

The Nation

June 22, 1918 : p. 738

Ancient Camouflage

TO THE EDITOR OF THE NATION:

SIR: In the stress of the present war, with its emphasis upon new inventions, it is startling to discover how many of our modern devices were known to the Greeks and Romans. The commander of a transport who has the vessel darkened at night as a precaution against submarine attack is merely following the example of Himilco, the Carthaginian, who, as he set out by night for Sicily in the year 406 B. C., "put up lanterns screened in front, so that the enemy might not detect the expedition from the light." Eighteen years later, when Dionysius, the famous tyrant of Syracuse, was besieging Caulonia, on the southern coast of Italy, Aristides of Elea resorted to a more elaborate scheme. Aristides had set sail against Dionysius with twelve triremes, and Dionysius, hearing of this, had fitted out fifteen ships and sailed against him. "Aristides turned aside and avoided him, and as night came on gave orders to put up the lanterns. The ships of Dionysius followed their light. A little later the sailors took these down and lowered into the sea other lanterns fastened to huge pieces of cork. Then, turning away from the light, they sailed toward Caulonia, and arrived there before the ships of Dionysius, which were lured from their course by the gleam from the buoys."

Sails were often colored in ancient times, and the wooden part of the ship regularly received a coat of color in encaustic, sometimes applied evenly to the whole surface, sometimes put on in elaborate designs. We read of a clever ruse once employed by a certain Nikon, a helmsman of Samos. "Wishing to escape notice, while the enemy's triremes were lying at anchor near by, he colored his own ship with a paint similar to that of the enemy's. Then, taking on board those rowers who were bravest and strongest of body, he sailed right past the bows of the enemy's ships as if he were a friend of theirs. Proceeding toward the outermost of the vessels lying at anchor, he sailed past them, while the enemy were filled with amazement and wonder at his deed. And he was recognized as an enemy only when it was no longer possible for him to be captured."

The colors which the Elder Pliny lists as available for ships might well belong to a modern camoufleur: crimson, violet, blue, two shades of white, orange, and green. Pliny tells us how, when the fleet of Alexander the Great was sailing a certain river in India, the commanding officers vied with each other in painting the canvas different shades. Small wonder that "as the wind filled the many-colored sails, the banks of the river stood amazed."

Ordinarily, of course, these brilliant pigments were not applied with any idea of producing "low visibility" or "protective coloring." But a Greek writer of the third century A. D. describes a pirate ship as "painted a sea-blue color," and the Roman author of an "Epitome of the Art of War," dating between 383 and 450, states that "reconnoitring ships, in order that they may not be betrayed by their shining whiteness, have their sails and rigging dyed blue, like the waves of the sea; and the wax with which the ships are painted is stained this same color. The soldiers and sailors, too, put on blue clothing, so that on their reconnoitring expeditions they may escape detection, not only by night, but also by day." Could modern camouflage do any more?

Poughkeepsie, N.Y., June 6, 1918

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