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## Resemblance and camouflage in Graeco-Roman antiquity

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**Abstract.** In the twenty-eighth book of the *Naturalis Historia* Pliny the Elder claims that, if a chameleon's left leg is roasted together with a herb bearing the same name, and everything is mixed with ointment, cut in lozenges, and stored in a wooden little box, this will bestow on those who own it a perfect camouflage. The ring of Gyges (Plato, etc.), that of Midas (Pliny), the heliotropium (Pliny), the *dracontitis* (Philostratus): ancient cultures abound with references to objects, recipes, and techniques able to bestow different kinds of invisibility, meant as a perfect resemblance with the environment. At the same time, these same cultures also teem with references to how to avert the perfect camouflage: for instance, by being endowed with a *pupula duplex*, a double pupil (Ovid).

The paper explores such vast corpus of texts from the point of view of a semiotics of cultures, in order to track the roots of a conception of camouflage that, from these ancient cultures on, develops through intricate paths into the contemporary *imaginaires* (and practices) of invisibility.

The paper's more general goal is to understand the way in which cultures elaborate conceptions of invisibility meant as the perfect resemblance between humans and their environments, often on the basis of the observation of the same resemblance between other living beings and their habitat. Ancient texts are therefore focused on in order to decipher the passage from camouflage as an adaptive natural behaviour to camouflage as an effective combat strategy.

## 1. Introduction: resemblance and invisibility

The present article stems from a wider research project, tentatively entitled “cultures of invisibility”. The hypothesis underlying this project is the following: because of a cultural influence that — through complex and not yet completely explored paths — originated in the link between the genesis of the epistemology of ‘Western’ art history and the Christian visual culture, visual studies thus far have neglected the fact that, in order to understand a visual culture, meaning must be attributed not only to the way in which it imagines, represents, and visualizes the being, but also to the way in which it veils it, hides it, and prohibits its representation (Leone 2007, 2009, in press a).

In the frame of this project, dwelling on the term “camouflage”, on the concept that it expresses, and on the texts and practices in which such concept is embodied, is useful in order to describe and analyze the semantic field of invisibility and the way in which it changes depending on the different historical and socio-cultural contexts. The background hypothesis of the present paper is that the phenomenon of camouflage cannot be understood exclusively as a technical fact or as a historical phenomenon, but as one of the semiotic modalities of the invisible, that is, as one of the somewhat paradoxical dynamics through which the invisible manifests itself as sign, as project of invisibility.

Corroborating such hypothesis through a semiotic analysis of texts and practices characterizing the ancient civilizations, and in particular the Greek and the Latin ones, might be effective in showing that camouflage is not only the result of the introduction of aircrafts in warfare, essentially from the First World War on, and of the consequent need to contrast the extraordinary power of observation from above of air fleets through more sophisticated strategies of invisibility (Leone in press b). The semiotically oriented study of a corpus of Greek and Latin texts will rather suggest that the advent of the aerial warfare did nothing but emphasizing a modality of the invisible that had been already rooted for centuries in the *imaginaire*, in the texts, and in the practices of ‘Western’ visual cultures. Greek and Latin texts analysed in the present paper have been selected not only for their cultural centrality in their respective civilisations, but also because they epitomise some of the

1 most fundamental trends concerning invisibility and camouflage in the  
2 Graeco-Roman semiosphere.

## 3 4 5 **2. Resemblance and the Greek camouflage**

6  
7 In the vast corpus of texts that compose the Greek civilization,  
8 invisibility is frequent. Gods often appear and disappear at their will,  
9 and at their will they make human beings, animals, and things appear  
10 and disappear (Smith 1902, 1920; Pease 1942). However, among these  
11 disappearances, some seem to share, in particular, the semantic features  
12 of the contemporary camouflage.

13 In the *Iliad*, it is often a god, or a goddess, who — often during a  
14 battle — dissimulates the presence of a human, frequently when this  
15 human is at the mercy of an aggressor. The means of such dissimulation  
16 may vary, but one of them is predominant: mist, a sort of natural  
17 *camouflet* that, all of a sudden, changes the transparency of the air into  
18 opacity, allows the divine intervention to take place in human affairs,  
19 and subtracts a mortal body from an otherwise ineluctable end.

20 In commenting on the way in which Plutarch describes the ca-  
21 mouflage of cuttlefish, Vernant writes:<sup>1</sup>

22  
23 Plutarque écrit qu'elle [la seiche] fait en sorte, technomènè, de rendre l'eau  
24 trouble et opaque, l'obscurité, skotos, se répandant autour d'elle pour lui  
25 permettre de fuir en secret et d'échapper à la vue du pêcheur. Il ajoute que la  
26 seiche imite ainsi les dieux d'Homère qui souvent entourent d'une nuée sombre,  
27 kuanèè nephelè, ceux qu'ils veulent sauver en les dissimulant. (Vernant,  
28 Detienne 2007[1974]: 1076)

29  
30 In order to escape the aggressor, Plutarch contends, cuttlefish spreads  
31 its ink in the water and makes it opaque, in the same way in which the  
32 Homeric gods would turn the visibility of the air into the invisibility of  
33 mist in order to save some humans from their enemies in the battlefield.  
34 According to Plutarch, then, the animal's camouflage imitates that of the  
35 Homeric gods. However, the opposite direction of imitation is more  
36 likely to have taken place: it was by observing and imitating the way in

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<sup>1</sup> Mainly with reference to Plutarch, *De sollertia animalium*, *Moralia* 978B.

1 which animals escape their aggressors through camouflage that the  
 2 ancient Greeks 'invented' the camouflage adopted by the Homeric gods.  
 3 Some animals' capacity to create a perfect dissimulation of their body in  
 4 the environment (that is, a perfect resemblance between their body and  
 5 the environment) has been imitated by the semiotic strategies the  
 6 ancient Greeks devised in order to obtain the same communicative  
 7 (negative) effect.

8 Thus, in the third book of the *Iliad*, at the peak of the battle between  
 9 Paris and Menelaus, one reads that:

10  
 11 He turned and made again for his man, determined to kill him  
 12 with the bronze spear. But Aphrodite caught up Paris  
 13 easily, since she was divine, and wrapped him in a thick mist  
 14 and set him down again in his own perfumed bedchamber.  
 15 (Homer, *Iliad* III, 379–382)  
 16

17 In the eleventh book one comes across an analogous episode, but evoked  
 18 from the point of view of the aggressor. Nestor says:

19  
 20 And now I would have killed the young Moliones, scions  
 21 of Aktor, had not their father who shakes the earth in his wide strength  
 22 caught them out of the battle, shrouding them in a thick mist.  
 23 (*Iliad* XI, 750–752)  
 24

25 In both cases the divine intervention — through mist — creates a  
 26 spatial-temporal breach in the chaotic scene of the battle, delays the  
 27 pleasure of killing, and, with it, that of narration. Hence, the camouflage  
 28 of the body of the victim enables the eroticism of narration. The erotic  
 29 connotation springs from the fact that the body of the victim is  
 30 subtracted from its aggressor when violence is about to reach its apex,  
 31 like when an object of erotic desire is offered and then absconded in a  
 32 striptease.

33 Again, in the twentieth book, during the fight between Aeneas and  
 34 Achilles, mist<sup>2</sup> is literally poured in the eyes of the aggressor who was  
 35 defeating the aggressed:

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<sup>2</sup> The Greek word used in these passages for mist (*achlys*) is different from *Iliad* 3.381, 11.752, 20.444, 446 and 21.597 (*ēēr* = *aēr*, which in Homer and Hesiod means 'mist', but in later periods simply 'air'). On the other hand, the same word is

1  
 2 When he had heard this, the shaker of the earth Poseidon  
 3 went on his way through the confusion of spears and the fighting,  
 4 and came to where Aineias was, and renowned Achilles.  
 5 There quickly he drifted a mist across the eyes of one fighter,  
 6 Achilles, Peleus' son, and from the shield of Aineias  
 7 of the great heart pulled loose the strong bronze-headed ash spear  
 8 and laid it down again before the feet of Achilles  
 9 (*Iliad* XX, 318–324)

10  
 11 For the aggressor, this mist that — when victory seems to be already  
 12 certain — subtracts the body of the aggressed from certain death, is  
 13 immediately a sign, an invisible trace, that the opponent enjoys the  
 14 favour of the gods. For instance, after that mist has allowed Poseidon to  
 15 have a sort of theatrical *à part* with Aeneas, this is what happens in the  
 16 battlefield:

17  
 18 He spoke, and left him there, when he had told him all this,  
 19 and at once scattered the mist away from the eyes of Achilles  
 20 that the gods had sent, and now he looked with his eyes, and saw largely,  
 21 and in disgust spoke then to his own great-hearted spirit:  
 22 “Can this be? Here is a strange thing I see with my own eyes.  
 23 Here is my spear lying on the ground, but I can no longer  
 24 see the man, whom I was charging in fury to kill him.  
 25 Aineias was then one beloved of the immortal  
 26 Gods. I thought what he said was ineffectual boasting.  
 27 (*Iliad* XX, 340–348)

28  
 29 Indeed, Achilles is right to complain, since, always in the twentieth book,  
 30 during the fight against Hector, one reads that:

31  
 32 [...] Meanwhile Achilles  
 33 made a furious charge against him, raging to kill him  
 34 with a terrible cry, but Phoibos Apollo caught up Hektor  
 35 easily, since he was a god, and wrapped him in thick mist.  
 36 Three times swift-footed brilliant Achilles swept in against him  
 37 with the brazen spear. Three times his stroke went into the deep mist.  
 38 (*Iliad* XX, 441–446)

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sometimes used for the mist that covers the eyes when someone dies. This lexical variation should be the object of further investigation.

1  
2 If mist is the ‘special effect’ per antonomasia of the *Iliad*, some variants  
3 of it are also noteworthy. In the fifth book, for instance, Hephaestus  
4 saves Idaios from the black Moira in the way that follows:

5  
6       Even so he could not have escaped the black death-spirit  
7       but Hephaistos caught him away and rescued him, shrouded in darkness,  
8       that the aged man might not be left altogether desolate.  
9       (*Iliad* V, 22–24)

10  
11 Moreover, always in the long passage on the deeds of Diomedes, one  
12 reads that:

13  
14       Now in this place Aineias lord of men might have perished  
15       had not Aphrodite, Zeus’ daughter, been quick to perceive him,  
16       his mother, who had borne him to Anchises the ox-herd;  
17       and about her beloved son came streaming her white arms,  
18       and with her white robe thrown in a fold in front she shielded him,  
19       this keeping off the thrown weapons lest some fast-mounted Danaan  
20       strike the bronze spear through his chest and strip the life from him.  
21       (*Iliad* V, 311–7)

22  
23  
24 This is an elegant version of the classic ‘being tied to one’s mother’s  
25 apron-strings’. Unfortunately, though, unlike the saints or the virgins  
26 *matamoros* or *mataindios* of the Christian pantheon, the Olympic gods  
27 who intervene in the battlefield expose themselves to the risks of the  
28 mortals (Dietrich 1983; Piettre 1996): Aphrodite, wounded in the wrist  
29 by Diomedes, lets Aeneas fall, but he is subsequently grasped by Apollo,  
30 who again hides him:

31  
32       She gave a great shriek and let fall her son she was carrying,  
33       but Phoibos Apollo caught him up and away in his own hands,  
34       in a dark mist, for fear that some fast-mounted Danaan  
35       might strike the bronze spear through his chest and strip the life from him.  
36       (*Iliad* V, 343–346)  
37

1 In the *Odyssey*<sup>3</sup> mist appears as a figure of dissimulation, but in other  
 2 narrative contexts, relating not only to the theme of the explicit danger  
 3 of aggression from enemies, but also to the implicit danger of hostility  
 4 from strangers. In the seventh book, for instance, mist protects  
 5 Odysseus from the potentially adverse curiosity of the Phaeacians  
 6 (Vernant 1999: 97):

7  
 8       Just then Odysseus got up to go to the city. Athena poured  
 9       much mist about him, with dear thoughts for Odysseus,  
 10       lest any great-hearted Phaeacian, meeting him,  
 11       might taunt him with words and ask him who he was.  
 12       (*Odyssey* VII, 14–17)

13  
 14 This modality of the invisible returns in the thirteenth book, when  
 15 Odysseus goes back to the “land of the fathers”, but is ambiguous  
 16 (Giardino 2003): on the one hand, indeed, one reads that:

17  
 18       [...]Then divine Odysseus awoke  
 19       from sleeping in his fatherland, but did not recognize it,  
 20       since he'd been so long away. For goddess Pallas Athena,  
 21       Zeus's daughter, had poured mist around him so she could  
 22       make him unrecognizable and tell him every thing,  
 23       so his wife would not recognize him, or his townsmen and friends,  
 24       before all the suitors paid for their transgressions.  
 25       (*Odyssey* XIII, 187–193)

26  
 27 On the other hand, though, this mist that allows Odysseus not to be  
 28 recognized is such that he himself cannot recognize his land, at least  
 29 until when, as one reads at the following verse (*Odyssey* XIII, 352: “So  
 30 saying, the goddess scattered the mist and the land appeared.” Later, in  
 31 the thirty-third book, it is Athena again who, “covered them in night  
 32 and led them quickly from the city” (*Odyssey* XIII, 372), allowing  
 33 Odysseus and his companions to egress the city, unseen.

34       Reading later texts, like Euripides's tragedies, for instance, one has  
 35 the impression that, in the poetical *imaginaire* of the early Greek

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<sup>3</sup> Homer *Odyssey*. Trans. Huddleston, James, available at  
[www.library.northwestern.edu](http://www.library.northwestern.edu)



1 civilization, camouflage was thought as possible because the structure of  
 2 space — and in particular that of the ether filling such space — was  
 3 conceived in a way closer to that of contemporary physics than to that of  
 4 the present-day common sense, which is essentially modelled after  
 5 Newton’s physics. By adopting a metaphor coined by Deleuze and  
 6 Guattari, one might claim that, in many cases, the gods of ancient Greece  
 7 succeeded in dissimulating the presence of human bodies not as much  
 8 by altering their visual structure, but by taking advantage of the ravines  
 9 of an ether imagined not as smooth, but as striped, as full of folds  
 10 (Deleuze, Guattari 1980).

11 In Euripides’s *Helen*, for instance, a text that in many respects is  
 12 centred on the theme of the uncanny disappearance of a body, the servant  
 13 reveals to Menelaus: “Your wife has disappeared / taken up into the folds  
 14 of the unseen air [...]” (*Helen* 605–606). This revelation is confirmed by  
 15 Helen herself: “Hermes caught me up in the folds of the air and / hid me  
 16 in a cloud” (*Helen* 44–45). One finds the same expression in *Orestes*,  
 17 where again it associates the dissimulation of a body with the interlace  
 18 between erotic desire and desire of death: Apollo indeed says to Orestes:  
 19 “Helen, whom all thy eagerness failed to destroy, / when thou wert  
 20 seeking to anger Menelaus, / is here as ye see in the enfolding air, /  
 21 rescued from death instead of slain by thee” (*Orestes* 1629–1632).

22 In the following centuries numerous texts kept reproducing the  
 23 figurative paths of invisibility already distilled by the early Greek  
 24 civilization. Apollonius Rhodius, for instance, in the third book of the  
 25 *Argonautica*, shaped the relation between protecting divinity and  
 26 protected humanity, potentially hostile strangeness and dissimulating  
 27 mist, in keeping with the Homeric model:

28  
 29 Now as the heroes went through the city,  
 30 Hera, with friendly intent, shed a thick mist on them  
 31 that they might reach the house of Aetes,  
 32 then again did Hera disperse the cloud.  
 33 (*Argonautica* III, 210-213)

34  
 35  
 36  
 37

### 3. Resemblance and the Latin camouflage

1 The same *imaginaire* characterizes the Latin culture, too, where human  
 2 beings also often disappear, frequently in hostile circumstances, thanks  
 3 to a benevolent god. For instance in the famous ode, the seventh of the  
 4 second book of the *Carmina*, where Horace half seriously and half  
 5 wittily remembers that:

6  
 7 With you beside me I experienced Philippi and its headlong rout, leaving my  
 8 little shield behind without much credit, when valour was broken and  
 9 threatening warriors ignominiously bit the dust. I, however, was swiftly caught  
 10 up by Mercury in a thick cloud and carried trembling through the enemy's ranks,  
 11 whereas you were sucked back into war by the current and borne away by the  
 12 seething tide. (Horace, *Carmina* II, vii, 9–16)

13  
 14 There are also cases in which Latin texts imagine the invisibility of the  
 15 body in quite original a way in comparison with Greek texts. Three  
 16 differences are particularly noteworthy. First, besides the episodes in  
 17 which a god dissimulates the body of a human, for instance in the  
 18 battlefield, one comes across episodes in which, on the contrary, it is the  
 19 disappearance of the body of a human to indicate his divine nature. In the  
 20 first book of Livy's *Roman History*, for instance, the disappearing of  
 21 Romulus's body in front of his army is evoked as follows:

22  
 23 Having accomplished these works deserving of immortality, while he was holding  
 24 an assembly of the people for reviewing his army, in the plain near the Goat's  
 25 pool, a storm suddenly came on, accompanied by loud thunder and lightning,  
 26 and enveloped the king in so dense a mist, that it entirely hid him from the sight  
 27 of the assembly. After this Romulus was never seen again upon earth. (Livy,  
 28 *Roman History* I, 15)

29  
 30 Second, in some narratives camouflage is no longer the outcome of  
 31 divine activity but the result of human behaviour, not the unexpected  
 32 intervention of a *numen* in the scuffle of the fight but an artfully  
 33 arranged war tactic. It is maybe not a coincidence that the clearest  
 34 example of this Latin humanization of the Greek camouflage can be  
 35 found in the second book of Silius Italicus's *Punica*, a work that, in  
 36 many respects, contaminates the genre of the Homeric poem with that of  
 37 the war chronicle. The passage recounting the duel between Theron and  
 38 the queen Asbyte reads as follows:  
 39

1           When the princess saw him rushing on with bloodstained weapon, she made her  
 2           horses swerve aside; and thus, evading him by wheeling to the left, she cleaves  
 3           the plain and flies like a bird over the curving field, showing him the back of her  
 4           chariot. And, while she vanished from his sight, and the hoofs of her horses,  
 5           galloping swifter than the wind, raised a cloud of dust on the field, her crashing  
 6           wheels crushed the opposing ranks far and wide; and the maiden launched spear  
 7           after spear upon them in their confusion. (Silius Italicus, *Punica* II, 169–176)

8  
 9           Silius Italicus is a sort of Quentin Tarantino of Latin literature and his  
 10          description of this technique of camouflage is almost cinematographic:  
 11          the queen, run after by Theron, pretends to move leftwards, then  
 12          suddenly wheels rightwards, and, dissimulated by the dust raised by her  
 13          own horses, hits the enemy, unexpectedly. It is not hazardous that this  
 14          *ante litteram* war camouflage is attributed to a woman, and it is not  
 15          hazardous either that, unlike divine camouflage, which spares a certain  
 16          death to those who benefit from it, human camouflage — this slanted  
 17          and dissimulating gait across the battlefield — is not rewarded but, on  
 18          the contrary, succumbs to the direct and manifest ardour of the male  
 19          warrior. Thrown off the chariot by her own horses frightened at the  
 20          sight of Theron's zoomorphic headgear, Asbyte gets killed by a blow of  
 21          club on her head, and the fragments of her smashed brain spread on the  
 22          wheels and on the bridled reins. Then the killer further rages on the  
 23          victim, beheading her with the queen's own axe and impaling her head  
 24          on a pike, in perfect *pulp* style.

25          Third, it is in the first centuries of the Christian era that, first in the  
 26          Latin culture, then in the Hellenistic one, camouflage as a modality of  
 27          the invisible is increasingly associated with magic-medical practices.  
 28          However, what connotation the texts of this era attribute to such  
 29          practices is brilliantly exemplified by the way in which Pliny the Elder,  
 30          in the twenty-eighth book of his *Natural History*, deals with the magic  
 31          properties of the chameleon. Pliny writes as follows:

32  
 33                To these animals we shall annex some others that are equally foreign, and very  
 34                similar in their properties. To begin then with the chameleon, which Democritus  
 35                has considered worthy to be made the subject of an especial work, and each  
 36                part of which has been consecrated to some particular purpose. This book, in  
 37                fact, has afforded me no small amusement, revealing as it does, and exposing the  
 38                lies and frivolities of the Greeks. (Pliny the Elder, *Natural History* XXVIII, 112)

39

1 It is in this context that Pliny reveals that, always according to Demo-  
2 critus,

3  
4 the left foot is sometimes burnt in a furnace with the plant which also has the  
5 name of “chameleon”, and is then made up, with some unguent, into lozenges;  
6 and that these lozenges, kept in a wooden vessel, have the effect, if we choose to  
7 believe him, of making their owner invisible to others. (*Natural History* XXVIII,  
8 115–116)

9  
10 Another example of the discredit that Pliny bestows upon pre-existent  
11 beliefs on invisibility and camouflage is in the thirty-seventh book,  
12 devoted to gems and precious stones. Here the encyclopaedic Latin  
13 author, after having thoroughly described the quality of the helio-  
14 tropium, adds:

15  
16 In the use of this stone, also, we have a most glaring illustration of the impudent  
17 effrontery of the adepts in magic, for they say that, if it is combined with the plant  
18 heliotropium, and certain incantations are then repeated over it, it will render the  
19 person invisible who carries it about him.<sup>4</sup> (*Natural History* XXXVII, 165)

20  
21 Pliny’s scepticism *vis-à-vis* the magic properties of both the chameleon  
22 and the heliotropium witnesses to the affirmation of a new naturalistic  
23 paradigm, in the frame of which the possibility that humans may  
24 magically absorb the invisibility of other living species is increasingly  
25 disbelieved. However, both the pre-naturalistic superstitions about  
26 camouflage and their naturalistic refutation indicate how, in the early  
27 civilizations, the human dream of becoming invisible to other humans,  
28 mainly in order to take advantage from this invisibility in the battlefield,  
29 was inspired by the observation of natural elements, such as animals,  
30 plants, or minerals, reputed as able to display, in certain circumstances  
31 — and mostly in situations of danger — a perfect resemblance to the  
32 environment.

33 The reputation of the chameleon and the heliotropium as  
34 instruments of perfect camouflage survived Pliny’s criticism, or was  
35 even strengthened by it. Rabelais mentions the former means of  
36 invisibility in the fifth book of *Gargantua*, whereas Dante quotes the

---

<sup>4</sup> The magic papyri, indeed, often contain formulae of this kind. See *The Greek Magical Papyri* VII, 620–622 and XIII, 235–237. Compare also Phillips 2009.

1 latter in the twenty-fourth book of the *Inferno*: “Among this cruel and  
 2 most dismal throng / people were running naked and affrighted. /  
 3 Without the hope of hole or heliotrope” (Dante Alighieri, *Inferno* XXIV,  
 4 91-93).

5 However, Pliny’s scepticism toward the magic practices of  
 6 camouflage indelibly marked their reputation, which afterwards was  
 7 further discredited by the first Christian Fathers: faced with the renewed  
 8 outbreak of magic in the Hellenistic era, texts such as Pseudo-Clement’s  
 9 *Recognitions* or Hippolytus’s *Refutation of All Heresies* ridicule the  
 10 expedients of Simon Magus or those of other ‘despicable’ illusionists of  
 11 the first Christian era.<sup>5</sup>

#### 14 4. Conclusions

15  
 16 From this rapid exploration of different cultures across several  
 17 centuries the following conclusion can be drawn: from a certain point of  
 18 view, the *imaginaire* of camouflage in the Graeco-Roman civilization  
 19 appears as similar to that characterizing most present-day cultures.  
 20 First, in both cases camouflage is a modality of the invisible, a modality  
 21 of perfect resemblance with the environment, often modelled after the  
 22 ‘invisibility’ of other natural elements. Second, in both cases this  
 23 modality is mostly against someone (and often in protection of someone  
 24 else). In other words, the semiotic practice of camouflage immediately  
 25 implies the constitution of a subject and an anti-subject aiming at a

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<sup>5</sup> The following example may suffice here: “But putting a skull on the ground, they make it speak in this manner. The skull itself is made out of the caul of an ox; and when fashioned into the requisite figure, by means of Etruscan wax and prepared gum, (and) when this membrane is placed around, it presents the appearance of a skull, which seems to all to speak when the contrivance operates; in the same manner as we have explained in the case of the (attendant) youths, when, having procured the windpipe of a crane, or some such long-necked animal, and attaching it covertly to the skull, the accomplice utters what he wishes. And when he desires (the skull) to become invisible, he appears as if burning incense, placing around, (for this purpose,) a quantity of coals; and when the wax catches the heat of these, it melts, and in this way the skull is supposed to become invisible”; Hippolytus, *Refutation of All Heresies*, IV, 106–107.

1 common object of value. From this point of view, then, camouflage is  
 2 *ipso facto* a narrativisation of the invisible (Vernant 2007[1983]). Third,  
 3 this narrativisation is not based on the disappearing of the object, or  
 4 merely on its occultation, as it is the case in other modalities of the  
 5 invisible. It is based, on the contrary, on the opaqueness of the object  
 6 while it is present to vision, and sometimes also to the other senses.  
 7 This opaqueness implies as such a certain modicum of transparency.

8 As regards the first point, camouflage can be defined as that modality  
 9 of the invisible in which invisibility is not absolute, but relative to the  
 10 relation between an invisible entity, an environment, and a viewer. It is  
 11 only when an entity looks to a viewer as perfectly resembling an  
 12 environment that camouflage is achieved. Change the entity, or the  
 13 environment, or the viewer, and the camouflage effect might vanish as a  
 14 result. This is the reason for which, both in human and non-human  
 15 instances, camouflage is adaptive: it does not guarantee a priori  
 16 invisibility, but invisibility as the reversal of a semiotic relation. If in  
 17 semiosis an entity is conceived of as the representamen of an object  
 18 through an interpretant, in camouflage the relation between the entity  
 19 and the object is interrupted: given the right combination of the  
 20 invisible entity, the environment, and the viewer, the entity ceases to be  
 21 the representamen of an object to the viewer and is simply perceived and  
 22 conceived of as a representamen of the environment.

23 Furthermore, if it is true that — as some historians of culture  
 24 claim — human beings developed their semiotic skills in hunting, and  
 25 mainly as a consequence of the need of deciphering the traces of fleeing  
 26 preys (Ginzburg 1986), it might be also true that human beings  
 27 developed their inverted semiotic skills — that is, their ability to  
 28 interrupt the semiotic salience of a certain entity in relation to its  
 29 environment — by observing the way in which non-human preys seek  
 30 to escape their predators. It is for this reason that narrative texts of  
 31 ancient civilisations about invisibility are significant: they might  
 32 represent a trace of the passage between the observation of camouflage  
 33 as a natural semiotic behaviour and the production of camouflage as a  
 34 cultural semiotic technique.

35 As regards the second point, and in keeping with the first one,  
 36 although ancient authors often refer to the invisibility properties of  
 37 mist, fog, night, etc., it is more likely that the first camouflage

1 techniques might have been learned from the observation of other living  
2 beings (for instance, those referred to by Plutarch in his *Moralia*). It is  
3 in the camouflage of plants or animals, indeed, that probably human  
4 beings first came across the same fundamental narrative structure that  
5 characterises all human conflict: the presence of two agencies that  
6 compete over the same object and therefore over the same value. The  
7 anthropology of René Girard has mainly focused on the way in which  
8 human beings develop mimetic behaviours upon their competition over  
9 objects of value, and actually attribute social value to an object as a  
10 result of such mimetic competition (Girard 1978). However, studying  
11 the way in which camouflage was turned from natural behaviour into  
12 cultural technique might reveal that the mimetic dimension concerns  
13 not only the aggressive relation among predators competing over the  
14 same prey, but also the defensive relation between the prey and the  
15 environment: if mimetic competition among subjective agencies of  
16 predation brings about the social value of a prey, mimetic camouflage  
17 with the environment seeks to annihilate the salience of the prey in the  
18 eyes of its potential predators.

19 On the other hand, if cross-cultural similarities can be hypothesised  
20 in the frame of the biosemiotics of camouflage, differences must be  
21 accounted for in the frame of the cultural semiotics of camouflage,  
22 mainly as regards invisibility as a domain of relation between humans  
23 and deities across different civilisations. First of all, whereas in the  
24 contemporary *imaginaire* of war a perfect camouflage is sought for with  
25 great effort as a means of valuable defence or effective attack against the  
26 enemy, in the Graeco-Roman culture the fact of dissimulating one's  
27 presence when confronting the enemy is not at all a sign of heroism,  
28 quite the opposite. It is the gods' prerogative, instead, according to times  
29 and ways that escape any human control, to hide the human body in the  
30 battlefield or in other potentially hostile situations in order to protect it  
31 from dangers. Second, whereas numerous ancient texts mention magic-  
32 medical practices suitable to obtain a perfect camouflage, the advent of  
33 naturalism and that of Christianity inaugurated a long period — one  
34 might say from Simon Magus until the Invisible Man — in which the  
35 power of appearing and disappearing at one's will was uniquely  
36 reserved for saints and virgins (Leone 2010). But this is a topic that  
37 deserves further elaboration and a different paper.

1  
2  
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 31 edition from Paris: Flammarion.]  
 32  
 33

### 34 Сходство и камуфляж во времена античности

36 Плиний Старший утверждает в 28-ой части своей книги *Naturalis*  
 37 *Historia*, что если левую ногу хамелеона испечь с растением, имею-  
 38 щим название «хамелеон», и все это перемешать с мазью, порезать на  
 39 кусочки и поместить в деревянной коробочке, то это предоставит  
 40 владельцу этой коробочки прекрасное средство камуфляжа. Кольцо  
 41 Гигеса (у Платона и др.), кольцо Мидаса (у Плиния), гелиотроп (у  
 42 Плиния), *dracontitis* (у Филострата) — античная культура предлагает

1 множество примеров объектов, рецептов и техник, которые обещают  
 2 невидимость различного вида, что в свою очередь дает возможность  
 3 совершенно слиться с окружающей средой. С другой стороны, те же  
 4 культуры полны примеров того, как избежать совершенного камуфляжа: например будучи вооруженным двойным зрачком (*pupula duplex* у Овидия).

7 В статье рассматривается соответствующий тематический корпус  
 8 текстов с точки зрения семиотики культуры, с целью обнаружения  
 9 истоков концепции камуфляжа, которые, возникнув в древних  
 10 культурах и преобразуясь в промежутке, развились в современные  
 11 представления (и практики) невидимости.

12 Более общая цель статьи — понять, каким образом разные  
 13 культуры развивали идею невидимости. Зачастую она основывалась  
 14 на наблюдаемом сходстве других живых существ и их мест обитания.  
 15 Древние тексты рассматриваются с точки зрения того, каким обра-  
 16 зом переход от камуфляжа как адаптивного поведения в природе  
 17 перешло в понятие камуфляжа как эффективной стратегии борьбы.

### 18 **Sarnasus ja kamuflaaž kreeka-romaa antiigis**

19  
 20  
 21 Plinius Vanem väidab oma raamatu *Naturalis Historia* kahekümne kahek-  
 22 sandas osas, et kui kameeleoni vasak jalg küpsetada koos taimega, mis  
 23 kannab samuti kameeleoni nime, ning kõik see segada võidega, lõigata  
 24 tükkideks ning säilitada väikeses puust karbikeses, siis võimaldab see  
 25 karbi omanikule ideaalset kamuflaaži. Gygese sõrmus (Platonil jt.), Mi-  
 26 dase sõrmus (Pliniusel), heliotroop (Pliniusel), *dracontitis* (Filostratosel):  
 27 antiik-kultuurid pakuvad rikkalikke näiteid objektidest, retseptidest ja  
 28 tehnikatest, mis võimaldavad erinevat liiki nähtamatust, mis omakorda  
 29 annab võimaluse täiuslikuks sarnasuseks keskkonnaga. Teisalt, needsa-  
 30 mad kultuurid kubisevad viidetest sellele, kuidas vältida täiuslikku kamu-  
 31 flaaži: näiteks olles varustatud topeltpupilliga (*pupula duplex* Ovidius).

32 Artikkel uurib vastavat temaatilist tekstikorpust kultuurisemiootika  
 33 vaatepunktist, otsides kamuflaaži kontseptsiooni algallikaid, seda, kuidas  
 34 viimased on iidsetest kultuuridest peale keerukaid teid läbides arenenud  
 35 kaasaegseteks nähtamatuse *imaginaariumideks* (ja praktikateks).

36 Artikli üldisem eesmärk on mõista viise, kuidas kultuurid on arenda-  
 37 nud arusaamu nähtamatusest, mille eesmärgiks on saavutada täiuslik  
 38 sarnasus inimeste ja nende keskkonna vahel. Sellised arusaamad on sageli  
 39 põhinenud tähelepanekutel teiste elusolendite ja nende elupaikade sarna-

1 suse kohta. Keskendun antiikkultuuri tekstidele, selleks, et mõista, kuidas  
2 on toimunud üleminek kamuflaažilt kui adaptiivselt käitumiselt looduses  
3 kamuflaažile kui efektiivsele võitlusstrateegiale.  
4  
5