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THE UNBREAKABLE SHIELD:
THEMATICS OF *SAKOS* AND *ASPIS*

NATASHA BERSHADSKY

THIS STUDY ADDRESSES a long-standing question of a difference in the employment of the two most common epic words for “shield,” *aspis* and *sakos*. The two words, separately or in conjunction with their commonest formulaic epithets, are not interchangeable metrically. This fact may lead one to expect, in accordance with Parry’s law of economy, that the two words were identical in meaning and metrically complementary.¹ However, this is not the case. In the *Iliad*, the two words show great consistency in references to the shields of particular heroes:² Achilles has *sakos* seventeen times, *aspis* once; Ajax always has *sakos* (twenty-two times); so does Antilochus (four times). Diomedes and Nestor have *aspides* (six and three times, respectively). Menelaus, Odysseus, and Patroclus are described at different points as having *sakos* or *aspis* (Menelaus has *sakos* three times, and three times he has *aspis*; and both Patroclus and Odysseus have *aspis* twice and *sakos* once); however, the same shield is almost never called both *sakos* and *aspis* in the same scene.³ Even more interestingly, Trojans almost never have *sakea*, either individually or as a class.⁴ Such distribution of the two words clearly suggests that there was a difference between them.⁵ Apparently, an operative convention in our *Iliad* dictates that *sakos* and not *aspis* is the word appropriate to designating the shields of Achilles and Ajax,⁶ and that *aspis* and not *sakos* is appropriate for any Trojan shield. What is the significance of this convention? Which qualities of a particular shield determine whether it is called *aspis* or *sakos*?

In the current scholarship, *aspis* and *sakos* are commonly described as a somewhat faded memory of two distinct shield types. Geoffrey Kirk’s

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1. Whallon 1969, 47. For the law of economy, see Parry 1971, 276.

2. Whallon 1969, 48; 1966, 13–14. See also Tayler 1913, 222–23; Gray 1947, 113; and Trümper 1950, 30–31.

3. Whallon 1966, 14; 1969, 48–49. The only two exceptions to this rule are the shield of Paris, called *sakos* in *Il.* 3.335, and *aspis* in 3.356, and the second shield of Achilles, called *aspis* in *Il.* 18.458, and *sakos* in 18.478 (and elsewhere). Both cases are discussed below.

4. The only two exceptions are *Il.* 3.335 (Paris) and 4.113. Tayler 1913, 223; Trümper 1950, 32.

5. Whallon 1966, 35.

6. Whallon 1969, 49.

Classical Philology 105 (2010): 1–24

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explanation is representative of this view: “σάκος and ἄσπις were originally different, the latter being πάντοσ’ ἔισην and therefore circular and the former being rectangular or figure-of-eight and made of ox-hides (cf. ἑπταβόειον etc.)”⁷ The line of reasoning that Kirk summarizes goes back to Dorothea Gray’s article on Homeric epithets.⁸ The key idea is that the commonest formulaic epithets of *sakos* and *aspis* provide particularly trustworthy information about their appearance at some past point of the epic’s development.⁹ Therefore, *aspis* is most often assumed to have been round and bossed, on the basis of its epithets πάντοσ’ ἔιση “evenly balanced,” εὔκυκλος “well-rounded,” and ὀμφαλόεσσα “having a boss.” The *sakos*, qualified by the epithets μέγα τε στιβαρόν τε “big and sturdy” and ἑπταβόειον “of seven bulls’ hides,” is supposed to have been a large shield constructed from layers of oxhide.¹⁰

After this picture has been extracted from the formulaic epithets of *aspis* and *sakos*, the next step is to explain Iliadic departures from the “original” appearance of the round *aspis* and body-shield *sakos*. There are famous instances in which the *aspis* is depicted as a huge body-shield: the description of the *aspis* of Hector, which is swung on his back and strikes his neck and ankles as he walks away (*Il.* 6.117–18), and a reference to an *aspis* of Periphetes that reaches his feet, and on whose rim Periphetes fatally stumbles (*Il.* 15.645–46).¹¹ Also surprising is a speech of Poseidon to the Greeks, in which *sakea* are visualized as being on the whole smaller than *aspides* (*Il.* 14.371–72, 376–77).¹² For those who believe in the original distinction in shape between the *aspis* and *sakos*, these instances are cases of a partial obsolescence of the traditional material inherited by the epic, which has resulted in numerous inconsistencies. The formulaic epithets, being more stable, are supposed to have retained the more archaic pattern; the individual elaborations of the shield motif, such as descriptions of particular shields, are thought to have departed much further from the original state.¹³

This account is problematic in several respects. The distinction between the “traditional” and “individual” in the epic, on which the reasoning is based, is misleading;¹⁴ the meaning of the epithets on the basis of which the inference about the shield form has been made is elusive;¹⁵ moreover, the fundamental assumption of the argument—that is, that different epithets applied

7. Kirk 1985, 315.

8. Gray 1947, 113–16, 119. For *aspis* as “originally” a round shield and *sakos* a body shield, see also Lorimer 1950, 187; Trümpp 1950, 34; Snell 1955, 1427–28; Stubbings 1963, 510; Ruijgh 1957, 94 (on *sakos*); Chantraine 1968, 126; 1977, 985; Frisk 1960, 168; 1970, 672; Janko 1992, 61; Drews 1993, 178, 179; Grethlein 2006, 169–70.

9. Gray 1947, 121. For a review of attempts to infer the shapes of *aspis* and *sakos* from their epithets, see Borchhardt 1977, E 2–4, E 45–46.

10. *Sakos* is cognate with Sanskrit *tvác-* “hide” and Hittite *tuekka-* “body.” See Frisk 1970, 672; Risch 1974, 79; Chantraine 1977, 985. On the semantic equation between “hide” and “body,” see Nagy’s discussion of *tvác-* and *tuekka-* (1990, 264–65).

11. Gray 1947, 120; Lorimer 1950, 181, 184; Trümpp 1950, 23; Stubbings 1963, 510, 511; Snell 1955, 1428–29; Snodgrass 1964, 258; Whallon 1966, 21; Borchhardt 1977, E 3, E 46–47; Kirk 1990, 170; Sherratt 1992, 149; Wees 1992, 17–21; 1994, 132–33.

12. Cited by Whallon 1969, 40.

13. Gray 1947, 120–21; Lorimer 1950, 184; Kirk 1990, 170.

14. See Whallon’s critique (1969, 38) of Gray’s classification of the epithets; see also Lord 2000, 47, 142.

15. Borchhardt 1977, E 2–4.

to *aspis* and *sakos* should suggest different appearances—is faulty, since a characteristic epithet of *sakos* conveying a certain quality does not indicate the absence of this quality in *aspis*, and vice versa.¹⁶

An even more basic objection to the explanations identifying some physical characteristic of *aspis* and *sakos* as the key difference between them is related to the distinction between the synchronic and diachronic study of the text. It has long been observed that if we take all the evidence of the form and material of *aspis* and *sakos* in the *Iliad* cumulatively, it would be impossible to arrive at a coherent distinction between the two words, even if we did not attempt to connect them to historically attested shields.¹⁷ There is a big overlap in the depiction of *aspis* and *sakos*, and little internal consistency of physical traits inside these categories. Thus, Achilles' *sakos* (*Il.* 18.478–608) and Agamemnon's *aspis* (*Il.* 11.32–40), made purely of metal and decorated, are much closer to each other than to the *sakos* of Ajax (*Il.* 7.219–23) or the *aspis* of Sarpedon (*Il.* 12.294–97), both made of oxhide and bronze.¹⁸ Whether *sakos* and *aspis* at some point referred to different types of shields is debatable, but in any case the question belongs to the diachronic study of the text. However—and this is the crucial point—the words *aspis* and *sakos* themselves, as we have discussed, are perfectly distinct synchronically: in our text of the *Iliad*, Achilles always has *sakos*, even if it is metal and elaborately decorated, and so does Ajax, whose *sakos* looks like an oxhide body-shield. In contrast, Hector's shield, even though it is described as a body-shield in Book 6, and indeed any shield belonging to a Trojan or Trojan ally, is invariably called *aspis*.

Therefore, if we investigate the use of *aspis* versus *sakos* in the *Iliad* synchronically, as in a coherent system, we should be able to come up with a certain principle clearly distinguishing *aspis* and *sakos*. Of course, one can imagine a scenario in which no general principle unites a disparate set of rules, for example: “Achilles always has a *sakos*,” “Ajax always has a *sakos*,” “if a warrior's shield is called *sakos* once, it should be called *sakos* throughout the passage,” and “no shield of a Trojan can be called *sakos*.”¹⁹ However, before we accept this hypothesis, we should look for a more economical solution that would detect a universal principle in the use of *aspis* versus *sakos*.

Indeed, when we analyze the context of the ninety-three instances of the appearance of *aspis* and the sixty-seven of *sakos* in the *Iliad*, a remarkable, previously unnoticed, pattern emerges: a warrior is never killed when his shield is called a *sakos*. This fresh piece of evidence is going to be the starting point for our investigation. What is the significance of this supreme

16. Whallon 1966, 23–24; 1969, 39–41; see also Wees 1992, 17–21; 1994, 132–33.

17. Trümper 1950, 26; Snell 1955, 1427; Ruijgh 1957, 94–95; Whallon 1966, 21; Borchhardt 1977, E 44.

18. Whallon 1969, 40.

19. Whallon (1969, 49) proposed tentatively that the objective behind the employment of the two words for “shield” was an attempt to facilitate the perception of the exchange of blows in battle encounters: “*sakos* and *aspis* are distributed from a desire for verbal consistency in the terms referring to the most important shields, and for verbal contrast in the episodes of shield combat; or else they are distributed from some further, undiscovered motive [italics mine]. . . .” However, if we accept the desire to facilitate the perception of fights as a main motive, it remains unexplained why Greek warriors should have both *sakea* and *aspides*: it would be easier to call consistently the Greek shields *sakea* and the Trojan *aspides*. I propose immediately below a “further motive” for the choice of the word for “shield.”

“protectiveness” of the *sakos*? How does it relate to the fact that the Trojans as a rule do not have *sakea*? Can the absence of deaths be explained as a result of some physical quality of the *sakos*, its sturdiness? Is *sakos* an absolutely protective shield also in the poetic traditions outside of the *Iliad*? I hope to answer these and other questions as I explore the thematics of *sakos* and *aspis*.

SAKOS AND ASPIS IN THE *ILIAD*

Let us start from the question of the relation between the absence of deaths associated with *sakos* and the near absence of Trojan *sakea*. In an attempt to clarify the relation between these two features, I am going to study the outcomes of all Iliadic individual battle encounters in which either a *sakos* or *aspis* is mentioned, dividing them into categories according to the words denoting the shields with which the opponents are armed. A Greek warrior can have either a *sakos* or an *aspis*, or his shield can be not mentioned explicitly (for which I will use “0” as a shorthand). This point is significant: the absence of the reference to the shield might be a deliberate narrative device.²⁰ A Trojan warrior can have an *aspis*, or his shield can be not mentioned. Thus, there are five different scenarios:

- I. Greek: *sakos*, Trojan: *aspis* (4 cases)
- II. Greek: *sakos*, Trojan: 0 (5 cases)
- III. Greek: *aspis*, Trojan: 0 (8 cases)
- IV. Greek: 0, Trojan: *aspis* (12 cases)
- V. Greek: *aspis*, Trojan: *aspis* (1 case)

Let us now examine the outcomes of these fights.

I. Greek: *sakos*, Trojan: *aspis* (4 cases)

In all four cases, the Greek, armed with *sakos*, defeats the Trojan, armed with *aspis*. In one case the Trojan dies.

1. Ajax (*sakos*) vs. Hector (*aspis*): *Iliad* 7.244–82. In the beginning of the duel Hector boasts about his aptness in wielding the shield (7.238–39).²¹ However, throughout the fight Hector’s *aspis* is consistently less protective than Ajax’s *sakos*. Hector’s blows on Ajax’s *sakos* cannot pierce it, while Hector is wounded in the neck through his *aspis* (7.260–62). At the climax of the fight, the stone thrown by Ajax crashes through Hector’s *aspis* (7.270). Hector collapses, crushed underneath his shield (7.272), in a striking contrast

20. I consider several cases of such deliberate avoidance of the mention of a shield throughout the paper.

21. Leaf (1900, 315) observes that through the employment of the expression τό μοι ἔστι ταλαύρινον πολεμίζειν (“that is what I call being a warrior who can bear the shield,” *Il.* 7.239), Hector claims Ares’ title ταλαύρινος πολεμιστής (*Il.* 5.289, 20.78, 22.267); see also Kirk 1990, 267. The poignant incongruity of Hector’s boast is highlighted by the fact that twice out of the three times this formula is used (*Il.* 20.78, 22.267), it is spoken by Achilles, who craves to glut ταλαύρινος πολεμιστής Ares with Hector’s blood.

with his initial proud assertion of his proficiency with the shield. Then Apollo lifts Hector to his feet. While the duel nominally ends in a tie, it is clear that Hector is a losing party from his injury and collapse, particularly since both words describing fallen Hector, ὕπτιος ἐξετανύσθη (“[he] lay outstretched on his back,” *Il.* 7.270), can refer to a dead body.²²

2. Ajax (*sakos*) vs. Hector (*aspis*): *Iliad* 14.402–20. The motif of a fight between Hector and Ajax in which Ajax is victorious recurs in Book 14. Hector throws his spear at Ajax, but it strikes Ajax on the intersection of two bands on which his *sakos* and his sword are hanging, so that Ajax is unscathed (*Il.* 14.402–6). In response, Ajax’s blow above the rim of Hector’s shield sends Hector spinning into a fall, and he collapses like an oak (14.412–18).²³ Hector’s shield and helmet fall (ἐάφθη) onto him (14.419–20). The similarity of Hector’s collapse to death is intensified by the fact that ἀσπίς ἐάφθη is used elsewhere in a description of a shield falling over a warrior at the moment of his death (*Il.* 13.543).

3. Menelaus (*sakos*) vs. Peisander (*aspis*): *Iliad* 13.601–19. Peisander strikes Menelaus’ *sakos* with a spear, but cannot pierce it, and his spear breaks (13.606–9). Menelaus leaps on Peisander with a sword; Peisander draws an ax from beneath his *aspis* (13.610–13). They strike simultaneously, and Menelaus’ blow kills Peisander.

4. Achilles (*sakos*) vs. Aeneas (*aspis*): *Iliad* 20.259–329. After the first round of the blows, initiated by Aeneas (who fails to pierce Achilles’ *sakos*), Aeneas picks up a great stone, and the narrative envisages the potential turn of events: Aeneas would have hit Achilles on his helmet or shield (*sakos*), which would have protected Achilles, after which Achilles would have killed Aeneas (20.288–91). At this point Poseidon carries Aeneas away from the fight, thus saving him.

In all four instances, the Greek whose shield is termed *sakos* prevails over the Trojan who wields an *aspis*. In all encounters, the first move is a blow struck by the Trojan *aspis*-bearer on the Greek’s *sakos*. The *sakos* is not penetrated by the opponent’s weapons. The *aspis*, in contrast, is not impervious: the *aspis* of Hector is pierced twice by Ajax (*Il.* 7.251–53, 260–62), and Achilles pierces Aeneas’ *aspis* (20.276–77).²⁴

II. Greek: *sakos*, Trojan: 0 (5 cases)

In all five cases, the Trojan is killed after striking the *sakos* of the Greek.

22. Out of fourteen occurrences of ὕπτιος in the *Iliad* the word is used twelve times in the context of a death scene; ἐκτανύω is used of Hector’s corpse in *Il.* 24.18. I am grateful to the anonymous reader of *CP* for drawing my attention to this.

23. Janko (1992, 214–15) notes that “the simile misleads us into thinking that Hector is dead.”

24. Fenik (1968, 32) observes in his analysis of typical battle scenes that piercing a shield with a spear is a typical detail. However, he does not notice that in all four scenes that he cites the pierced shield is called *aspis*. For other instances in which a typical pattern observed by Fenik turns out to be linked with a particular word for “shield,” see nn. 26, 27, 49, and 52 below.

1. Antilochus (*sakos*) vs. Adamas (0): *Iliad* 13.560–75. Adamas strikes with a spear the *sakos* of Antilochus (13.560–62). Poseidon saves Antilochus: the spear of Adamas is broken in two and stuck in Antilochus' *sakos* (13.562–65). Adamas is then killed by Meriones.²⁵

2. Menelaus (*sakos*) vs. Harpalion (0): *Iliad* 13.643–55. Harpalion strikes Menelaus' *sakos* in the middle but fails to pierce it (13.646–47). Harpalion is killed by Meriones.

3. Meges (*sakos*) vs. Dolops (0): *Iliad* 15.525–43. Dolops strikes Meges in the middle of his *sakos* (15.528) as Meges attempts to strip the armor from a Trojan that he has killed. In this case, the *sakos* is pierced but Meges' corselet saves him (15.529), and Dolops is killed by Menelaus. Bernard Fenik observes that when a warrior who is stripping an enemy's corpse is attacked, it is very uncommon for the attacker to be slain—the usual pattern is that the despoiler is killed or wounded.²⁶ It is noteworthy that the rare pattern in which the despoiler survives is coupled with the designation of his shield as a *sakos*.

4. Achilles (*sakos*) vs. Asteropaeus (0): *Iliad* 21.161–82. Asteropaeus strikes Achilles' *sakos*, but cannot pierce it. He wounds Achilles in the right elbow with a spear simultaneously thrown by his other hand. Achilles' spear misses Asteropaeus, but Achilles kills him with his sword.

5. Achilles (*sakos*) vs. Hector (0): *Iliad* 22.289–330. Achilles hurls his spear first, but Hector avoids it. Then Hector throws his spear, which strikes Achilles' shield (*sakos*) in the middle, but leaps back from it (*Il.* 22.289–91). Hector then looks for Deïphobus for the second spear, does not see him, and instantly becomes aware of his impending death. He springs upon Achilles with a sword, and Achilles strikes him a deadly blow in the neck with his spear.

What do these instances tell us about the significance of labeling a shield *sakos*? In all five cases the Trojan warrior is killed after having struck the *sakos* of the Greek. However, the term *sakos* apparently does not necessarily signal that the *sakos*-bearer is a particularly powerful fighter: in two cases the Trojan is killed not by the *sakos*-bearer himself, but by another warrior. The case of Meges' *sakos* is also informative: the *sakos* is pierced, and it is said explicitly that Meges is saved by his corselet. In this case, there is obviously no causal relation between the *sakos* and the safety of the warrior; however, the thematic association between the *sakos* and safety remains. Thus, the word *sakos* essentially serves as a marker establishing certain ex-

25. Fenik (1968, 141) finds a close similarity between the episode of which this passage forms a part (*Il.* 13.540–75) and *Il.* 13.502–39. In these two episodes the mention of *sakos* is correlated with a more extreme scenario in which the Trojan attacker is killed, not just wounded. For other cases when the outcome of the scenes considered "typical" by Fenik vary according to whether the shield is called *sakos* or *aspis*, see nn. 35, 36, 37, and 38 below.

26. Fenik 1968, 40, 88, 131.

peptations at a given point of the narrative: labeling the shield of Megeš *sakos* does not tell us anything about the protective capacity of the shield per se, but rather indicates more generally that Megeš will survive the fight. However, such use of the word as a purely situational marker is rare. More often, the association between *sakos* and protection is joined with specific thematic patterns creating the sense that *sakos* denotes an object with particular qualities. For example, it is a remarkable fact that the only injury that ever happens to a wielder of a *sakos* is a grazing wound in the right forearm, inflicted on Achilles by the ambidextrous Asteropaeus. In all other cases the attacker invariably strikes the *sakos* itself, without wounding the *sakos*-bearer. This thematic pattern produces the impression that the *sakos* is nearly impenetrable and supremely sheltering. A related thematic pattern that emerges from all nine cases considered thus far is that striking a blow on a *sakos* is followed in every case by death or defeat of the Trojan attacker.²⁷ It seems to be nearly impossible to avoid striking a *sakos* in a fight, and striking it is fatal for the attacker. It is telling that in the fight with Achilles, Hector realizes that his death is inevitable right after he has struck Achilles' *sakos*: the thematic pattern, according to which a warrior dies or is defeated after having delivered a blow on his opponent's *sakos*, asserts itself here to shape the narrative.²⁸

The two groups of cases that we have considered thus far differ in frequency of lethal outcome of the fights. The Trojan dies in all cases in which his shield is not mentioned. However, the Trojan does not die in three of the four encounters in which his shield is called *aspis*. The warriors fighting in these three cases, Hector and Aeneas, are the central heroes of the *Iliad*. This situation appears to be a nonlethal variety of the fight with a *sakos*-bearer, occurring when the story line of the *Iliad* makes certain that the Trojan cannot be killed in that particular encounter.²⁹ We will consider the intriguing correlation between the explicit mention of the *aspis* and the survival of the Trojan when we discuss the thematic patterns associated with *aspis*.

III. Greek: *aspis*, Trojan: 0 (8 cases)

The crucial next step of our analysis is the examination of situations when the Greek warrior has an *aspis*. Out of eight instances when the Greek has an *aspis* and the shield of the Trojan is not mentioned, four encounters result in the death of the Greek, three result in the death of the Trojan, and one is inconclusive.

27. Five battle encounters involving a warrior with a *sakos* conform to two typical patterns described by Fenik: "A throws at B and misses, or fails to pierce B's armor. B then kills A," where A is always Trojan (Fenik 1968, 11, 87, 145–46), and a pattern in which a Trojan fails to pierce the armor of one Greek and is slain or wounded by another Greek (Fenik 1968, 7, 102, 141). Naming the shield of the attacked warrior *sakos* is a part of these patterns, recurring in five of the six instances of these two patterns cited by Fenik. However, not all of the battle encounters in which a *sakos*-bearing Greek participates fall neatly into Fenik's categories: Fenik (1968, 146) comments on the singularity of *Il.* 21.161–82; he also does not suggest a typical pattern for *Il.* 15.525–43.

28. I am grateful to the anonymous reader of *CP* for this formulation.

29. Compare Fenik 1968, 11.

1. Elephenor (*aspis*) vs. Agenor (0): *Iliad* 4.467–69. Agenor kills the Greek Elephenor, striking him in his side left uncovered by his *aspis*, as Elephenor drags a corpse in order to strip the armor.

2. Aphareus (*aspis*) vs. Aeneas (0): *Iliad* 13.541–44. Aeneas strikes Aphareus on the throat with his spear. As Aphareus dies, his helmet and *aspis* fall down.

3. Periphetes (*aspis*) vs. Hector (0): *Iliad* 15.638–62. Periphetes stumbles upon the rim of his *aspis* that reaches his feet, and falls backward (15.645–46); Hector notices this, comes close, and kills Periphetes, striking him in the chest with his spear.

4. Patroclus (*aspis*) vs. Euphorbus/Hector (0): *Iliad* 16.793–822. In the scene of Patroclus' death his *aspis* falls to the ground, undone by Apollo (16.803), before Patroclus is wounded by Euphorbus and killed by Hector.

5. Diomedes (*aspis*) vs. Pandarus (0): *Iliad* 5.280–96. Pandarus strikes the *aspis* of Diomedes with his spear. The spear pierces it through to the corselet (5.281–82). Then Diomedes hurls his spear, and Athene guides it to Pandarus' nose and teeth, killing him.

6. Odysseus (*aspis*) vs. Socus (0): *Iliad* 11.434–49. Socus strikes the *aspis* of Odysseus; the spear goes through the shield and the corselet, tearing all the flesh from Odysseus' ribs (11.434–37), but Athene does not allow the spear to pierce Odysseus' vitals. Odysseus then strikes the running Socus between the shoulders with his spear, killing him.

7. Menelaus (*aspis*) vs. Euphorbus (0): *Iliad* 17.43–50. Euphorbus strikes Menelaus on the shield without piercing it, and his spearhead bends back in Menelaus' *aspis* (17.43–45). Menelaus prays to Zeus, and strikes Euphorbus in the throat, killing him.

8. Idomeneus (*aspis*) vs. Deiphobus (0): *Iliad* 13.402–12. Deiphobus throws his spear at Idomeneus. Idomeneus crouches beneath his *aspis* and so remains unscathed (13.405); the spear glances off Idomeneus' shield and kills Hypsenor.

The comparison of this group of cases with the instances when the Greek has a *sakos* reveals striking differences between the Greek *aspis* and *sakos*. The Greek wielding an *aspis* dies in half of the cases. The *aspis* can be pierced, and the warrior wounded through it; it can expose the warrior's body for deadly injury; moreover, the *aspis* can be a cause of a fatal mishap (Periphetes' case). We can formulate "rules of the game" associated with the Greek *aspis*: if a Trojan strikes the *aspis* of the Greek, the Trojan dies (3 cases); if a Trojan strikes the Greek in the place unprotected by an *aspis*, he kills the Greek (4 cases); and the glancing of the spear off the *aspis* counts as a tie—nobody dies (1 case). Interestingly, in all three cases when the attack on the *aspis* of the Greek results in the death of the Trojan, the Greek receives some divine assistance: Athene guides the spear of Diomedes into Pandarus' face, and the spear of Socus away from Odysseus' vitals;

Menelaus prays to Zeus before striking Euphorbus. It looks as if the protection given by the *aspis* should be augmented by divine help in order to be effective.³⁰

Another interesting point is that in all four cases when the *aspis*-bearing Greek is killed, the Trojan slayers (Agenor, Aeneas, Hector) are heroes frequently described as armed with *aspides*. However, no reference to their *aspides* is made in the episodes in which they kill an *aspis*-bearing Greek. The mention of the *aspis*, thematically associated with defeat, is avoided in the case of the victor, in order not to provide conflicting cues about the outcome of the fight.

The episodes in which an *aspis* fails to shelter the body of its bearer might create an impression that it is a smaller shield. And yet, the *aspis* of Periphetes, reaching to his feet, proves this impression incorrect. The large size of Periphetes' shield is the very cause of his disastrous stumble. It is clear from this example that it is the association of *aspis* with death and defeat, and not the particular dimensions of a given *aspis*, that gives rise to the observed thematic patterns.

The case of Patroclus' shield deserves some closer attention. It is called *sakos* in the arming scene (*Il.* 16.136), which is unsurprising in itself, since the shield is labeled *sakos* in all arming scenes apart from Agamemnon's arming.³¹ However, at this point we can appreciate a deeper significance of this type-scene convention. The arming is a starting point of the warrior's *aristeia*, his triumphant assault in which he is victorious and invincible—the qualities expressed by labeling his shield *sakos*. However, Patroclus' *aristeia* is both glorious and ultimately disastrous, so neither *sakos* nor *aspis* is completely appropriate for his shield. Indeed, no reference to Patroclus' shield is made during his *aristeia* (*Il.* 16.284–697). Then, while Patroclus charges the wall of Troy (disregarding Achilles' admonition not to do it, given in *Il.* 16.91–94), Apollo thrice beats with his hand on Patroclus' shield—this time called *aspis* (*Il.* 16.704). The mention of *aspis* appears at the point when, as it is said explicitly, Patroclus made his fatal error by ignoring Achilles' warning, and is going to die (*Il.* 16.684–87, 692–93): the appearance of the word *aspis* is correlated with an allusion to death.³² The shield is called *aspis* once again when it falls to the ground in the scene of the death of the mysteriously disarmed Patroclus (*Il.* 16.802–3).

Calling Patroclus' shield borrowed from Achilles an *aspis* gives us important insight concerning the nature of this labeling. It has been observed that the *Iliad* demonstrates awareness of the fact that Achilles' shield, carried first by Patroclus, then by Hector, is impenetrable: Apollo strips Patroclus' shield off before he is killed, and Hector is wounded by Achilles in the neck, which is unprotected by his armor (*Il.* 22.324).³³ If despite this attention to

30. I am grateful to the anonymous reader of *CP* for pointing out this pattern to me.

31. Arend 1933, 92–97; Armstrong 1958, 341–54; Whallon 1966, 14 n. 8; Fenik 1968, 78–79, 191; Kirk 1985, 313–14.

32. Compare a similar change in the naming of Paris' shield (discussed below), when the heroic arming of Paris is followed by his defeat in the duel with Menelaus (*Il.* 3.335, 3.356).

33. Edwards 1991, 322; similarly, Janko 1992, 334, 409.

the imperviousness of Patroclus' shield it is called *aspis*—the word associated with death and defeat—it follows that the word *aspis* does not primarily signify the shield's lack of sturdiness, but rather relates to the broader situation, conveying the impression of a disaster awaiting Patroclus.³⁴ Neither the size of Periphetes' shield nor the imperviousness of Patroclus' shield affects their labeling as *aspides*, in exact parallel to the employment of the word *sakos*, which does not communicate the shield's absolute physical protectiveness, but rather signals that in the general outcome of the situation the *sakos*-bearer will remain unharmed.

IV. Greek: 0, Trojan: *aspis* (12 cases)

In six encounters, the Trojan is killed; in two cases, the Trojan is rescued by a god; in four cases, the fight does not end in the unambiguous victory of either side.

1. Agamemnon (0) vs. Deïcoön (*aspis*): *Iliad* 5.533–40. Agamemnon kills Deïcoön, striking through his *aspis* and hitting him in his abdomen (5.537–40).

2. Agamemnon (0) vs. Coön (*aspis*): *Iliad* 11.248–60. Coön wounds Agamemnon in the arm below the elbow (*Il.* 11.251–53). Agamemnon kills Coön, striking him beneath his *aspis*, while Coön tries to drag away the body of his brother (11.259–60).

3. Odysseus (0) vs. Chersidamas (*aspis*): *Iliad* 11.423–25. Odysseus kills Chersidamas, stabbing him with a spear beneath his *aspis*.

4. Menelaus (0) vs. Thoas (*aspis*): *Iliad* 16.311–12. Menelaus kills Thoas, striking him on the chest exposed beside the *aspis*.

5. Patroclus (0) vs. Pronous (*aspis*): *Iliad* 16.399–400. Patroclus kills Pronous, striking him on the chest exposed beside the *aspis* (same formula as in 16.311–12).

6. Automedon (0) vs. Aretus (*aspis*): *Iliad* 17.516–24. Automedon kills Aretus, piercing his *aspis* with a spear and hitting him in his abdomen (17.518–19 = 5.538–39, Agamemnon–Deïcoön encounter).

7. Diomedes (0) vs. Aeneas (*aspis*): *Iliad* 5.297–318. Aeneas, holding his *aspis* (5.297, 300), is wounded by Diomedes in the hip with a stone. Aeneas would have died then and there, were he not snatched away by Aphrodite.³⁵

8. Achilles (0) vs. Agenor (*aspis*): *Iliad* 21.579–98. Agenor, holding his *aspis* in front of him (*Il.* 21.581), hurls his spear at Achilles and strikes him

34. Edwards (1991, 322) notes the “irony” of the contrast between the imperishable nature of the armor and the mortality of its bearers. In the words of Armstrong (1958, 349), “the armor seems tainted with a kind of fatality, as it were a talisman of death. . . .”

35. Fenik (1968, 33–34) and Kirk (1990, 91) connect this episode with *Il.* 8.320–29 and *Il.* 20.285–91. The outcomes of the attacks with a stone vary in correlation with the words used for the shield of the attacked warrior (*sakos/aspis/0*).

in the leg under the knee. The spear rebounds from the greave. Achilles springs at Agenor, but Apollo snatches Agenor away.

9. Ajax/Teucer (0) vs. Sarpedon (*aspis*): *Iliad* 12.400–407. Ajax and Teucer attack Sarpedon: Teucer hits him with an arrow on the *telamon* of the shield, but Zeus saves Sarpedon from death (12.400–403). Ajax strikes Sarpedon’s shield, but cannot pierce through it (12.404–5). Sarpedon gives a little ground, but is still eager to fight.³⁶

10. Meriones (0) vs. Deïphobus (*aspis*): *Iliad* 13.156–66. Meriones strikes the *aspis* of Deïphobus with his spear (13.160). Meriones’ spear breaks (13.161–62); frightened Deïphobus holds his shield away from him (13.162–64); Meriones, angry at his failure, retires into the ranks of his comrades.³⁷

11. Ajax (0) vs. Hector (*aspis*): *Iliad* 13.188–94. Ajax hurls his spear at Hector, who is unscathed because his armor protects him; however, the spear strikes the *omphalos* of Hector’s *aspis* with such force that Hector draws back from the bodies of two killed warriors and the Greeks carry both bodies away.³⁸

12. Ajax (0) vs. Hector (*aspis*): *Iliad* 16.358–63. Ajax’s attempt to injure Hector with his spear has no result because of Hector’s skill in covering himself with his *aspis* (16.358–61). At this point of the narrative, Hector recognizes that the battle has taken a turn unfavorable to the Trojans, but he still stands his ground in order to save his comrades.

Comparing this group of cases with those in which the Greek warrior has an *aspis* and the shield of the Trojan is not mentioned, we can observe both similarities and differences. The similarity is that the Trojan *aspis*-bearers are killed in half of the cases, and survive in the other half, just like the Greek *aspis*-bearers. Among those six Trojans who survive, three are helped by the gods: Sarpedon is saved by Zeus, Aeneas is snatched away from the battlefield by Aphrodite, and Agenor is saved by Apollo. This assistance recalls the cases of the divine intervention in situations when the Greek has an *aspis*, and the Trojan’s shield is not mentioned. However, here we come to the difference between the two groups: in the case of the Greeks with *aspides*, divine help results in the death of their Trojan opponents; in the case of the Trojans, divine help only allows them to survive—no Greek is

36. Hainsworth (1993, 359) and Fenik (1968, 186) compare this scene with *Il.* 14.402–6. The different outcomes correlate with the words used for the shields of the assaulted warriors: the *aspis*-bearer is forced to withdraw slightly, while the *sakos*-bearer is victorious.

37. Fenik (1968, 125) classifies this encounter with two others (*Il.* 14.402–8, 22.289–93) as a combat pattern in which “A strikes B’s shield and either breaks or loses his spear. A is then angry and withdraws.” Fenik observes that A’s fate varies in the three encounters. The variance in fact correlates with labeling B’s shield *sakos* or *aspis*: when B’s shield is *aspis*, A survives; when B’s shield is *sakos*, A is either defeated or killed.

38. Fenik (1968, 126) observes that the detail of thrusting a warrior back by striking, without piercing, his shield recurs in *Il.* 12.400–407. In both cases the struck shield is an *aspis*. When the shield that is struck without being pierced is called *sakos*, the pattern is very different—the attacker (a Trojan) is killed or defeated. Fenik discusses this last pattern (see n. 27 above) without noticing that the choice of *aspis* vs. *sakos* correlates with two very different patterns.

ever killed by a Trojan *aspis*-bearer. A relation between striking a blow on an *aspis* and the fatality of the outcome is also different for the Greeks and the Trojans. We have seen that striking a Greek *aspis* is followed by the death of the Trojan attacker, while striking a Greek warrior in a body part exposed by the *aspis* results in the death of the Greek. However, no association between delivering a blow on a Trojan *aspis* and the deadliness of the outcome can be established: a Greek can kill a Trojan both by striking him in the parts unprotected by the *aspis* as well as through the *aspis*; sometimes, however, the Trojan can also survive such attacks.

We can also make some more observations concerning the logic of not mentioning of the shield. The shields of Agamemnon and Diomedes are not mentioned in the scenes in which they kill or defeat a Trojan warrior armed with an *aspis*; and yet, these Greek warriors are described as armed with *aspides* elsewhere. The mention of the Greek *aspis* would result in a situation in which both opponents in the fight were armed with *aspides*, so that an expectation of defeat would be confusingly triggered for both parties. The lack of mention of the *aspides* of the Greeks in the episodes in which they kill an *aspis*-bearing Trojan is parallel to the lack of mention of the shields of Aeneas, Hector, and Agenor in the scenes in which they kill an *aspis*-bearing Greek. The lack of mention of the shield of Ajax in encounters 9, 11, and 12 is guided by a different logic. These encounters all end indecisively. Since Ajax is armed exclusively with *sakos*, the mention of the *sakos* alongside the Trojan's *aspis* would immediately activate the thematic pattern according to which the *aspis*-bearer is defeated in a fight with a *sakos*-bearer, and so, if an indefinite outcome of a fight is required by the narrative, the mention of the *sakos* must be avoided.

V. Greek: *aspis*, Trojan: *aspis* (1 case)

We have just considered the battle encounters in which the *aspis* of one warrior is not mentioned, in avoidance of an ambiguous situation in which both participants are associated with defeat. However, an *aspis-aspis* fight does appear once in the *Iliad*,³⁹ and it seems that the ambiguity of the cues is part of the scene's intended effect.

The case in question is a duel between Menelaus and Paris (*Il.* 3.344–82). First Paris strikes Menelaus on his *aspis* (κατ' ἀσπίδα πάντοσ' ἔϊσθη, 3.347), which withstands the blow, and the point of Paris' spear bends back. Then Menelaus strikes Paris on his *aspis* (κατ' ἀσπίδα πάντοσ' ἔϊσθη, 3.356), tearing through Paris' shield, corselet, and shirt (3.357–60). Menelaus strikes Paris on the helmet with his sword; the sword shatters; Menelaus starts dragging Paris by the crest of his helmet. Aphrodite snatches Paris away from the battleground and brings him and Helen together in the bedroom.

Several details of the fight have close parallels with the encounter between Ajax and Hector in Book 7,⁴⁰ and the rescue of Paris is similar to other divine rescues (*Il.* 20.325, 5.314–18, 20.444).⁴¹ However, in addition

39. Whallon (1966, 15) considers this scenario exceptional.

40. Kirk 1978, 25, 32; 1985, 317.

41. Kirk 1985, 320; 1990, 93, with a reference to Fenik 1968, 36.

to the unique naming of the shields of both opponents as *aspides*, there are other irregularities in the scene. Paris' arming before the duel is the only arming scene of a Trojan warrior in the *Iliad*, and calling the shield of Paris *sakos* in it (3.335) is the only instance of a particular Trojan warrior bearing a *sakos*. Moreover, Paris' shield is called *aspis* twenty lines later (3.356), during the duel, in a striking departure from the consistent avoidance of calling the same shield *sakos* and *aspis* in the same scene.⁴²

Can we explain this group of irregularities given our earlier observations of the thematic patterns associated with *sakos* and *aspis*? The duel between Paris and Menelaus starts with great pomp and gravity: a fight between the two men whose strife over a woman is the cause of the war initially seems to have the potential to bring a resolution to the conflict.⁴³ When Paris takes up the *sakos*, this seems to forecast his impending victory in the fight, as do other arming scenes introducing a warrior's *aristeia*; however, the surprise of having a Trojan carry a *sakos* might already hint that the scene will develop unusually. When during the duel Paris suddenly turns out to be armed with an *aspis*, this change results in an unprecedented symmetry of the shields of the two opponents, which may suggest the duel's hopeless futility. After all, the audience knows that Menelaus and Paris at this point are powerless to end the war: the wrath of Achilles has been triggered already.⁴⁴ Moreover, the shift from *sakos* to *aspis* in the same scene blatantly strays from the convention of "serious" Iliadic fighting, and this departure is paralleled by the following sudden change of genre, the abrupt move from the battlefield to the bedroom. The change of name for Paris' shield is comparable to the same change in the case of the shield of Patroclus, but while the shift from *sakos* to *aspis* in the case of Patroclus is tragic, in the case of Paris it is almost comic. The duel that promised to end the Trojan war ends in a vignette replaying the starting point of the trouble: Helen and Paris are in bed together, while Menelaus runs amok looking for Paris in a futile rage (3.447–50).

We have seen during this examination of *sakos* and *aspis* in the *Iliad* that the label *sakos* is unambiguously correlated with victory and safety of the shield's bearer, while the outcomes of fights in which a shield is labeled *aspis* are more variable. In fact, this variability can be strikingly reduced if we take into account a formulaic epithet of the *aspis*, *pantos' eise*,⁴⁵ which seems to communicate that the death of the *aspis*-bearer is unlikely.

42. Whallon 1966, 14. Contra Kirk (1985, 315), the application of the two words to the same shield is extremely rare in the *Iliad* (see n. 3 above).

43. See Armstrong 1958, 343.

44. Kirk (1985, 317) comments that at this point the instantaneous end of the war is impossible for "historical, . . . dramatic and theological" reasons.

45. κατ'καί/θέρ' ἀσπίδα πάντοσ' εἶσθην is an adaptable formula completing the line after the trochaic caesura, with the word break at the bucolic diarsis. As we will see, the formula can be used in various narrative contexts, in the situations of both victory and defeat. The Greeks armed with *aspis pantos' eise* are Menelaus (*Il.* 3.347), Odysseus (11.434), Idomeneus (13.405), Menelaus (17.43). The Trojans are Paris (3.356), Aeneas (5.300), Hector (7.250), Deiphobus (13.157, 160), Aretus (17.517), Aeneas (20.274), Agenor (21.581).

The *aspis*-bearer dies only once out of the eleven cases in which the *aspis* has the epithet *pantos' eise* (this unfortunate *aspis*-bearer is, characteristically, a Trojan, Aretus, at *Il.* 17.516–24). For comparison, when the shield is called *aspis* without the epithet *pantos' eise*, the warrior carrying the *aspis* dies in ten battle encounters out of fifteen (the Greek dies in four cases out of five, and the Trojan dies in six cases out of ten).

In addition, two out of four Greeks with an *aspis pantos' eise* (abbreviated as *APE* below) kill their Trojan opponents (Odysseus at 11.434, Menelaus at 17.43),⁴⁶ while only one Greek warrior out of five with the “plain” *aspides* kills his adversary. The two encounters in which Odysseus and Menelaus are armed with *APE* also account for two out of the three cases in which a Greek armed with an *aspis* is helped by a god, and in which a blow delivered on an *aspis* of the Greek is followed by the death of the Trojan. It is probably also not a coincidence that Odysseus and Menelaus have *sakea* at other points in the narrative (10.149; 13.606, 608, 646).⁴⁷ For a Greek warrior, *APE* seems to be a weaker version of *sakos*, indicating a reduced protection: while both Odysseus and Menelaus succeed in killing their opponents, Odysseus is wounded in the fight, and Menelaus fights in the desperate situation following the death of Patroclus.

The Trojans with the *APE* are usually worsted in a fight,⁴⁸ but have a propensity to be helped out by a deity: out of the seven cases where a Trojan has an *APE*, four times a god snatches him away from the fight at a critical moment, raising the beaten Trojan back to his feet in the fifth case (3.380–82, 5.314–18, 20.325–29, 21.596–98, 7.272).⁴⁹ We should also recall here the puzzling detail that the explicit mention of the *aspis* appears to correlate with the survival of the Trojan in the fight with a *sakos*-bearer: in fact, in two out of the three cases when the Trojan *aspis*-bearer survives in the fight with a *sakos*-bearer, the *aspis* has the epithet *pantos' eise* (7.272, 20.325–29).

Thus, the expression *aspis pantos' eise* signals that the warrior most probably will survive the fight, and may also receive the divine help appropriate for his side (the Greeks can be helped to kill their adversary, the Trojans can be saved from death). We can now appreciate anew the intrinsic futility of the duel between Menelaus and Paris. In this unique instance, not only is there a fight between two *aspis*-bearers: the warrior with an *aspis pantos' eise* fights another warrior with an *aspis pantos' eise*. The epithet of the shields of Paris and Menelaus indicates from the very beginning of the duel that the participants are highly unlikely to die, and that the duel is likely to end in divine rescue of the Trojan.

46. *Il.* 3.344–82 and 13.402–10, in which Menelaus and Idomeneus, respectively, are armed with *APE*, end indecisively.

47. In addition to Odysseus and Menelaus, among the Greeks only Achilles and Patroclus are said to have *aspis* at one point and *sakos* at another.

48. The only exception is the encounter between Meriones and Deïphobus (*APE*), which ends indecisively (13.162–66).

49. Fenik (1968, 12, 36–37, 39) examines the typical pattern of divine rescue, in particular *Il.* 3.380–82, 5.314–18, and 20.325–29. However, he does not notice that the qualification of the *aspis* as *pantos' eise* is one of the pattern's elements, recurring in four out of the five Iliadic divine rescues.

Below I present a summary of the thematic patterns associated with *sakos*, *aspis pantos' eise*, and *aspis*. The first readily apparent trend is the decrease of protection as we move from *sakos* to *APE* to *aspis*: the three designations in this sequence denote shields that are progressively easier to pierce and less sheltering. The second tendency is that the Trojans generally fare worse than the Greeks. If we compare the thematic patterns associated with the identically called shields of the Trojans and the Greeks, the Trojan shields turn out to be less protective for their owners and less dangerous for the attackers to strike than the analogous Greek shields.

Greek *sakos* (9 cases)

- the bearer is victorious
- sakos* is usually impermeable (1 exception, in which no injury is inflicted)
- opponent's blows as a rule fall only on *sakos* (1 exception)
- the bearer of *sakos* is usually invulnerable (1 exception)
- striking the *sakos* is always followed by death/defeat of the attacker

Greek *APE* (4 cases)

- the bearer does not die, is sometimes victorious (in 2 cases)
- APE* can be pierced and the bearer wounded through it (1 case)
- striking the *APE* is always followed by death/defeat of the attacker (3 cases)

Trojan *APE* (7 cases)

- the bearer usually does not die (1 exception)
- APE* can be both pierced (4 cases) and the bearer wounded through it, or it can fail to cover the body so that the *APE*-bearer is struck in the unprotected part (3 cases)
- the bearer is usually overcome in fight (1 exception)
- the bearer is often rescued by a god (5 cases)
- the attacker of an *APE*-wearing Trojan never dies

Greek *aspis* (5 cases)

- repeatedly fails to cover the whole body of the bearer; the bearer is struck where unprotected and dies (4 cases)
- striking a Greek *aspis* may be followed by the death of the attacker (1 case)

Trojan *aspis* (10 cases)

- repeatedly fails to cover the whole body of the bearer; the bearer is struck where unprotected (5 cases) or through the *aspis* (1 case) and dies
- the attacker of an *aspis*-wearing Trojan never dies

We can further formulate some conclusions about the relation between the words *sakos* and *aspis* and the individual shields. It is clear from the few instances where both words are applied to the same shield that *sakos* and *aspis* do not refer to elements of the two distinct classes of shields, the invincible and the vulnerable ones, but rather constitute movable labels that can be applied to the same shield in different circumstances, communicating different messages concerning the same object. Therefore, the protectiveness of a *sakos* cannot be predicated on its physical sturdiness or large size. However, as we have noted above, in the descriptions of fights the *sakos* turns out to be, save for rare exceptions, impenetrable and supremely sheltering. These qualities would be most natural in a shield that is very large and exceptionally sturdy. Similarly, the fact that the *aspis* often leaves various body parts of the warrior unprotected gives the impression of a shield of a smaller size. While there is no correlation between the descriptions of the

outward appearance of the shields and their labeling as *aspis* or *sakos*, in a fight *sakos* and *aspis* often functionally resemble a large and a small shield. The language of physical protection is used to express the conceptual notion of invincibility communicated in labeling the shield *sakos*. In the same way, qualifying an *aspis* as *pantos' eise* does not imply that the particular *aspis* is circular or balanced physically—rather, it seems to indicate that the *aspis* in the particular scene is functionally protective, defending its bearer equally from all sides.⁵⁰

We should also discuss the occurrences of *sakos* and *aspis* in the *Iliad* in contexts other than individual battle encounters. Both words appear (once side by side, *Il.* 13.130–31) in the descriptions of a host of warriors fighting or going to battle, as well as in the descriptions of the individual warriors. It seems that in these contexts the difference between *sakos* and *aspis* is neutralized.⁵¹ However, we can observe the same association of *sakos* with protection and of *aspis* with death in certain situations other than individual fights. For example, *sakos* (in singular or plural) refers nine times to the shields employed for protecting entities other than the *sakos*-bearer himself: the bodies of the dead or wounded, warriors fighting without a shield of their own, or warriors under duress from an enemy onslaught.⁵² The *aspis* appears only three times in a similar situation, and twice out of the three times it is qualified as *pantos' eise*, the epithet adding the sense of protection.⁵³ In all cases where the shields are used for help and protection, there is the same alignment of Greeks with *sakea* and Trojans with *aspides* as in the descriptions of individual battle encounters. The Trojans are described protecting their comrades with shields three times—once with an *APE* (*Il.* 5.297), once with “plain” *aspides* (*Il.* 14.428), and once, uniquely, with *sakea* (*Il.* 4.113), while the Greeks protect their companions eight times with *sakos/sakea*, and only once with an *APE*.⁵⁴ While *sakos* is preferred to *aspis* as a word referring to a shield that gives shelter, *aspis* is used in references to shields of the dead warriors. Twice a chariot is described as running over the bodies of the fallen and their shields—*νέκυάς τε καὶ ἀσπίδας* (11.534, 20.499); in the battle for the ship-protecting wall, many are pierced clean through the shield (*aspis*) itself (*διαμπερὲς ἀσπίδος αὐτῆς*, 12.429).

50. I suspect that *amphibrote* “covering the whole man,” might have had a function similar to *pantos' eise*, signaling that the *aspis* is protective in the given situation (note the semantic parallelism). However, the number of occurrences is not sufficient to make a definite claim.

51. An *aspis* is not less “prestigious” or “heroic” a shield than a *sakos* (contra Snell 1955, 1427): some cases in point are the elaborately decorated *aspis* of Agamemnon (11.32–40), the blazing *aspis* of Diomedes (5.4), and the famed golden *aspis* of Nestor (8.192). It is difficult to say whether the association between *aspis* and death is dormant in these cases, or whether the idea that the glorious warrior armed with an *aspis* is vulnerable to the enemy’s attack implicitly adds poignancy to the scene. Interestingly, Diomedes and Agamemnon are both wounded during their *aristeiai* (5.97–100, 11.251–53)—the fact possibly related to naming their shields *aspides*.

52. *Il.* 4.113, 8.267, 8.331, 11.593, 13.420, 13.488, 17.132, 17.268, 17.354. Fenik (1968, 33, 105, 110, 132, 160) comments on the typicality of the scenes in which a warrior covers a wounded or dead comrade with a shield. Fenik does not notice that the shield in these scenes is usually *sakos*.

53. *Il.* 5.297, 17.7 (*APE*); 14.428 (*aspides*).

54. *Sakea*: *Il.* 8.267, 8.331, 11.593, 13.420, 13.488, 17.132, 17.268, 17.354; *APE*: *Il.* 17.7.

At this point we can return to the original question: how does the fact that no warrior dies when his shield is called *sakos* relate to the fact that the Trojans as a rule do not have *sakea*? I suggest that the near absence of Trojan *sakea* is related to the general framework of the Trojan War narrative, in which the Trojans are doomed to defeat. One manifestation of this association between the Trojans and defeat is the fact that identically named shields are less protective and less perilous to attack if the bearer is Trojan than if he is Greek. It seems that the avoidance of labeling the shields of the Trojans *sakea* similarly expresses the affinity of the Trojans with defeat.

There is one episode in the *Iliad* that may further help us to distinguish between the phenomena that are connected with *aspis* and *sakos* proper and those that are related to the contrast between the Greeks and the Trojans. This is a fight in which both opponents, armed with *aspis* and *sakos*, are Greeks: the duel between Diomedes and Ajax at the funeral games for Patroclus (23.818–25).

After three charges, Ajax delivers a blow on Diomedes' *aspis* (κατ' ἀσπίδα πάντοσ' εἴσην, 23.818). The fact that the *aspis* of Diomedes is called πάντοσ' εἴσην suggests that the attack of Ajax is not going to be fatal for Diomedes (although Diomedes' *APE* is pierced by Ajax, as often happens with *APE* in the *Iliad*: 3.356–57, 7.251–52, 11.434–35, 17.517–18, 20.274–77). The response of Diomedes is significant: rather than striking Ajax's *sakos*, he attempts to reach Ajax's neck over the top of the shield (ὑπὲρ σάκεος μέγαλοιο, 23.820), and the audience immediately becomes afraid for Ajax. Diomedes' victory is established by Achilles giving Diomedes the sword (23.824–25) that was announced to be a victory prize (23.805–8). The encounter between Diomedes and Ajax allows us to separate more clearly two characteristic patterns associated with *sakos*, observed earlier in the cases of the Trojans fighting Greek *sakos*-bearers: (1) the protectiveness of a *sakos* for its owner; and (2) the pattern according to which a blow delivered on a *sakos* results in the death or defeat of the attacker. While the *sakos* proves to be characteristically protective for Ajax, Diomedes, surprisingly for an *aspis*-bearer, is victorious. The fact that Diomedes does not strike Ajax's *sakos* sets him apart from all Trojans in a fight with a *sakos*-bearer. All Trojan warriors, without exception, make the move of striking the *sakos* of their opponent, and are subsequently defeated; Diomedes does not strike it and is victorious. This case of the inversion of the thematic pattern associated with the *sakos* provides valuable confirmation of the pattern's general validity. It also importantly suggests that the thematic differences between *aspis* and *sakos* are not confined to the battle encounters between the Greeks and the Trojans.

I will conclude this discussion of *sakos* and *aspis* in the *Iliad* by examining the last and most striking instance in which the same shield is called both *aspis* and *sakos*. Achilles' second shield is always designated *sakos*, with one remarkable exception. When Thetis comes to Hephaestus, begging him for a new set of armor for her son, she asks for an *aspis*—which is surprising, given that in the following elaborate description the shield in the

making is called *sakos* four times. The words of Thetis' appeal (18.457–58) are as follows:

τοῦνεκα νῦν τὰ σὰ γούναθ' ἱκάνομαι, αἶ κ' ἐθέλησθα
υἱεῖ ἐμῷ ὀκυτόμορῳ δόμεν ἄσπίδα καὶ τρυφάλειαν

Therefore now I come to your knees; so might you be willing
 to give me for my short-lived son a shield (*aspis*) and a helmet . . .⁵⁵

Thetis' appeal sounds like a prefiguration of her future lament for her son, concluding her compressed retelling of the *Iliad* (II. 18.444–56).⁵⁶ It is hardly a coincidence that the only time the word *aspis* is applied to Achilles' shield it is juxtaposed with the epithet ὀκυτόμορος “short-lived.”⁵⁷ While the primary meaning of ὀκυτόμορος probably was “bringing swift death,” in relation to Achilles it acquires the meaning “having a brief life span.” As Laura Slatkin notes, “[i]n effect both functions are joined in Achilles, who participates in bringing about his own swift death.”⁵⁸ The double meaning of ὀκυτόμορος, “swiftly destroying” and “swiftly destroyed,” correlates with the double nature of Achilles' *aspis*, an emblem of the coming destruction of his enemies as well as a token of his own approaching death.⁵⁹

In this survey of the usage of the words for “shield” in the *Iliad*, we have uncovered an array of thematic patterns associated with *sakos*, *aspis*, and *aspis pantos' eise*. An application of these terms to a shield communicates the level of safety and the likelihood of victory that the shield-bearer has in a given episode: superior in the case of *sakos*, moderate in the case of *aspis pantos' eise*, and inferior in the case of *aspis*. The abstract notion of different levels of safety is often expressed as greater or smaller physical protection provided by a shield. However, occasionally the connotations of a particular term for a shield are reflected solely in the general outcome of the situation. The differences between *sakos*, *aspis*, and *aspis pantos' eise* are clearest in the context of individual battle encounters; in the descriptions of the host fighting they are frequently neutralized. There is also a large-scale slant in the treatment of the shields of the Greeks and the Trojans: in comparable situations the shields of the Trojans are less protective than the shields of the Greeks. We will pass now to the examination of the employment of *sakos* and *aspis* outside of the *Iliad*.

SAKOS AND ASPIS IN THE ODYSSEY

Shields are something of a rarity in the *Odyssey*. The word *sakos* is employed twelve times, *aspis* only three. *Sakos* first appears in Book 14, in a lying account of a failed assault on the land of Egypt that Odysseus gives to the

55. The translation is by Lattimore (1951).

56. Slatkin 1991, 46.

57. ὀκυτόμορος is applied in the *Iliad*, except for one instance, “only to Achilles and only by Thetis” (Slatkin 1991, 36).

58. Slatkin 1991, 37.

59. “The shield, supreme implement of ‘safety,’ becomes the instrument of his [Achilles'] fatality” (Slatkin 1991, 45). Similarly, Edwards (1991, 140) notes that in Achilles' shield “the craftsmanship of an immortal and the short life-span of the mortal are violently contrasted.”

swineherd Eumaeus (*Od.* 14.257–84). When the assaulting band is overpowered by the Egyptians, the band's leader, Odysseus' fictional character, takes off his *sakos* and clasps the knees of the Egyptian king, asking to be spared; the king saves him. The story resembles Archilochus' poem (frag. 5 W) unabashedly describing the speaker losing his *aspis* in battle, but saving his life.⁶⁰ Archilochus' passage has been compared with a fragment of Alcaeus that expresses a similar sentiment—a “mocking challenge to the warrior ethic of equating one's shield with one's identity”⁶¹—recurrent in the sympotic poetry. It seems that Odysseus' lying tale is another example of the same topos, particularly if we remember that it is told to Eumaeus over a cup of wine. In Odysseus' version the irony with which the normative warrior ethic is treated is possibly further intensified by labeling the shield *sakos*.⁶² The story seems to be ironically inverting Iliadic values: an invincible shield of the *Iliad* is discarded in the *Odyssey* in order to save the character's life.⁶³

The *sakos* next appears in another story conjured by Odysseus for Eumaeus in an attempt to procure a cloak for himself. He tells of an ambush on a very cold night during the Trojan War. It is so cold that ice covers the surface of the ambushers' *sakea* (*Od.* 14.477). While all other participants sleep, wrapped in their cloaks and covered by their *sakea* (14.479), the teller of the story is freezing, having only a *sakos* and no cloak (14.482). Again, the irony is readily apparent: the *sakos* can offer a supreme protection from the enemy's assault in the *Iliad*, but it cannot protect the hero from the cold in the *Odyssey*.⁶⁴

There are other idiosyncrasies of the usage of the word *sakos* in the *Odyssey* in comparison with the *Iliad*. One might expect that there would be a rule, parallel to the Iliadic exclusion of the Trojans from having *sakea*, that would reserve *sakea* for Odysseus' companions and *aspides* for the suitors. This does not happen. The suitors' ship, waiting in ambush for Telemachus, is laden with *sakea* (*Od.* 16.474), and Melanthius brings twelve *sakea* to the suitors from Odysseus' storeroom during the final battle (22.144). Thus, both the suitors and Odysseus' friends are armed with *sakea* in the final confrontation.

The word *aspis*, on the other hand, never refers to a shield in actual use. *Aspis* is used for the shields that Odysseus and Telemachus remove from the walls of the dining hall so that the suitors will not be able to arm themselves when Odysseus attacks (*Od.* 19.31–33). In the beginning of the battle, the suitors are looking in vain for these *aspides*, missing from the walls

60. Cook 1999, 164.

61. Nagy 2004, 39.

62. Odysseus' lying tale is an exact antithesis of the song of Hybrias the Cretan, *PMG* 909, cited by Nagy (2004, 42) as a particularly clear-cut expression of the normative warrior ethic. The model warrior in Hybrias' song boasts about his superiority over a character lacking a spear and a shield, who is therefore obliged to kiss the warrior's knee and to call him a great king. Odysseus' fictional hero lets go of his shield and spear, approaches the Egyptian king, and kisses his knees.

63. On the relation between Odysseus' identity as a “trickster” and an “Iliadic hero” in his encounter with Eumaeus, see Cook 1999, 163–64.

64. Cf. Hoekstra 1989, 226.

(22.23–25). The word *aspis* also refers to the shield of Odysseus in the speech of Athene/Mentes in the beginning of the *Odyssey*, when she conjures for Telemachus an image of his father, taking his stand at the entrance to his house with a shield and two spears (ἀσπίδα καὶ δύο δοῦρε, 1.256). Interestingly, as this remote vision grows more real, *sakos* is substituted for *aspis* in the variation of the formula: on the eve of the day when Odysseus will kill the suitors, he tells one of the main suitors, Eurymachus, that he wishes he would have a shield and two spears (σάκος εἶη καὶ δύο δοῦρε) to demonstrate to Eurymachus his fighting skills (18.377). Telemachus echoes the same formula at the beginning of the battle, offering to bring weapons to his father (σάκος οἴσω καὶ δύο δοῦρε, 22.101);⁶⁵ finally, Odysseus puts on his *sakos* in a scene of heroic arming before his *aristeia* (22.122).⁶⁶ Thus, as the narrative progresses, the imagined *aspis* of the absent Odysseus turns into the real *sakos* of Odysseus who came back to assert his heroic identity. The question is: does this change from *aspis* to *sakos* communicate that Odysseus has turned from a loser into a victor? I believe it does.

Despite the many differences from Iliadic usage, I suggest that the association between *sakos* and victory is, in fact, still operative in the *Odyssey*. While initially both sides in the final battle are said to be armed with *sakea*, the *sakea* of the suitors seem to evaporate from the poem after the first mention. The suitors are never depicted as wielding any kind of shields; Odysseus and his supporters, on the other hand, are repeatedly connected with *sakea* (*Od.* 22.101–2, 110, 122, 279–80⁶⁷). There might be a different ironic twist of the theme when the goatherd Melanthius is caught by Eumaeus and Philoetius while carrying out of the storeroom the old *sakos* of Laertes (22.184). Melanthius is bound and later killed: Laertes' *sakos*, rather than protecting Melanthius, proves fatal for him. The message that this episode appears to convey is that *sakos* is protective only for a warrior that wields it rightfully. The suitors might arm themselves with *sakea* taken from Odysseus' storeroom, but the moment they put them on, the shields lose their protective quality.

The *Odyssey* clearly differs from the *Iliad* in its handling of the distinction between *sakos* and *aspis*; however, the Iliadic pattern apparently remains relevant as a point of reference. The basic Iliadic association between *sakos* and invincibility is first ironically subverted in the *Odyssey*, only to be reaffirmed in the conclusion of the poem. The dynamics of the use of the word *sakos* perfectly conforms to the fundamental design of the *Odyssey* as

65. The existence of the formulaic variants ἀσπίδα καὶ δύο δοῦρε (*Od.* 1.256) versus σάκος . . . καὶ δύο δοῦρε (*Od.* 18.377, 22.101) confirms that the choice of between *aspis* and *sakos* is not mechanical, and therefore probably thematically important.

66. Odysseus' arming in *Od.* 22.122–24 is identical to *Il.* 15.479–81, presenting a compressed version of the arming scene; see Arend 1933, 95–96. On Odysseus' arming as a typical opening of a warrior's *aristeia*, see Müller 1966, 137. On *Mnesterophonia* as Odysseus' *aristeia*, see Cook 1995, 152.

67. In *Od.* 22.279–80, Eumaeus' shoulder above his *sakos* is grazed by a spear of Ctesippus, who is immediately killed by Philoetius. We can note the resemblance to the Iliadic pattern: the attacker on the *sakos*-wielding warrior is slain. However, there is also a difference in that the *sakos* does not seem to have the supreme sheltering effect that we have been observing in the *Iliad*.

formulated by Erwin Cook: “trajectory of Odysseus’ self-identification as a suffering wanderer and initial repression of his heroic identity followed by its triumphant reassertion at the end of the story.”⁶⁸

SAKOS AND ASPIS IN HESIOD

The only poem in the Hesiodic corpus where the shields are present is the *Shield*. The name of the poem, *Aspis*, is misleading: the shield of Heracles in the poem is consistently referred to as *sakos* (*Sc.* 139, 217, 232, 315, 319, 414, 455). The title is probably a product of a later period, when the word *sakos* had become obsolete.

Three shields appear in the narrative: the *sakos* of Heracles, given pride of place, the *sakos* of Ares, and the *aspis* of Cynus. The latter appears in a by-now familiar scene of a combat between two warriors armed with the *sakos* and the *aspis*. Cynus strikes Heracles’ shield (*sakos*), but cannot pierce it (*Sc.* 413–15). Heracles then at once kills Cynus, striking him in the neck, which is exposed between the helmet and the *aspis* (*Sc.* 416–20). The combat between Heracles and Cynus perfectly conforms to the pattern observed in the *Iliad*, where the warrior striking his opponent’s *sakos* is immediately killed or defeated.

Another two fights described in the poem are between Heracles and Ares. After the death of Cynus, furious Ares attacks Heracles. He hurls his spear at Heracles’ *sakos*, but Athene turns the spear aside (*Sc.* 451–56). Ares springs at Heracles with a sword; then Heracles wounds him in the thigh, exposed under the *sakos* (*Sc.* 460–61), and casts him to the ground. Earlier in the poem, Heracles describes his previous battle with Ares, asserting that he had thrice hurled Ares to the ground, hitting his *sakos* (οὐταμένου σάκεος, *Sc.* 363), and wounding Ares in the thigh (*Sc.* 359–65). Heracles’ success in twice wounding *sakos*-bearing Ares, as well as being victorious after having struck Ares’ *sakos*, is very unusual given the thematic patterns normally associated with *sakos*: the invulnerability of the *sakos*-bearer, and the connection between striking a *sakos* and the defeat of the attacker. However, given the typicality of the fight between Heracles and Cynus, it is likely that the departures from convention in the fights between Heracles and Ares meant to emphasize the extraordinary nature of Heracles’ accomplishment as well as his invincibility, thematically expressed by his wielding his own *sakos*.

SAKOS IN THE LATER SOURCES

The remarkable fact is that the word *sakos* is found only once outside of epic in Archaic Greek poetry. It appears in Fragment 5 of Solon, where Solon describes his excellence in the art of leadership, and declares that he guarded the rights of both the demos and the aristocrats, holding a shield (*sakos*) between them. The choice of the word for “shield” in this poem seems highly appropriate in the light of the associations of this word that we have observed in epic poetry. The shield held by Solon guards both parties and, as it is said

68. Cook 1999, 157.

explicitly, does not allow either side to win. Equally appropriate seems the absence of the word in poems connected with military topics, as for example the poems of Tyrtaeus. A shield making its master invincible would be incongruous in poems praising death in battle as a highest virtue. The word *aspis*, on the contrary, is widely attested in the Archaic poetry of Archilochus, Callinus, Mimnermus, Stesichorus, Alcaeus, and, particularly prominently, Tyrtaeus.

In tragedy, both *sakos* and *aspis* continue to be used, although *sakos* becomes increasingly rare.⁶⁹ The two words seem to be used indiscriminately. While the functional distinction between *sakos* and *aspis* apparently did not survive in tragedy, a vestige of the epic differentiation could have been preserved in the characterization of the *sakos* as “unbreakable” that appears both in Aeschylus and Sophocles. The non-Homeric expression ἄρρηκτον σάκος “unbreakable shield” is employed in Aeschylus *Suppliants* 190 (κρεῖσσον δὲ πύργου βωμός, ἄρρηκτον σάκος, “stronger than a fortress is an altar, a shield that cannot be broken”⁷⁰) and in Sophocles *Ajax* 576, where Ajax concedes his unbreakable shield (ἄρρηκτον σάκος) to his son Eurysaces. The recurrence of the expression ἄρρηκτον σάκος hints at its formulaic nature. It is unlikely that Sophocles is just echoing a phrase coined by Aeschylus. Aeschylus’ line, describing the protective quality of the altar by comparing it to the protection of an unbreakable shield, presents the protection of ἄρρηκτον σάκος as something acknowledged and proverbial.⁷¹ The rhetoric of the line is effective precisely if the traditional associations of the expression ἄρρηκτον σάκος can enhance the idea of the security provided by the altar. We can also note that Aeschylus’ line suggests that an unbreakable shield is more protective than a tower of defense; such unexpected hierarchy needs to rely on an established concept. Another indication of the traditionality of the expression ἄρρηκτον σάκος comes from epic poetry. The shield of Heracles at the moment of his arming is described in the following way (*Sc.* 139–40):

χερσί γε μὴν σάκος εἴλε παναίολον, οὐδέ τις αὐτὸ
οὔτ’ ἔρρηξε βαλὼν οὔτ’ ἔθλασε, θαῦμα ἰδέσθαι.

With his hands he grasped a shield (*sakos*), all flashing—no one ever broke through it by striking it nor smashed it, a wonder to see.⁷²

The juxtaposition of *sakos* and the verb ῥήγνυμι “to break” in the negative is parallel to ἄρρηκτον σάκος. The formula consisting of οὐδὲ + ῥήξε σάκος also appears at *Iliad* 20.267–68 and 21.164–65.⁷³ both times it describes the shield of Achilles as withstanding the opponent’s spear. It is notable that the

69. It is attested nine times in Aeschylus (*aspis* is attested twenty-three times), twice in Sophocles (where *aspis* occurs five times) and four times in Euripides (against fifty-two attestations of *aspis*).

70. The translation is by Friis Johansen (1970, 67).

71. On the proverbial, gnomic character of this line, see Garvie 1969, 137, and Friis Johansen 1980, 152, giving other examples of the image of a shield used as a figure of protection.

72. The translation is by Most (2007).

73. The similarity between ῥήξε σάκος in *Il.* 20.268, 21.165 and ἄρρηκτον σάκος was noted by Friis Johansen (1980, 152).

combination of ῥήγνυμι in the negative and σάκος is reserved for descriptions of the invincibility of the most important shields, those belonging to Achilles and Heracles. Thus, it is possible that the lines of Aeschylus and Sophocles preserve the formulaic expression of the epic theme of an unbreakable shield, without retaining the operative distinction between *aspis* and *sakos* as labels signaling the vulnerability or invincibility of the shield bearer in a given scene.

The examination of the usage of *sakos* and *aspis* in the poetic traditions outside of the *Iliad* by and large replicates the findings concerning the distinction between these two words in the *Iliad*: the association of *sakos* with victory and invincibility and of *aspis* with vulnerability and defeat. The *Shield of Heracles* conforms to the Iliadic convention of naming the shield of the victor *sakos*, and the shield of the loser *aspis*. In the *Odyssey* the usage of *sakos* and *aspis* is less straightforward, but the basic rule observed in the *Iliad*—that a warrior is never killed when his shield is called *sakos*—is upheld. It is not quite clear whether the distinction is effective in lyric poetry, although the consistent avoidance of *sakos*, and its sole appearance in Solon's poem in a context associating the *sakos* with supreme protection, are very suggestive. The two words are not differentiated in tragedy, but the expression *arrehton sakos* demonstrates the presence of an inherited traditional concept of *sakos* as an unbreakable shield.

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