



Detail of an Attic kylix, ca. 490 BC, showing the sack of Troy. Note the decorated inside of the *aspis*. The bands might carry the very same story.

DECORATED PELOPONNESIAN SHIELD-BANDS HOPLITE STORIES

By Cezary Kucewicz

Modern discussions of Greek warfare traditionally focus on the technological impact of hoplite shields and their importance for the phalanx formation. Relatively little emphasis is placed on the shields as private, custom-made objects. Looking at shields as personal items offers fascinating clues about the individual experience of combat and the mindset of Greek warriors.

There are fewer images more evocative of ancient warfare than the Greek hoplite. Named after their military equipment (*hoplon*), hoplites formed the backbone of Greek citizen militias in the Archaic and

Classical eras (ca. 750–323 BC). Their longevity on the battlefield has been ascribed to their panoply, purchased by the hoplites themselves and often adorned with elaborate decorations. The best-known decorative element was the shield

blazon, frequently featuring images of animals or mythical monsters, or the symbol or first letter of the warrior's *polis* (e.g. Heracles' club for Thebans; Λ for Lacedaemonians). It is less commonly known that many shields were also decorated on their obverse side, with small images placed on bands attached inside the shield. Found mostly in the Peloponnese and dating to the Archaic era, decorated shield-bands showcase a fascinating world of images and stories that accompanied individual men into battle.

Hoplite shield-bands

Apart from the central arm-band (*porpax*), some hoplite shields were fitted with separate bands which ran vertically from the top to the bottom of the shield. Made from bronze, hoplite shield-bands were attached with small pins to the *porpax* in the centre and the outside rims of the shield. Their specific purpose remains unclear. They could have provided extra reinforcement to the central arm-band or simply functioned as an aesthetic upgrade. Images of warriors on Greek vases only occasionally depict the shield-bands, suggesting that they were an optional feature which hoplites could add to their panoply.

A bronze *porpax* from Olympia – the central strap of the *aspis* – with both decorative and figurative panels, late sixth century BC. The images inscribed into the bands can just be made out.

© Lauren van Zoonen

Some shield-bands were plain and undecorated. Others were adorned with simple patterns or – most strikingly – decorated with small images, or metopes, depicting figural scenes. Depending on its length, which varied between 75–90 cm, a decorated shield-band featured

Drawing of the *porpax* with different scenes from Greek mythology and the Trojan War.

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between five to eight metopes on both the top and bottom side. Made using dies hammered into bronze,

their images were pre-arranged in specific sequences. Based on their artistic style and technique, the centre of production of decorated shield-bands has been traced to the city of Argos in the Peloponnese, where the first hoplite shields likely originated.

Decorated shield-bands were items of high artistic quality and undoubtedly had a hefty price tag. The variety of images found on them also suggests that the warriors could choose what scenes they wanted to feature on their bands. Unlike shield blazons, the peculiar placement and small size of the metopes indicate that shield-bands were not designed for display. Being visible only to the warrior holding the shield, the shield-bands can be seen as expensive, personal decorations, which allowed men to carry a selection of images and stories with them into the harsh realities of hoplite battles.

Where to find them?

There are currently over 230 known examples of decorated shield-bands from the Greek world. Most consist of small fragments, though a few fully-preserved shield-bands have survived. Almost all the finds come from temples, where the Greeks dedicated captured weapons and armour. Evidence of shield-bands has been found all over the Mediterranean basin, but most come from mainland Greece, especially the major Panhellenic sites of the Sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi, the Sanctuary of Poseidon in Isthmia and, most importantly, the Sanctuary of Zeus at Olympia.

Today a small town in the north-western Peloponnese, ancient Olympia was renowned for hosting the most prestigious athletic games in antiquity, which took place every four years from 776 BC onwards. In addition to hosting the athletic games, Olympia was also the most important sanctuary for dedicating weapons and armour in the Greek world. First excavated in 1875, the site has yielded an unparalleled quantity of hoplite armour dedicated by victorious *poleis* as a thanksgiving to Zeus. Shield-bands feature heavily among the finds, with over 200 items discovered to date, including rare, fully-preserved examples.

Most popular scenes

Until now, archaeologists working at Olympia have reconstructed a total of seventeen complete die sequences (stamps to shape the bronze sheet) used to make a shield-band. But since the surviving evidence consists predominantly of partial fragments, most of the sequences remain incomplete, with over 90 separate sequences currently identified. The sheer variety of available sequences implies that warriors had plenty to choose from and could pick their favourite scenes to feature on their shields. Although the order of metopes within each sequence appears to be mostly random, many of them begin and end with an image of heraldic lions or sphinxes.

There are over 80 different scenes identified on the hoplite shield-bands so far. They



Reconstruction of the inside of an *aspis* with *porpax* and painted shield band.

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The temple of Hera at Olympia. A very large amount of preserved arms and armour was found at Olympia, where it was dedicated to various deities. Oddly, many of the shield-bands were found in the banks for the spectators. The shields had been used as filling!

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Sculpture of a dying hoplite from the pediment of the temple of Aphaia. His *aspis* has a *porpax* but no shield-band.

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Scenes on shield-bands. (From top to bottom:) heraldic sphinxes, the rape of Cassandra, and Heracles and the Nemean lion.

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The Chigi vase, ca. 650 BC, depicts Greek hoplites carrying shields adorned with shield blazons, which added personal flair and sent messages to the enemy.

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SCENE	SEQUENCES
Running Gorgon	26
Heraldic lion	23
Heracles and the Nemean Lion	22
Horse rider	20
Heraldic sphinxes	17
Zeus and Typhon	17
Menelaus and Helen	15
Theseus and the Minotaur	11
Rape of Cassandra	9
Heracles and Geras	8
The birth of Athena	7
Heracles and Geryon	6
Achilles and Penthesilea	5
Chimera	5
Warrior's farewell	4
The ransom of Hector	4
The suicide of Ajax	4
The death of Priam	4

feature both mythological episodes and images drawn from the everyday life of warriors. The most popular metopes are those depicting the running Gorgon, heraldic lions, and sphinxes. The inclusion of fantastic creatures and beasts on shield-bands was almost certainly because of their apotropaic character. Averting evil and bad luck would have been of great importance on the battlefield. Such images were, therefore, chosen by hoplites to provide them with an extra layer of protection. Other images depicted on the shield-bands are equally revealing of what the hoplites might have thought about before and during combat.

Heracles and mythological heroes

Myths associated with Heracles were extremely popular in the art of Archaic Greece. They appear in over 40 separate shield-band sequences, making Heracles by far the most popular mythological figure of the genre. The most common scenes are the defeat of the Nemean Lion (22), the encounter with Geras, the god of old age (eight), and his fight against the three-headed/bodied giant Geryon (six). Being the embodiment of extraordinary strength and courage, Heracles was a figure to emulate for all Greek hoplites. Stories of Heracles and other heroes like Theseus (eleven) or Achilles (seven), were among the favourites in the Greek world, inspiring warriors to strive for excellence no matter the danger and adversity.

The world of a warrior

While many images on shield-bands were drawn from the enormously rich world of Greek mythology, some depicted more generic scenes from everyday life. Among the most popular ones are images of horses, owned by many of the wealthy hoplites. Other metopes are directly related to the world of the warrior, featuring moving scenes of arming, saying farewell to loved ones before battle and playing dice games on campaign. These images, which appear in no less than thirteen separate shield-band sequences, were reminders of home and the life that the warriors were fighting for. Their prominence provides us with a glimpse into the personal lives of the hoplites, both at home and close to the battlefield.

Violence and transgression

Among the most revealing images are those depicting stories of transgressions and unheroic behaviour. The rape of the Trojan princess Cassandra by the Lesser Ajax during the sack of Troy was the most popular featuring in nine separate sequences. On the metopes, Cassandra is often depicted naked, which heightens the threat of sexual violence and the overall negative overtone of the image. A similar episode is the murder of the young Trojan prince Troilus by Achilles, which appears in three sequences. Such stories of transgressions and sexual violence showcased the cruelty of war, in some cases providing cautionary tales against hubris



A variety of undecorated bronze shield-bands from Olympia, each with a porpax.

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Two metopes from a shield-band fragment - a farewell scene and a scene with a female figure and centaur.

© Cezary Kucewicz

that came with defying the gods. They also served as reminders of the dark fate that awaited the defeated and their families. The latter is powerfully illustrated in the metopes depicting the death of the aged king Priam, brutally killed during the sack of Troy (four sequences).

The motif of sexual violence is also prevalent in the group of images showing an armed warrior forcefully leading a woman away. These images, commonly identified as the scene of Menelaus leading Helen away after the sack of Troy, are very popular on the shield-bands, appearing in fifteen separate sequences. The identification with a specific myth, however, is not always clear. The metopes are characterized by their clear dynamic of power: the warrior is fully armed, wields a sword, and holds the woman by the wrist, which implies a clear sense of coercion and violence. Although rarely mentioned in the sources, the usual fate of women after the sack of a city was to become the property of the victors. The metopes, therefore, could have reminded warriors of the spoils of war awaiting them; equally, they would

have been powerful warnings of what happens to the families of the defeated.

Hoplite stories

The scenes on the shield-bands are characterized by their great diversity. As warriors could pick from many different images, their choices tell us a great deal about their personalities, ideals, and values. From the heroic exploits of great heroes like Heracles or Theseus, there to inspire and be emulated; favourite myths, reminding warriors of childhood songs sung to them by their mothers and nannies; pictures of animals and fantastic creatures, helping to avert evil and offer protection from danger; images of riding horses and leaving for war, providing moving reminders of home life; to scenes of wartime atrocities, murder, and sexual violence, serving as dark reminders of what happens to those who end up on the losing side. Altogether, the shield-bands offer us an enormously rich tapestry of stories which Greek hoplites took with them into battle. **AV**

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Detail from the eastern frieze of the Treasury of the Siphnians in Delphi that dates to ca. 525 BC. Shield-bands have been painted on the interior of the hoplites' shields.

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Red-figure plate, ca. 525 BC, now in the Louvre, Paris. The goddess Athena is shown carrying an *aspis* with a decorative shield-band.

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