

Homer, *Iliad* 18.468-607

*In this passage, Homer describes the making of the shield of Achilles, and, in particular, an elaborate picture engraved by the god Hephaestus, depicting a wide range of human activities. At this point in the Iliad, Achilles has moved to a new level of rage: beyond the insult to his honor that originally motivated his withdrawal from the Greek effort, Achilles is now seething because his dearest companion, Patroclus, has been killed by Trojan Hector while fighting in Achilles' own armor. Achilles once again enters the war, clad in some new armor (including the shield) from Thetis, his divine mother, and Hephaestus, but he's burning with savage revenge, which drives him to some horrific actions. Homer's audience was supposed to remember the shield as they listened to the blood-soaked marauding of enraged Achilles in battle, and the stark contrast it presents to the warrior ethic typically celebrated in Greek culture.*

*Keep in mind as well the long oral tradition associated with the composition of Homeric epic: it's clear that material from the Late Bronze Age has been preserved in these poems and handed down to a later period of time.*

Consider:

*what kind of world is depicted on the shield? what basic features of human society are represented? what aspects does the poet emphasize?*

*what kind of conflict is shown on the shield? what impact does it have on human society?*

(478) First of all he forged a shield that was huge and heavy,  
elaborating it about, and threw around it a shining  
triple rim that glittered, and the shield strap was cast of silver.

There were five folds composing the shield itself, and upon it  
he elaborated many things in his skill and craftsmanship.

(483) He made the earth upon it, and the sky, and the sea's water,  
and the tireless sun, and the moon waxing into her fullness,  
and on it all the constellations that festoon the heavens,  
the Pleiades and the Hyades and the strength of Orion  
and the Bear, whom men give also the name of the Wagon,  
who turns about in a fixed place and looks at Orion  
and she alone is never plunged in the wash of the Ocean.

(490) On it he wrought in all their beauty two cities of mortal men. And there were marriages in one, and festivals.

They were leading the brides along the city from their maiden chambers under the flaring of torches, and the loud bride song was arising.

The young men followed the circles of the dance, and among them the flutes and lyres kept up their clamour as in the meantime

the women standing each at the door of her court admired them.

The people were assembled in the market place, where a quarrel had arisen, and two men were disputing over the blood price for a man who had been killed. One man promised full restitution in a public statement, but the other refused and would accept nothing.

Both then made for an arbitrator, to have a decision;

and people were speaking up on either side, to help both men.

But the heralds kept the people in hand, as meanwhile the elders were in session on benches of polished stone in the sacred circle and held in their hands the staves of the heralds who lift their voices.

The two men rushed before these, and took turns speaking their cases, and between them lay on the ground two talents of gold, to be given to that judge who in this case spoke the straightest opinion.

(509) But around the other city were lying two forces of armed men shining in their war gear. For one side counsel was divided whether to storm and sack, or share between both sides the property and all the possessions the lovely citadel held hard within it.

But the city's people were not giving way, and armed for an ambush.

Their beloved wives and their little children stood on the rampart

to hold it, and with them the men with age upon them, but meanwhile the others went out. And Ares led them, and Pallas Athene.

These were gold, both, and golden raiment upon them, and they were beautiful and huge in their armour, being divinities,

and conspicuous from afar, but the people around them were smaller.

These, when they were come to the place that was set for their ambush, in a river, where there was a watering place for all animals,

there they sat down in place shrouding themselves in the bright bronze.

But apart from these were sitting two men to watch for the rest of them and waiting until they could see the sheep and the shambling cattle,

who appeared presently, and two herdsmen went along with them playing happily on pipes, and took no thought of the treachery.

Those others saw them, and made a rush, and quickly thereafter cut off on both sides the herds of cattle and the beautiful

flocks of shining sheep, and killed the shepherds upon them.

But the other army, as soon as they heard the uproar arising from the cattle, as they sat in their councils, suddenly mounted behind their light-foot horses, and went after, and soon overtook them.

These stood their ground and fought a battle by the banks of the river, and they were making casts at each other with their spears bronze-headed;

and Hate was there with Confusion among them, and Death the destructive; she was holding a live man with a new wound, and another

one unhurt, and dragged a dead man by the feet through the carnage.

The clothing upon her shoulders showed strong red with the men's blood.

All closed together like living men and fought with each other

and dragged away from each other the corpses of those who had fallen.

(541) He made upon it a soft field, the pride of the tilled land,

wide and triple-ploughed, with many ploughmen upon it

who wheeled their teams at the turn and drove them in either direction.

And as these making their turn would reach the end-strip of the field,

a man would come up to them at this point and hand them a flagon

of honey-sweet wine, and they would turn again to the furrows

in their haste to come again to the end-strip of the deep field.

The earth darkened behind them and looked like earth that has been ploughed

though it was gold. Such was the wonder of the shield's forging.

(550) He made on it the precinct of a king, where the labourers

were reaping, with the sharp reaping hooks in their hands. Of the cut swathes

some fell along the lines of reaping, one after another,

while the sheaf-binders caught up others and tied them with bind-ropes.

There were three sheaf-binders who stood by, and behind them

were children picking up the cut swathes, and filled their arms with them

and carried and gave them always; and by them the king in silence

and holding his staff stood near the line of the reapers, happily.

And apart and under a tree the heralds made a feast ready

and trimmed a great ox they had slaughtered. Meanwhile the women

scattered, for the workmen to eat, abundant white barley.

(561) He made on it a great vineyard heavy with clusters,

lovely and in gold, but the grapes upon it were darkened

and the vines themselves stood out through poles of silver. About them

he made a field-ditch of dark metal, and drove all around this

a fence of tin; and there was only one path to the vineyard,  
and along it ran the grape-bearers for the vineyard's stripping.  
Young girls and young men, in all their light-hearted innocence,  
carried the kind, sweet fruit away in their woven baskets,  
and in their midst a youth with a singing lyre played charmingly  
upon it for them, and sang the beautiful song for Linos  
in a light voice, and they followed him, and with singing and whistling  
and light dance-steps of their feet kept time to the music.

(573) He made upon it a herd of horn-straight oxen. The cattle  
were wrought of gold and of tin, and thronged in speed and with lowing  
out of the dung of the farmyard to a pasturing place by a sounding  
river, and beside the moving field of a reed bed.

The herdsmen were of gold who went along with the cattle,  
four of them, and nine dogs shifting their feet followed them.  
But among the foremost of the cattle two formidable lions  
had caught hold of a bellowing bull, and he with loud lowings  
was dragged away, as the dogs and the young men went in pursuit of him.  
But the two lions, breaking open the hide of the great ox,  
gulped the black blood and the inward guts, as meanwhile the herdsmen  
were in the act of setting and urging the quick dogs on them.

But they, before they could get their teeth in, turned back from the lions,  
but would come and take their stand very close, and bayed, and kept clear.

(587) And the renowned smith of the strong arms made on it a meadow  
large and in a lovely valley for the glimmering sheepflocks,  
with dwelling places upon it, and covered shelters, and sheepfolds.

(590) And the renowned smith of the strong arms made elaborate on it  
a dancing floor, like that which once in the wide spaces of Knossos  
Daidalos built for Ariadne of the lovely tresses.

And there were young men on it and young girls, sought for their beauty  
with gifts of oxen, dancing, and holding hands at the wrist. These  
wore, the maidens long light robes, but the men wore tunics  
of finespun work and shining softly, touched with olive oil.

And the girls wore fair garlands on their heads, while the young men  
carried golden knives that hung from sword-belts of silver.

At whiles on their understanding feet they would run very lightly,  
as when a potter crouching makes trial of his wheel, holding  
it close in his hands, to see if it will run smooth. At another  
time they would form rows, and run, rows crossing each other.

And around the lovely chorus of dancers stood a great multitude  
happily watching, while among the dancers two acrobats  
led the measures of song and dance revolving among them.

(606) He made on it the great strength of the Ocean River  
which ran around the uttermost rim of the shield's strong structure.

(transl. Lattimore