as one component within broader composite ruses that combine misinformation, disguise, environmental manipulation, and carefully controlled timing. In this sense, Polyaenus presents deception as modular and transferable: stratagems are framed not as fixed procedures tied to specific historical circumstances, but as adaptable solutions that commanders could modify according to situational demands. By arranging dispersed historical material into accessible thematic groupings, Polyaenus preserves and reshapes Greek strategic knowledge in a format designed for consultation, reflection, and practical emulation.

Frontinus represents the most explicit effort to systematise concealment as a military competence. In *Strategemata* 3.13, he isolates the problem of secure communication and assembles Greek and Roman precedents into a coherent instructional framework. Unlike Aeneas, Frontinus does not experiment with technique; unlike Polyaenus, he does not merely collect clever anecdotes. Instead, he stabilises deceptive practices by embedding them within Roman traditions of exemplarity and administrative order. Concealment becomes doctrinal: messengers are trained, animals conditioned, materials standardised, and techniques presented as repeatable procedures.

These differences discussed here can be summarised schematically. Xenophon privileges psychological deception, focusing on shaping enemy perception through leadership and foresight: Aeneas, in turn, prioritises physical concealment, designing systems that prevent detection altogether; while Polyaenus emphasises exemplary adaptability, offering stratagems as flexible models. Finally, Frontinus foregrounds institutional codification, transforming earlier practices into a disciplined body of tactical knowledge. While their emphases differ, all four treat deception as a skill that can be learned, refined, and deliberately applied. Across the manuals by the four authors, a clear hierarchy emerges. Concealment consistently outweighs encryption, and deception is most effective when the existence of communication itself remains undetected. Whether through cognitive misdirection (Xenophon), material invisibility (Aeneas), exemplary abstraction (Polyaenus), or doctrinal systematisation (Frontinus), these texts converge on a shared assumption: control of information is as decisive as control of terrain.

Deception is not an occasional expedient but a core operational competence, adapted to context yet grounded in transferable principles.

Conclusion

This article has argued that Greek and Roman military manuals reveal a systematic, practical, and highly sophisticated approach to deception in warfare, particularly in the domain of communication. Unlike traditional narratives in Herodotus or Thucydides, which often describe deception in episodic or morally framed terms, manuals by Xenophon, Aeneas Tacticus, and later Roman authors such as Frontinus and Polyaenus demonstrate that cunning, concealment, and ingenuity were institutionalised components of strategic practice. Xenophon provides the earliest illustrative examples of deception as a tactical tool, emphasising the exploitation of terrain, human perception, and situational advantage. His works, including *On the cavalry commander* and *Cyropaedia*, highlight the use of misdirection, surprise, and observation to achieve operational success, while also offering guidance for practical implementation (*Eq. mag.* 1.13; 5.3–12; *Cyr.* 3.3.55; 6.1.31). By systematising these practices, Xenophon bridges the gap between historical narrative and prescriptive instruction.

Aeneas Tacticus builds upon this foundation to provide the most extensive surviving Greek treatment of covert communication. His work *How to survive under siege* demonstrates that secure transmission of information was a central concern in military planning. Through detailed discussion of steganographic techniques, rudimentary cryptography, signalling devices, and inventive mechanical methods such as water clocks and *astragali*, Aeneas emphasises both the practicality and limitations of each method. His work reflects a clear hierarchy of priorities: concealment of the message's existence is primary, encryption secondary, and careful calibration essential to operational success. Aeneas' manual represents a decisive step in the transformation of wartime ingenuity into systematic, teachable doctrine.

Later Roman authors Frontinus and Polyaenus inherited and adapted earlier Greek principles discussed by Xenophon and Aeneas Tacticus. This demonstrates both continuity and innovation. Frontinus' *Strategemata* codifies Greek examples of concealed communication, often drawn from Aeneas, Xenophon, and Herodotus, into a practical handbook for Roman commanders (*Strat.* 3.13). He preserves the same underlying logic of risk management and psychological exploitation while embedding it within a Roman framework of instruction, emphasising replicability and systematic application. Polyaenus, similarly, offers strategic guidance on deception, illustrating that Greek ideas of stratagem were transmitted, expanded, and institutionalised in the Roman military imagination.

Taken together, these manuals show that deception and communication were not marginal or morally ambiguous concerns, but integral to the operational and intellectual culture of warfare. They transform anecdotal examples into reproducible procedures, reflecting a military ethos in which intelligence, timing, and ingenuity could decisively shape outcomes. Greek and Roman commanders were therefore not merely opportunistic tacticians; they were participants in a long-standing, cross-cultural tradition of codified stratagem theory. By focusing on manuals rather than narrative histories, this article highlights the systematic, practical, and technical dimensions of ancient military deception, demonstrating that the control, concealment, and timely delivery of information were regarded as vital to success in both Greek and Roman warfare. In doing so, it underscores the enduring value of these sources for understanding not only how ancient armies fought, but also how they planned, communicated, and controlled knowledge as a strategic resource.

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