

The Shield of Achilles:

The shield of Achilles plays a major part in the Iliad. It portrays the story of the Achaeans and their fight against the Trojans in a microcosm of the larger story. Forged by the god, Hephaestus, who was a crippled smith, it depicts the two cities and the happenings within, as well as Agamemnon's kingly estate. To gain insight into the details and intricacies of the shield, one must look at the shield itself, the cities depicted within the shield, and the King's Estate and other scenes which are also depicted. These items will give even an amateur reader a fair understanding of the importance of Achilles' shield and the Iliad.

Hephaestus, the god of fire, is the smith whom forged Achilles' shield. He begins with twenty hot bellows and fires bronze, tin, gold, and silver in his kiln. He then proceeds to hammer the metals upon his anvil to create a massive shield for Achilles to wield. The shield itself is made of five layers of metal with a triple ply shield strap edging on the rim. On the shield are scenes showing the heavens and earth and sea, two noble cities, a king's estate, fallow fields, a thriving vineyard, a herd of longhorn cattle, and a dancing circle. Once Hephaestus completes the shield he makes a breastplate and helmet for Achilles. The armor he forges is indestructible and worthy of a god. Through Homer's description of the shield and how it is forged, the reader can begin to understand the importance and value of this device in a literary context.

The two cities depicted on the shield represent a city in Greece and Troy. One of the cities is filled with men dancing and singing and brides marching through the streets, while the other is circled by an army. This army has two plans which split their ranks: to share the riches which they have captured or plunder the city and capture more. Turmoil surrounds each city. In one a quarrel breaks out and is brought to judgement. Surrounding the other, two armies fight along the river banks killing men and dragging off the dead. Both cities are tainted with death, and both house love. In the former two men quarrel over the blood price for a murdered kinsman and take their case to a judge to decide the outcome. In the latter, children and housewives stand guard as the men march out to war. This scene is analogous to the Trojans leaving to fight the Achaeans between their shores and the city. As seen in line 625, "...now hauling a deadman through the slaughter by the heels...", Homer foreshadows Achilles victory over Hector and how Achilles humiliates him.

The king's estate is also portrayed on Achilles' shield. Bountiful harvests of ripe grain are reaped and bound, and the king stands in silence rejoicing among the endless bundle of barley. An ox is being prepared for the harvest feast while the women fix the midday meal. The shield depicts happiness and prosperity for the king (whom represented Agamemnon, the King of the Achaeans) again foreshadowing the Achean's victory in their war with Troy.

The shield also shows a thriving vineyard with a winding footpath on which the pickers run. Among the pickers is a young boy who plays his lyre and sings a lovely dirge. A herd of longhorn cattle is also shown. The bulls are engraved in the gold and tin along with the rest of the pasture's swaying reeds and rippling stream. A pair of lions seize a bull from the front and proceed to devour it. A pack of dogs and herdsman run to aid, but it is too late. The smith also forges a meadow for the flocks to graze and a dancing circle for young boy and girls to court and dance. The scene brings forth a festive and joyous mood.

As you can see, the shield of Achilles is a finely detailed and intricate piece of craftsmanship suitable for a god. The details within the cities themselves and within the King's estate are evidence of this. Not only do they hold beauty in the intricacies, they also serve to represent the larger story of the Iliad and the war between the Achaeans and the Trojans. It serves to remind the reader of what has taken place, as shown in the battle scenes, while setting the scene for what is to come. It acts as a pause for the reader to step back and absorb the meaning of the events prior, and foreshadows the fall of Troy.

