

Kirk, G.S., The Language and Background of Homer. Cambridge, 1964

*Shields*

Gray, D. H.F., "Homeric epithets for things" (Class. Quarterly 61, 1947, 109-21)

p. 59 Of the Homeric words for shield, ἀσπίς occurs 96 times and σάκος 79 times. Both words are used in general descriptions of the Greek and Trojan armies. *an*

p. 65 Homer, it seems, found in the tradition a helmet which was fundamentally non-metallic, ornamented by a horsehair crest and reinforced by various attachments, the meaning of which had already become obscure; this he overlaid lavishly with the colour, brilliance, and elaborate decoration which now leave the most vivid and lively impression on the reader, but without removing the traditional features to make room for the new. *an*

p. 65 The absence of any traditional phrase to describe the πᾶλλος χάλκος shows that these were not the shields which were familiar while the epic tradition was being developed.

p. 66 The traces of the body-shield are interesting examples of Homer's use of traditional material. . . . On internal evidence alone the obscurity of the epithets and the fewness of the incidents show that they were not drawn from contemporary life. *an*

p. 67 The poems then contain traces of a shield of great height which lapped round the wearer's body. This shield must have been known, or at least clearly remembered, during the earlier stages of the development of the traditional diction, since it inspired two traditional phrases. It had, however, long ceased to be an actual and familiar object; no one who knew the body-shield could have been impressed by the size of any other type. Only the phrases, along with a few episodes, were remembered and they were gradually being driven out by more familiar words. The prevailing traditional phrases described two types of shield, a large and strong leather σάκος of unspecified shape but, unlike the body-shield, broad rather than high, and a round ἀσπίς with a conspicuous boss or bosses. Neither type was marked by outstanding beauty of ornament or substantial use of metal. These shields, too, were obsolescent, since the characteristic which is vividly alive in the poems is the outer face of gleaming metal, brilliantly ornamented, which has been added to the round shield. The leather foundation has become a subsidiary feature necessary to the construction. No functional change is implied; the phrases belonging to non-metallic shields could remain current because although inadequate they were not inappropriate to the metal shields which were accepted as normal. It is not the purpose of this article to carry further the comparison with the archaeological evidence.<sup>2</sup> *an*

The evidence is cumulative. A single phrase proves nothing. A consistent group of phrases creates a probability. Still more when we find that the traditional phrases describe both helmets and shields of a utilitarian and unspectacular type, and that the epithets which do not form such phrases are permeated with brightness and colour, it is a strong argument for believing that the attributes of brightness and colour were derived from a new artistic development and not from the memory of a long-dead past. *a*