

The description of shields enjoys a long tradition in Greek and Latin poetry, and is a convention special to the epic genre. The earliest and arguably most famous one occurs in book 18 of Homer's *Iliad*, in which the poet describes at some length the shield fashioned by Hephaestus which the goddess Thetis gives to her son Achilles. Then there is the lengthy description of the shield of Heracles in a poem once ascribed to Hesiod and fittingly called *the Shield*. In classical as well as Hellenistic Greek literature, imitations of these two famous descriptions, technically called "ekphrases", abound. It is not surprising to learn that Latin poets adapted the convention to their culture and language.

Vergil's *Aeneid*, a masterful adaptation of Greek epic poetry to the Roman context, also contains descriptions of shields. Of them, the depiction of the shield of Aeneas is the longest and most significant. For just when Aeneas and his men have arrived on Latin soil and prepare to establish a new colony, Venus appears before her son with the gift of a divinely crafted shield. Occupying some one hundred lines of Book Eight, the apparent digression from the narrative serves an important function in the immediate context of the *Aeneid* and enhances the meaning of the poem as a whole. Precisely how the description enhances the meaning of the poem, however, remains a subject of lively debate.

Artists have attempted to reconstruct the shield described by Vergil in an effort to portray the scenes visually and so to appreciate their significance. Figure 1 below presents one common and simple representation of the shield.

While the depths of Tartarus are portrayed appropriately in the lower tableau of the shield, the Capitol of the "eternal city" is pictured above. At the center of the shield appears the battle of Actium and the success of Augustus, who may be seen as the Roman leader in whose honour the poem is written. The sides of the shield are occupied by scenes from Roman history, including the tribes of Latins and Sabines, as well as the individuals such as Mettus and the Tarquins. Needless to say, however, there have been many variations upon this scheme, as well as widely differing representations. Indeed, many literary critics are convinced that

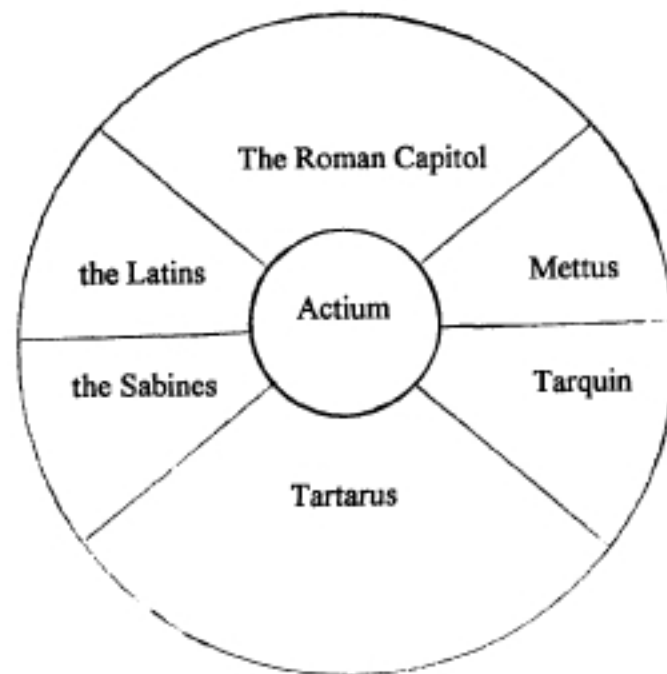


Figure 1

the ekphrasis defies visual representation and conclude that the shield is a figment of the poet's imagination, not intended to be interpreted pictorially.

While the debate concerning the significance of the Shield of Aeneas portrayed in *Aeneid* 8.625-730 continues, it has become clear that the poet employs the description for several ends. In what follows we shall relate the most obvious and widely accepted one. According to one school of thought, the poet portrays on the shield scenes of historical significance to Vergil's contemporaries. Whereas Aeneas is unable to appreciate the importance of scenes portraying events yet to take place after his death, Vergil's readers would be able to identify the figures and happenings. As he does elsewhere in the poem, so too here Vergil brings the mythical past and historical present together by means of flashbacks and foreshadowings. In a national epic celebrating the formation and establishment of a powerful people, a brief survey of important military

and political events is fitting. Perhaps Vergil uses the shield description to catalogue major events in Rome's history from the time of Aeneas' landing on the banks of the Tiber to the triumph of Octavian.

While the shield of Achilles in Homer's *Iliad* contains no scenes of direct relevance to Achilles and his Greek people, Aeneas' shield portrays scenes of actual historical events (as well as legendary ones). But whereas the obviously martial theme is appropriate to the weapon Aeneas will use in establishing a new colony, the meaning of the scenes eludes the hero. To the readers, however, the poet is able to convey the importance of the scenes he describes. At a point in the narrative when fighting is about to commence, the poet surveys crucial wars in the history of Rome. Central to these is the battle at Actium (671-713), an event crucial to the fortunes of Rome. Victory by Marc Antony in 31 BC could have meant the imposition of rule from Alexandria and Egypt; Octavian's success secured the empire for Rome. Closely following this lengthy scene is the triumph of Octavian in 29 BC (lines 714-728), an event which may be interpreted as securing peace and establishing a stable government.

Besides the central scene of the battle of Actium and Octavian's triumph, there are others of similar importance to the survival of Rome. The rape of the Sabine women (635-641), as well as the fighting against indigenous peoples around the site occupied by Aeneas and his descendants, are violent events critical to the continuation of the clan. Also the story of Mettus portrayed on the shield (642-645), may be interpreted in this light. A dictator of Alba Longa who made a treaty with the third king of Rome, Mettus deserted him and neglected his duties in the face of the enemy. His absence from the battle against the Fidenae and Veii resulted in a critical test of Roman military fortitude. The attempted return of the non-Roman Tarquins, and the threat of domination by the Etruscans is portrayed in lines 646-651. Perhaps situated above these at the top of the shield is the Capitol, the site of several events alluded to in lines 652-666. The famous story of the repulsion of the Gauls from the city's peak, for example, suggests that this scene serves to reinforce the supreme status of Rome as center of a mighty civilization.

In adapting the literary convention of epic shield descriptions, Vergil infuses the depiction of Aeneas' shield with historical meaning. As is appropriate to the national epic of the *Aeneid*, the scenes on Aeneas' weapon anticipate events in the history of the burgeoning empire and

suggest that Aeneas' battles on the shores of the Tiber are the first in a long line of violent events that culminate in the accession of Caesar Augustus. While other interpretations of the scenes portrayed may be considered also, it is clear that the historical importance of them enhances the meaning of the description by placing the wars of Aeneas in the context of the many subsequent battles that form part of the rich history of Rome. As the poet himself says, although Aeneas does not know the meaning of the scenes on the shield, "he lifts upon his shoulder the fame and destiny of his children's children" (8.731).