

# The Greek shield as a metal artifact and its reflection in the story of the Croesus' gifts in Thebes

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The article is devoted to the study of archaeological evidences and literary tradition regarding ancient Greek shields as metal artifacts or as the artifacts made by the use of metal. Presented is an attempt at interpreting the names “σάκος” (*sakos*) and “ἀσπίς” (*aspis*), by which ancient authors called the Greek shields in the Archaic and Classical Periods. New data on the dating of some artefacts let assume that a number of shields, the production technology of which goes back to the Late Bronze Age or made later (in the Geometric or Archaic Periods) may have been displayed in sanctuaries under the influence of the artifacts from the Late Bronze Age. The authors propose a version according to which Herodotus, describing the Croesus' gifts in Thebes, uses the word “σάκος”, thereby emphasizing the uncommonness of the golden shield, its heroic antiquity and the reliability of the Amphiarus' shield. Archaeological parallels and the words “φάεναν [ἀσπ]ίδα” from an inscription found in Thebes suggest that it was a round shield. This artifact had not only a religious, but also a historical and educational function, being an article that bounds up the Thebans with their heroic past.

**Key words:** shield, bronze, gold, *sakos*, *aspis*, Thebes, Amphiarus, Croesus, Herodotus, Apollo Ismenios, Delphi.

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## Introduction

The article presents an attempt to combine in the research both archaeological evidences and written sources relating to the ancient Greek shield. We will indicate the differences between the names “σάκος” and “ἀσπίς”, mentioned in the epic poetry; reveal the main properties and construction of the bronze-plated hoplite shield and some preceding types, and trace the impact of the shield phenomenon on the Theban mytho-history by the example of the Croesus' gifts to Amphiarus, mentioned by Herodotus (Hdt. 1.52). There is a considerable historiography on the first two issues, so our excursus is selective and collective in character and takes into account modern achievements. We hope that it will be interesting to the readers of the journal to address themselves to the history of metallurgy and the main characteristics of the bronze-plated shields.

As regards the production technology and performance attributes based on hypothetical reconstructions of the shields, which are mentioned in Homeric poems, we refer the readers to the following book: *Paipetis S. A. The Unknown Technology in Homer*. Dordrecht, 2010. 210 p. (for shields and other protective armament see subsection: Part 4).

As for Thebes, we offer a study which let expand an understanding of difficult questions about comparison of “σάκος” and “ἀσπίς”. Besides, we will consider cultural and historical as well as historical and educational consti-

tents of the shield as an artifact that has been in Herodotus' time in Thebes.

## Literary tradition and archaeology

Before presenting the types of the shields known from archaeological data, let us pay attention to the terms that denote shields in the epic tradition (Homeric poems, works of Hesiod and Aeschylus). There is an idea regarding the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* that they were created approximately in the middle or last part of the VIII century BC. However, the historiographical trend is such that a number of researchers propose to date these works to the time around 700 BC or even later, up to 678 BC as *terminus post quem* and around 630 BC as *terminus ante quem* [26; 16, p. 131; 149–152]. As regards the works of Hesiod, the near dating is assumed: around 700 BC or a little later, since the date can be attributed to the Lelantine war [18; 16, p. 152]. The creation time of Aeschylus' *Seven Against Thebes* refers to the period from 475 to 470 BC [27, p. 81; 10, p. 233; 1, p. 307–308]. In that way, the period from around 700 to around 470 BC, or the time from the Archaic to the Early Classical Period is considered in relation to the terms that denote the shield in literary sources. Already in Homeric poems, shields are designated by the terms “σάκος” or “ἀσπίς” that are the most used in epic poetry. In modern research, these terms are usually considered as distant reflection of once different types of the shields. Sometimes, “ἀσπίς” is thought originally

a round shield, while “σάκος” is a body shield [7, p. 61; 5, p. 178–179]. However, as noted by Bershadsky, Achilles’ “σάκος” (Hom. *Il.* 18.479–608) and Agamemnon’s “ἄσπις” (Hom. *Il.* 11.32–40), are made exclusively of metal, decorated and have more common features than “σάκος” of Ajax (Hom. *Il.* 7.219–223) or “ἄσπις” of Sarpedon (Hom. *Il.* 12.294–297), which are both made of oxhide and bronze [2, p. 3]. Having fulfilled quantitative and contextual usage analysis of the terms under discussion, Bershadsky notes that in the *Iliad* the hero is never killed if he has the “σάκος” shield [2]. That is, the words denoting shields in Homeric poems do not reflect the type of a shield, but the degree of the hero protectability. In such a way, there is confirmed the Grethlein’s assumption that the *Iliad* contains recollections of these shields without any perfect definitions, and the words “σάκος” and “ἄσπις” are supplemented with epithets that define both of them as a small round shield and as a long shield; if the idea of a long shield is not interpreted as a fantastic expression of the hero’s strength, it corresponds to the image of Mycenaean long shields [6, p. 169].

This brings up the question: If a long shield corresponds to any of the Late Bronze Age periods, then what time can a small round shield belong to?

As early as in 1967, Snodgrass has noted that a small, circular shield is the commonest variety for the period 1250–1150 BC. However, regarding the material of which the shields were made, the researcher notes that “these shields must all be largely of hide, like their predecessors, but they may have had a metal accessory in the shape of one or more large bronze discs, about six inches across, with a domed centre and sometimes a protruding spike” and further “a twelfth-century grave at Moulana in Crete produced the earliest specimens, but more impressive evidence comes from Cyprus in a slightly later period (1100–1050 BC – A. Mozhaysky, V. Pichugina), a find which also shows that a metal border could be attached to such a shield” [23, p. 32–33]. In the following period of the the Early Iron Age (right up to VIII century BC) finds of bosses from the shields “occur both in Greece and in Cyprus”. Systematizing the finds of this time, Snodgrass marks that now such bosses “almost always found singly, suggesting a smaller, probably round shield, the basic material of which must be hide” [23, p. 44]. These shields probably have had a central handle, using which, if needed, it was possible to put forward the shield to the full length of an arm, as did Deiphobus in one of the episodes of the *Iliad*: Διφωβος δὲ ἄσπιδά ταυρεῖην σχέθ’ ἀπὸ ξο (Hom. *Il.* 13.163).

However, since when does the archaeological data provide the shield-modeled, fully bronze objects or bronze-plated shields? Let us start with the fact that the images of small round shields from the Late Bronze Age (LH IIIC period, 1200/1190–1075/50 BC) correspond in proportions to the European samples “of Urnfield groups (broadly defined) in Italy, the Balkans, and central Europe”: 50–60 cm in diameter, based on the proportion comparison between shields and people who hold them

[25, p. 130–136; 12, p. 284–285]. The researchers have noticed that in the last decades before the destruction of the palaces, some of Mycenaean centres may have been in contact with Urnfield groups, and later “many metal objects were made in Greece that had features that looked like and functioned in similar fashions as objects made in the Urnfield tradition, but many of these same objects also had features derived from Aegean smithing traditions” [12, p. 281; Cf. 11]. In this respect, we believe that if the dating of the small round shield No. 3642 at the Archaeological Museum in Delphi (Delphi Shield 1 by Molloy’s classification), that Molloy suggests is correct, then here is a possible prototype of the LH IIIC period for the round “σάκος” or “ἄσπις” in Homeric poems. Let us cite a description of this shield in Molloy [12, p. 288]: “The shield today is fragmentary, so its original diameter cannot be defined. It features a central boss that is 13.0 cm in diameter and 4.0 cm high from the front. The shield, as it survives, weighs 1,117 g, suggesting the original complete item weighed a little over 2,000 g, which is consistent with the comparatively heavy (by European standards) Group Plzeň shields, an admittedly broad group consisting of three shields, two provenanced to Denmark and one to the Czech Republic. A handle was originally attached as indicated by three rivets and one rivet hole measuring ca. 5.8–7.0 mm in diameter. The length of the rivets suggests the handle was ca. 3.0–4.0 mm thick where it attached to the body of the shield, and the deformation on the interior end of the surviving rivets indicates that the handle was forcibly removed. The simple (non-stepped) domed central boss is consistent with Lommelev-Nyitúra-type or Herzprung designs... It is surrounded by three concentric embossed rings, each with a V-notch pointing toward the boss and aligned with the axis of the handle. The notches are then surrounded by a row of miniature bosses, a further embossed ring with no apparent V-notch, and a subsequent row of miniature bosses before breakage prevents further decorative analyses”.

Such finds are traditionally dated to the VIII or VII centuries BC. However, in Molloy’s opinion based on a comparative analysis with possible analogues, this shield was made in the last centuries of the Bronze Age. He argues that “Bronze Age shields were items of display that either remained visible or were rediscovered in the Iron Age”, and, along with offensive weapons, “some served as models for copies designed for display and votive deposition” [12, p. 279]. As the researcher emphasizes, “from Delphi, we therefore appear to have at least two spearheads and one shield (Delphi Shield 1) that have close stylistic parallels and identical technologies to the European 13<sup>th</sup>- to 11<sup>th</sup>-century series, and a spear-head, two spearheads or swords, and a shield (Delphi Shield 2) that adopt stylized features of Bronze Age objects” [12, p. 297]. Thus, the characteristic features of Late Bronze Age weapons were in demand by the Greeks in VIII–VII centuries BC for aesthetic or also for political (legitimation) and religious reasons. This exactly, in our opinion,

is reflected in Homeric poems, an example of which may be the description and mixing of the shield types in the terms “σάκος” and “ἀσπίς”.

Bershadsky has also analyzed mentioning the shields by Hesiod [2, p. 21] and found that of all the works of Hesiod's corpus, shields are found only in the *Shield*. There are three shields presented in this work: “σάκος” of Heracles, “σάκος” of Ares and “ἀσπίς” of Cycnus. A single combat between Heracles armed with “σάκος” and Cycnus armed with “ἀσπίς”, in the researcher's opinion, is in perfect agreement with similar descriptions from the *Iliad*: a warrior with “σάκος” is victorious over a warrior with “ἀσπίς”. In other words, here “σάκος” gives also more protection. Nevertheless, a slightly different picture is beginning to emerge in the descriptions of the fight between Heracles and Ares, where the winner is Heracles, who twice wounded Ares, which is explained by the author's conception and the expression of Heracles' invincibility.

Researchers note that it is impossible to identify the typological difference between “σάκος” and “ἀσπίς” in Aeschylus' tragedy *Seven Against Thebes*, since both shields are qualified as “round” (for example: Sept. 489 - ἀσπίδος κύκλον, 540 - σάκει κυκλωτῶ, 642 - εὔκυκλον σάκος) [22, p. 259, n. 6; 3, p. 124, n. 356]. However, the main emphasis in Aeschylus' description of shields is placed on the symbolism that the shield bears – on what is depicted on it, including what pedagogical aspect this image has [19].

Whenever the so-called “Hoplite revolution” has occurred (and whether the use of such a name is legitimate: see various points of view in [8]), by the time of Aeschylus, the shield of a heavily armed warrior was a hoplite shield. De Groote [4, p. 199] has summarized information about hoplite shields taking into consideration the historiography as follows:

Average diameter, cm .....	c.90
Average width of rim, cm .....	c.4.5–5.5
Average bowl depth, cm .....	>10
Average bowl thickness, cm .....	c.0.6–2
Estimated average weight (wooden faced), kg .....	c.5–7
Estimated average weight (with bronze facing), kg ...	c.7–9.

Attention is drawn to the detail that permits to effectively use this shield in a close formation – phalanx: “It was equipped with an innovative double-grip system consisting of a central looped arm-band, the porpax, through which the left forearm was slipped as far as the elbow, and a peripheral handle, the antilabe, which was gripped by the hand” [4, p. 198]. Here De Groote also notes that “the offset rim, which averaged between 4.5 and 5.5 cm in width and 1 cm in thickness, apparently was always reinforced by a thin layer of bronze, as opposed to the domed outer face of the shield, which could be either left wooden-faced or covered in its entirety by a thin (c.0.05 cm) layer of bronze”.

In the writings of Herodotus and Thucydides, the word “ἀσπίς” is adapted for naming the hoplite shield, for example: Hdt. 9.74.2 – the shield of the Athenian Sophanes in the Battle of Plataea; Hdt. 8.27.4 – Phocians captured four thousand of Thessalians shields and donated them

to Delphi and Abae; Thuc. 3.22.3 – shields of Plataeans; Thuc. 4.9 (corrected for mentioning here a light shield, which confirms that the word “ἀσπίς” has a wide application [19, p. 125, n. 12]) and 6.58.2 – shields of Athenians; Thuc. 4.12 и 4.38.1 – shields of Lacedaemonians; Thuc. 4.96.2 – shields of Boeotians [Cf. 3, p. 122–123, n. 336]. Cases of designation of the hoplite shield by the word “ὄπλον” are deciphered by Lazenby and Whitehead and probably do not appear earlier than IV century BC [9].

It is intriguing that along with the use of the word “ἀσπίς” [20, p. 49–50], Herodotus has also used other words designating different types of shields: γέρρα – Persian shields (Hdt. 7.61.1); προβλήματα – shields of Asiatic Ethiopians (Hdt. 7.70.2); πέλται – the Thracian shields (Hdt. 7.75.1); and shields of the Cilicians – λαισήια (Hdt. 7.91.1) [3, p. 122, n. 331]. Hence, Herodotus definitely evinces the knowledge of the shield types. Against this background it looks like a complete mystery the only mention by Herodotus of an “σάκος”, referring to the shield that was located in Thebes.

### Gifts of Croesus and “σάκος” in Thebes

According to Herodotus (Hdt. 1.92.1; 1.52), the Lydian king Croesus has donated two golden shields and a golden spear to the Greek sanctuaries. One of the shields (ἀσπίς χρυσῆ μεγάλη) could be seen in the Sanctuary of Athena Pronaia in Delphi, and the other one (σάκος χρύσεον) together with the spear was donated to Amphiaraus in Thebes, but in the time of Herodotus they could be seen in the temple of Apollo Ismenios. In one of our articles, having collecting literary evidences, archaeological and topographical data, we have assumed that “the gifts of Croesus were transported from the Amphiareum to a safer place, i.e. the temple of Apollo Ismenios which was protected by the late Archaic wall of Greater Thebes that included the southeastern sector near Kadmeia” and “the reason was arguably the disturbance caused by the Persian invasion of Greece” [13, p. 78]. In other works, it was analyzed where the sanctuary of Amphiaraus in Thebes could be located and the literary traditions associated with it were established [21; 15].

Having mentioned why, from Herodotus' report, “σάκος”, which was considered as a gift of Croesus to Amphiaraus, has been found in the temple of Apollo Ismenios, let us turn to the interpretation of this shield. Buxton believes that since Herodotus so thoroughly distinguish terminologically between the different types of shields, the only mention of “σάκος” have to mean a shield that differs from the round “ἀσπίς”. According to Buxton, “σάκος” of Herodotus may represent “a type of shield no longer in use – a shield which could be associated in Greeks' minds to an heroic past – such as one of the body-shields of LH I, represented in a dagger blade found in grave IV at Mycenae” [3, p. 125]. We agree with Buxton that Herodotus denotes the shield, that probably belongs to another epoch, different from the contemporary with the Herodotus' “ἀσπίς”. However, recent discoveries call

into question the hypothesis that it can be a “tower” type or a “figure-of-eight” shield of Mycenaean time. Firstly, the above-mentioned re-dating of the shield from Delphi shows that the small round shield is also suitable for interpreting Herodotus’ “σάκος” and may also date from the Late Bronze Age. Let us note one more similarity. In Delphi, in addition to this shield, there has been found two spearheads that, in Molloy’s opinion, belong to the Late Bronze Age. Hence, the combination of the round shield and the spear presented by Croesus to Amphiarus from the story of Herodotus gets an archaeological parallel. If Thebes did not possess Late Bronze Age artifacts, then it is very likely that similar items (stylistically based on Late Bronze Age artifacts) could later have been made using gold. Moreover, as we have already shown, close in time to Herodotus, Aeschylus in the *Seven Against Thebes* defines “σάκος” as a round shield. Secondly, and this is a key point, Papazarkadas has published the inscription, found in Thebes in 2005 [17, pp. 233–248]. According to Papazarkadas, the inscription on the side of the artifact, which is written in the epichoric script of Boiotia, can be dated to the end of VI – beginning of V centuries BC. The researcher believes that the inscription refers to the same artifact that Herodotus saw in the temple of Apollo Ismenios. The inscription tells of an unknown “supervisor” of the sanctuary of Apollo who miraculously discovered the stolen shield of Croesus. However, the inscription does not mention “σάκος χρύσεον” as Herodotus did, but “φάεναν [ἀσπ]ίδα” (the shining shield). Considering that, as we have established, by the time of Aeschylus and Herodotus, “ἀσπίς” is a round shield in the literature, this inscription is ranked similarly, and “σάκος” of Herodotus could hardly be shield of a different shape. Perhaps the author of the inscription found in Thebes used the Homeric formula to emphasize the heroic character of this shield, and did not focus on the word “σάκος”. For example, in the *Iliad* we find “διὰ μὲν ἀσπίδος ἦλθε φαεινῆς ὄβριμον ἔγχος” (Hom. *Il.* 3.357), or “ὥς Ἴκτωρ ἄσβεστον ἔχων μένος οὐχ ὑπεχώρει | πύργῳ ἔπι προὔχοντι φαεινὴν ἀσπίδ’ ἐρείσας” (Hom. *Il.* 22.96–97), or else “δὲ δέ μιν σάκεϊ κρύπτασκε φαεινῶ” (Hom. *Il.* 8.272). In our opinion, the key characteristic of the Theban “σάκος” of Herodotus should have been its antiquity and symbolic aspect: heroic and religious. According to Herodotus, this shield was made of gold. For this reason alone, it must have been uncommon. This shield corresponds to the shield owner protectability established by Bershadsky, since Amphiarus, as a matter of convention, was swallowed up by the earth, saving himself from pursuit. Thus, the hero found himself in some intermediate state between the living and the dead. By convention, reflected in *The Mythological Library* by Pseudo-Apollodorus, prior to a Periclymenus’ chance to strike Amphiarus in the back, Zeus cleft the earth by throwing a thunderbolt, and Amphiarus has disappeared along with his chariot and charioteer (Ps.-Apollod. *Bibl.* 3.6.8). It is possible that Herodotus, using the word “σάκος” with reference to the shield

sent to Amphiarus as a gift, emphasized this aspect too along with antiquity.

### Conclusions

Current state of knowledge regarding literary sources, archaeological, epigraphic and topographical data make it possible to establish that round Greek hoplite shield was called “ἀσπίς” by V century BC. Nevertheless, a number of shields being rooted in the Late Bronze Age or made later (in the Geometric or Archaic Period) under the influence of Late Bronze Age artifacts, could be displayed in sanctuaries. Archaeological data evidence that these may have been round-shaped shields, imitating those of the last centuries of the Bronze age. This thesis is confirmed by artifacts from Delphi and some other places. It explains the presence in literary sources, starting with Homeric poems, usage of the terms “ἀσπίς” and “σάκος” concerning heroic shields, which are defined at times as round and at other times as body-shields (images of the latter were found by the Greeks of Archaic times). Herodotus, describing the gifts of Croesus in Thebes, uses the words “σάκος”, thereby emphasizing the uniqueness of the golden shield, its heroic antiquity and the divine nature – the reliability of the Amphiarus’ shield. This shield, if we take into account the archaeological parallels and the “φάεναν [ἀσπ]ίδα” from an inscription found in Thebes, was probably also circular one.

In summary, we note another constituent of shield in Thebes. In our recent article, by the example of bronze tripods with the Cadmean letters, which Herodotus have seen in the same temple of Apollo Ismenios (Hdt. 5.57–61), we have noted that the non-ferrous metal artifact could serve “as mediator of relations between a man and the past, the local and national history; it has an influence upon self-determination, self-awareness and education” [14, p. 47]. The artifacts discussed in this paper have also served the same educational purpose. “Golden” or “shining” shield, as well as a spear in the sanctuary of Amphiarus, and then in the temple of Apollo Ismenios, were the articles that bound up the Thebans with their heroic past, the legendary story of the *Seven Against Thebes*. Thonemann believes that these gifts were not the gifts of Croesus to Thebes, but were donated to Thebes by an Athenian aristocrat from the Alcmaeonid family [24]. For the context in which we examine the gifts, such a view doesn’t change much. And in the article already mentioned above, we have stressed that “recently found inscription proves that Herodotus had indeed visited the Theban Ismenion and had seen the gifts of Croesus, or at least the gifts thought by the Thebans to have been offered by Croesus” (13, p. 74). However, if Thonemann turns out to be right, then there is present a change or addition to the educational narrative, influenced by large-scale historical events reflected in the mirror of metal artifacts.

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