

A Horse is a Horse?
Pursuing Plato in Aeneas Tacticus 31.15

The text of Aeneas Tacticus's *How to Survive under Siege*, the earliest surviving and most interesting of Greek treatises on warfare, still tends to be read for details of military developments or at best for the author's understanding of public opinion in the besieged city. Colorful details of his treatment of Greek espionage and cryptography remain particularly fascinating. Although we are not entirely sure of the author's identity, he is probably an Arcadian general active in the first half of the fourth century. It is worth asking how the impulse to create technical treatises on warfare relates to the fourth century intellectual milieu in general and the desire to systematize knowledge. One of Aeneas's device that at first glance seems to anticipate modern graphic steganography (the concealment of information in a pictorial representation) may hide a connection to the philosophical world beneath its surface..

In 31. 15-16 Aeneas explains how to write on a votive tablet, paint over it, then leave it in a hero shrine to be picked up by a fellow conspirator. The hidden message can then be brought out by placing the tablet in olive oil. In effect, this is a palimpsest on wood, and the olive oil functions like ultraviolet light.

Aeneas, however, specifies a subject for the painting: "a light-bearing horseman ... [with a] white cloak and a white horse---or ... any other color---except black." At least one scholar has seen a "fiendishly ironic" meaning in the light-bearing horseman whose dazzling light conceals the secret. The doubly white cloak and horse arouses further suspicion. Lucius's white horse in Apuleius's *Golden Ass*, named Candidus, or "Whitey," is now widely accepted to be the white horse of the tri-partite soul from *Phaedrus* 253ce. Not every white horse can be a Platonic white horse. Yet if we admit any symbolic association to this light-bearer on a white horse---or any not black horse!---a specifically Platonic association is no great leap.

Aeneas Tacticus cites many events from the early fourth century BC, nothing with certainty after 360, so the allusion may not contribute much to dating the *Phaedrus* ---and might reflect oral discussion within the Academy in any case. It is still worth noting that, just as the practical soldier Xenophon was part of the Platonic circle, another fourth century general might have been in touch with developments in philosophy as well.

The ironies of Platonic allusion here proliferate beyond light and dark imagery alone. The noble white horse is a distraction meant to mislead: the real meaning is buried in the black, almost erased but not to be forgotten, written text beneath. Internal rebellion against the leaders of the besieged city lies there, awaiting only a reader and some olive oil to bring it to the surface. The first non-philosophic allusion to the Platonic tripartite soul might be in a work of espionage and warcraft.

Bibliography

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