



Shield of Achilles

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Plot of the Iliad



"Μῆνιν ἄειδε θεὰ Πηληϊάδεω Ἀχιλῆος"

"Rage – Goddess, sing the rage of Achilles"¹

Some two thousand years ago a bard would be standing in the middle of a theatre. He would sing the best epic he knew, the famous Iliad of Homer! He would sing of the Greek army coming over to Troy to conquer the town and rescue Helena, the most beautiful woman in the world. He would sing of the rage of Achilles, the great hero of the Greeks.

Achilleus is young, handsome and the most brilliant fighter of them all. He is born as son of a goddess, Thetis, and a mortal man. But it is predicted that either he will die in his early years as an outstanding hero or he will live a long life at home as a nobody. Being offended by the Greek commander, however, Achilleus refuses to fight. But he allows Patroklos, his closest friend, to dress in his own armour and join the battle. But there arrives Hektor, the proud leader of the Trojans – he kills Patroklos and takes the armour off.

Now Achilleus' anger turns to sheer rage – further he has no other aim than to murder Hektor for having killed his beloved friend! But how is he to do so? – He has no armour, since it all has been taken. While Achilleus is weeping on the beach in grief and anger, his mother, the goddess Thetis, arrives. And she climbs Mount Olympus to find Hephaistos, the gifted smith of the gods. She asks him to forge new armour for her son. And Hephaistos takes tin, bronze, silver and gold to shape new armour. As a masterpiece he forms a broad shield and decorates it with marvellous pictures.

In his striking new armour Achilleus enters the battlefield and conquers them all. The Trojans escape into town and close all the gates – outside remains only Hektor. Furious Achilleus hurries over and kills Hektor unforgivingly. Then he commits the most dreadful sacrilege – he drags the dead body three times around the grave of Patroklos and leaves it alone - exposed to the flies!

This breach of honour and convention enrages the Gods and they command that the outrage be stopped. Also they send a messenger to Hektor's father, the Trojan king, to lead him through the Greek camp, while all the soldiers are asleep, to the tent of Achilleus. And Hektor's father implores Achilleus, to release his dead son. Achilleus' heart melts and he returns Hektor's body to be buried back in Troy with all due honours.

¹ Ilias I/1

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Shield as Art



And the bard sings of Achilles' tremendous Shield...

Hephaistos forges the Shield and decorates it with various pictures – you see them coming to life, since the little figures, human beings as well as animals, start to act, to move, to fight. Nine times he creates a different scene, and each has its own content, its own meaning. Hephaistos starts with the world, forms two cities and adds three pictures of agriculture or two of animal farming. Thereafter he creates a wonderful dancing scene and completes his work with an image of the Ocean.

The interpretation of all those scenes is not easy. Already in the eighteenth century the German writer Ephraim Lessing stated that with his "Shield", Homer had undermined all the limits between poetry and painting²! Since that sharp-witted paper the "Shield" is presumed to be the embodiment of an elaborate description of art. Many historians have been dealing since then with the singular contents of the pictures on the Shield, most of them without recognizing any sense in it.

Today we click on Google, or better, ask Wikipedia; on the topic it says, that the Shield of Achilles could be read in different ways, such as

- simply a physical reduction of the entire world; or
- a series of contrasts, as war and peace, work and festival; or
- a calm before an imminent danger to underline the brutality of war."³

In its final conclusion it points out: "The passage describing the 'Shield' is an early example of Ekphrasis"⁴ Now, what's this? Again Wikipedia: "Ekphrasis ..., [means] an often dramatic description of a visual work of art."⁵

There we are! The Shield seems to be nothing but a work of art!

² Gotthold Ephraim Lessing: Laokoon. Oder: Über die Grenzen der Malerei und Poesie. 1766

³ Wikipedia "Shield of Achilles"

⁴ Wikipedia "Shield of Achilles"

⁵ Wikipedia "Ekphrasis"

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Missing Gorgon



To take revenge for his beloved friend, Achilles needs new armour, the best existing.

His rival, the offending commander of the Greeks, Agamemnon, owns the most prestigious armour. On his shield glares "the Gorgon's grim mask – with burning eyes"⁶, the bloody head of the Gorgon Medusa with twisted snakes in place of hair. And Herakles, the greatest hero ever, also holds "the head of a dreadful monster, the Gorgon"⁷ on his shield.

A shield is made to protect its bearer from sword strokes, but better still to ward off any attacks: frightening symbols should discourage any enemy. Used for this purpose are the eagle, bull, wolf, scorpion and moreover, again and again the Gorgon.

Nothing of all this will show up on the Shield of Achilles. We see the sky; we see the world with cities and fields, but nothing to be really frightened of. So what's the use of all that strange scenery on the Shield?

We should not forget that Homer is called the master of allegories. Up to eight hundred human names are mentioned in the Iliad. Homer tries to give most of them a personal face. Therefore he compares them with all kind of creatures, with huge animals like the bull or tiny like the fly, with strong animals like the lion or gentle like the sheep. And he compares their struggling between life and death with wind and weather, thunder and lightning, fire and flame, and blood flowing like a mountain spring.

⁶ Iliad XI/32

⁷ (former Hesiod) Shield of Heracles 139/230

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Reading the Shield



The description of the Shield is at the same time ingenious and inconsistent.

It does not read like a myth or a fable, since there is no story and no moral. And also it does not appear like a parable or allegory, since all kinds of elements are mixed, deities, humans, animals and hard facts, and anything will fit together. Why, for instance, are two of the three cities unnamed, if the third bears the name of an existing city, Knossos? Now, are they allegories or real cities? Why do we discover a vineyard surrounded by wall and trench? And who needs four herdsmen and nine dogs for just one herd?

I have always had the impression that the Shield wanted to relate a certain message. I started to search, to seek out parallels between Achilleus' Shield and other parts of Homer's Iliad. And I made a find! In the first, a city council is judging a man for having killed a citizen. There are four parallels in the Iliad, and to my surprise, they all refer to one place, to Achilleus' birthplace Phthia! And furthermore: in the same city manifold wedding celebrations take place. I found three references in the Iliad, but all three are linked with Phthia, without exception!

If we compare this fact with Achilleus' destiny, we will notice the striking correlation:

[Quote] "My mother told me my twofold fate:
If I stay to fight, my return will be lost, but my fame will last forever;
If I return, my fame will be lost, but my life will last much longer."⁸

Achilleus finds himself between two worlds, between his homeland Phthia and the battlefield of Troy! This allocation makes sense; the first peaceful city with its festivities corresponds to Phthia, the second embattled city to Troy. Herewith we find the first indication, that the description of the Shield is closely linked with the plot of the Iliad.

Now I went through the entire contents of the Shield, comparing every single detail with the text of Homer's epics, the Iliad and the Odyssey! Over time I noticed, that for reliable results I had to go back to the original text. The Greek language has a large vocabulary with a wide range of expressions. Homer uses the refinements of his language in an accurate way. This enables us to trace specific words and in that way to follow Homer's train of thought.

⁸ Iliad IX/410 [summarized]

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Nine pictures on the Shield



Working on the text of the Shield, I found different layers of meaning.

In particular, I noticed that the impression of bright serenity is deceptive, in that the view of housing and farming represented only the outer aspect, a nicely arranged cover. Under the cover I found all the hardship of a warrior's life. Let us now go through the full range of the nine pictures, which are shown on the Shield.

In the **First Picture**, the center circle, Hephaistos forms the whole universe: "He made the Earth and ... the Sky, and the Sea"⁹. This of course strikingly evokes the Genesis of our Bible: "In the beginning, God created the Heavens and the Earth." Hephaistos is seen here as the Creator of the world – but on a small scale! This fact suggests, that something important will arise.

Hephaistos also installs some famous stars and constellations such as "the Pleiades, ... and the Bear, which men also call the Wain". An absolutely identical longer passage is to be found in the Odyssey,

⁹ Iliad XVIII/483

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describing how Odysseus is sailing through the night and watching the stars¹⁰. It implies, that the Iliad and the Odyssey are closely interconnected. But, what is of greater importance, it shows, that Hephaistos depicts one of the best-known constellations, which serves as a benchmark for navigation. Here also is pointed out that the Shield serves as a kind of compass.

In the **Second Picture**, third circle from the center, Hephaistos forms two cities, one living in peace, the other at war.

– In **One City** brides are prepared for weddings; women are glancing and boys are dancing. In the market wise old men are judging a refugee who has killed a citizen. – Now, as mentioned before, this city represents Achilles' hometown, Phthia, his far away place of desire. But the weddings will not happen, since the young men are beyond the sea and will probably never return.

– The **Other City** in wartime, reminds us, of course, of Troy. Two armies lie outside the gates; children and old men observe from the walls. This scenery has a close parallel in the Iliad, when Greeks and Trojans try to decide the outcome of the war through a duel – but the attempt fails. On the Shield now one army rushes out to the fields and kills two shepherds; the other army arrives and everything ends in a dreadful slaughter. This reminds us of Patroklos and thereafter Achilles joining in the fights; the resulting battle with all its atrocity fills one whole book of the Iliad!

The next three **Pictures**, counter-clockwise around the outer circle, show us different agricultural scenes:

So in the **Third picture**, at lower right, we see men ploughing a field three times, and the earth turns to black. – We find a reference in the Iliad: "Three times they drove their chariots round the body ... and the sand grew wet with tears."¹¹. The ploughs are compared to the war chariots of the Greeks in honour of Patroklos. The peaceful scenery turns out to be the calm of a grave; the earth blackens due to the blood of the victims...

In the **Fourth Picture** appears an estate with reapers; the grain falls in rows. – In the Iliad we find: "Like reapers slashing down the reaping rows, ... so Greeks and Trojans slashed into each other"¹². Homer compares the fighters with reapers cutting grain. Nowadays the personified Death is called "the grim reaper". Also the fourth picture turns out to be a metaphor of war and fighting.

The **Fifth Picture** shows a vineyard, strangely enough with wall and trench, and young people carrying dark grapes. – The Iliad states: "The Greeks threw up towering walls for ships and troops, outside the wall they dug an enormous trench to guard"¹³. And close by: "Greeks lie dead, their dark blood spoiled ... So gather up, and near the ships we burn the bodies"¹⁴. The vineyard represents the fortified ship camp of the Greeks and the collecting and burning of the fallen soldiers.

Now we have two pictures showing animal farming:

In the **Sixth Picture** two lions attack a bull in a herd of cattle; four herdsmen and nine dogs can't help. – In the Iliad frequently heroes are compared to lions, and their victims to cattle. So Hektor, "like a murderous lion"¹⁵, and his fellow, "with the pride of a lion"¹⁶, attack and kill Patroklos. Thereafter Greeks and Trojans tear the dead body like "a huge bull, for stretching the beast's skin"¹⁷. The picture on the Shield shows Patroklos as bull in the midst of the Greek cattle, attacked by the two Trojan lions.

If Greeks appear as cattle, the herdsmen must be gods. And four gods indeed, as the Iliad tells us, – Hera, Athena, Poseidon and Hermes – are desperate to help, since Zeus, the king of heaven, is not willing to "permit a single god to save the Greeks"¹⁸! So they have no other choice but to abandon

¹⁰ Iliad XVIII/486; Odyssey V/269

¹¹ Iliad XXIII/13

¹² Iliad XI/67

¹³ Iliad VII/436

¹⁴ Iliad VII/328

¹⁵ Iliad XV/630

¹⁶ Iliad XVII/20

¹⁷ Iliad XVII/389

¹⁸ Iliad XV/72

Patroklos¹⁹. Nine Greek fighters instead try to defend his body²⁰ – they are barking like nine intimidated dogs.

The short description of the **Seventh Picture** shows a flock of sheep near their stable. Homer uses cattle to depict the Greeks, whereas the Trojans are portrayed as a "flock of sheep in a wealthy farmers stable"²¹. From the context we understand that the wealthy farmer is none other than the king of Troy. The picture illustrates the end of the Iliad with the "funeral for Hektor in the house of Priamos"²².

In the **Eighth Picture** for the first time specific names are mentioned. To be seen is a circle, like Daidalos made once for Ariadne on Knossos, with young people dancing around, a bard and two acrobats in their midst. With its vitality this picture contrasts with all the previous ones. It leads to the future, and in my opinion it is the key to an understanding of the whole Shield.

Accurate references now are to be found in the Odyssey: "There is ... the city of Knossos, where Minos reigned"²³. King Minos is father of Ariadne, but also stepfather of Minotauros, a dreadful monster, part man-part bull. Minotauros dwells in a labyrinth, built by Daidalos, and has to be fed with human flesh. One of the victims kills the Minotauros, and falls in love with Ariadne. To celebrate the monster's extinction, they dance all together in a circle like on the Shield.

One other reference seems to be of great importance: "They were feasting all together, in their midst sang a bard and a pair of acrobats sprang, leading on the dance." The event in the Odyssey is none other than the "wedding-feast for Hermione, beautiful as Aphrodite! Helena had borne her; she was given to the son of Achilleus."²⁴ I think this is the key point: Helena's daughter is given to Achilleus' son! The offspring of the main players of the Iliad will open new paths.

In the Ninth Picture Hephaistos forges finally the Ocean running round the rim.

In the Odyssey again we find: "Once you have crossed the Ocean, ... go down to the dark house of Hades"²⁵. Beyond the ocean – and beyond the edge of the Shield – danger and death are waiting!

¹⁹ Iliad XX/33

²⁰ Iliad XVI/856 - XVII/377

²¹ Iliad IV/433

²² Iliad XXIV/802

²³ Odyssey XIX/172

²⁴ Odyssey IV/2

²⁵ Odyssey X/508

Shield as Mirror



On the Shield Hephaistos shows us the universe as seen from Mount Olympos.

We overlook the entire world with countries and towns, with humans and animals. This is to be understood by everybody. But there is also a hidden message, to be understood only by Achilles. The hero, being desperately stuck, finds here new rules of conduct.

Let's go back: In the second picture manifold terms of duality or split are to be found, as two cities, two men, two armies, two spies, as discrepancy or dispute, as conflict or confrontation. The picture presents the conquest of the Outer Enemy. – In the eighth picture in contrast terms of uniting or rounding appear, as joining hands, round dance, circle or wheel. But beforehand Daidalos and Ariadne are mentioned, guard and sister of Monotauros, the monster to be killed. The picture presents the overcoming of the Inner Enemy, the consideration of one's shadow!

The Shield's purpose is to protect Achilles by calming down the rival – but above all by reflecting the hero's fate! As in a Mirror Achilles may find on the Shield the traces of his own life and also a way to overcome all his troubles. As we know, he succeeds – in handing over Hector's body to his father. But the real apotheosis will happen in a new age, when the son of Achilles gets married to the daughter of beautiful Helena, she being the cause of the Trojan War!

Achilleus' Shield is not intended as a piece of art, but as a mirror of the soul!

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