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Unbreakable Shield: A Difference between sakos and aspis in the Iliad

The study seeks to find a difference in the employment of the two most common epic words for "shield," **aspis** and **sakos**, in the *Iliad*.

Past investigations concentrated on examination of formulaic epithets and expanded descriptions as indicators of the appearance and the material of the shields. On the basis of its epithets, the **aspis** was assumed to be round, while the **sakos** was interpreted as a memory of a Mycenaean ox-hide body-shield, oblong or figure-of-eight in shape. However, it was often observed that the proposed distinction between a round **aspis** and a large long **sakos** repeatedly gives way in the expanded descriptions; moreover, the formulaic epithets, used to infer conclusions about shield form, are by themselves discrepant. Nevertheless, **sakos** and **aspis** retain a certain difference in the epic: it was shown by Whallon (*Yale Classical Studies* 19 (1966): 7-36) that the choice between the words **sakos** and **aspis** is not dictated by the meter, and that the two words are kept apart in the descriptions of shields of the major figures.

While previous investigations were seeking a difference between *objects* to which the words **sakos** and **aspis** might relate, the present study examines the differences in the use of the words **sakos** and **aspis**. The hypothesis explored in the course of this study is that the choice of a particular word for "shield" is determined by the narrative context.

An observation, emerging from a consideration of all appearances of the words **sakos** and **aspis** in the *Iliad*, is that a warrior is never killed while armed with a **sakos**. This phenomenon cannot be connected with any physical quality of the **sakos**, since sometimes (rarely) the same shield can be called both **sakos** and **aspis** consecutively. A connected peculiarity is that in the *Iliad*, a warrior striking his opponent's **sakos** *always* immediately dies or is defeated. In the fight between two warriors armed with the **aspis** and the **sakos**, the **sakos**-bearer always wins. In contrast, warriors who carry **aspis** are often (not always) killed; a blow to the **aspis** often results in the death of the **aspis**-bearer, but it may have no result, and sometimes the death of the attacker may follow. Thus, in the frame of the *Iliad* as a whole, in the pair **sakos** / **aspis**, **sakos** is a marked element, carrying inherently the idea of invincibility, while the **aspis** is unmarked. Remarkably, this contextual observation finds a correspondence in the language of tragedy. Both Aeschylus (*Suppliant Maidens* 190) and Sophocles (*Ajax* 576) used expression **arrêkton sakos** – "unbreakable shield." The coincidence of an identical expression in the two authors hints to the formulaic nature of the word combination **arrêkton sakos**. While the functional distinction between **sakos** and **aspis** did not survive in the tragedy (the two words are used interchangeably), the vestige of the old differentiation was preserved in the description of the **sakos** as "unbreakable."

On the basis of these results, it is possible to conclude that there is nothing intrinsic in a shield that makes it **sakos** or **aspis**. The power of denomination belongs to the epic. The choice between **sakos** or **aspis** as a word for "shield" appears to be a tool that allowed a fine shaping of the narrative expectation for a particular hero.