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An [Hesiodic] danse macabre: The Shield of Heracles

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When discussing the pseudo-Hesiodic Shield of Heracles it is customary to stress how poor a poem we are dealing with.\(^1\) The poet of the Aspis may be no Homer; but he has composed an intriguing,\(^2\) if bizarre poem.\(^3\) Value judgments, so often involving anachronistic comparison, have greatly hindered the pursuit of the meaning of the Shield.\(^4\) In this paper I will argue that the Shield is, thematically speaking, typical of its era. The argument is a convoluted one; it might be best at the outset to provide a summary. I believe that the Aspis is a reflexive and unintellectual response to the problem of death.\(^5\) The theme of the poem is death (rather than, say, the horror of war and mortal combat, or violence and the hero).\(^6\) To demonstrate the presence of this theme it is necessary to analyze the structure of the Aspis and above all the structure of the shield depiction. The shield


\(^3\) Bizarre because of its fascination with the macabre. See the comments of C. F. Russo, Hesiodi Scutum (Firenze 1950) 7 ff. (and the criticisms by J. A. Davidson, CR 2 [1952] 153–54). See also van der Valk (above, note 2: Mnem. 6 [1953]) 266. Note also H. Fränkel, Early Greek Poetry and Philosophy, trans. M. Hadas and J. Willis (Oxford 1975) 108–12.

\(^4\) Lesky (above, note 1) 128 feels that the Aspis is a pale imitation of Homer. Compare also Evelyn-White (above, note 1).

\(^5\) By "reflexive" I mean spontaneous, unlaboured, unelaborated—the "reflexive," presumably produced with speed rather than care, responds in a straightforward, immediate, in an unanalytical manner to a single issue. The "reflexive" may highlight a problem rather than attempting its solution. "Reflective" art analyses, attempts solutions, shows all of the signs of revision. The "Shield of Achilles" (especially on Taplin's convincing reading) is a good example of the latter. Sappho, I dare say, typifies the former.

\(^6\) Thus Fränkel (above, note 3) 108–12 and Thalmann (above, note 1) 62–64.
depiction, as Fränkel demonstrates, creates a metaphorical commentary on the duel between Heracles and his opponents.\(^7\) It will be suggested that Perseus, acting as a doublet for Heracles, is the focal point of both the shield depiction and of the poem as a whole. This "doublet" relationship provides an approximate though recognisable structure for the poem. There are, however, dissimilarities between Heracles and Perseus, most notably that one became immortal, the other remained mortal. The crucial dissimilarity directs attention towards the theme of death. But the poem as a reflexive work—posing problems without offering answers—opens a window into the poet's own and his age's preconceptions. It will also be suggested that the macabre imagery of this thanatological text is symptomatic of the attitude to death of the era in which it was composed. Deracination, burgeoning prosperity, individualism, led to an heightened, sometimes macabre fear of death. The attitude to death of the seventh and sixth centuries spawned the pseudo-Hesiodic Shield of Heracles.

I

That Perseus and Heracles act as doublets has been stated recently and without qualification by Janko (citing in support van der Valk's observations concerning the penchant of the Aspis for doublets).\(^8\) Perhaps the most important link between the two heroes concerns their roles as alexikakoi. Let us consider Perseus. The two tableaux following the Perseus interlude (depicting two cities, one at war, one at peace) are especially instructive.\(^9\) In the first (v. 237b–270a) an horrifying picture of the circumstances of the sacking of a city is drawn: men fight, women scream, old men pray while the fates and death stand by. In the second city (v. 270b–313), peacetime is seen with its feasting, dancing and revelling, its sowing, harvesting, hunting and sports playing. The two pictures illustrate Perseus' capacity as alexikakos. In the city at peace the order which he should be capable of protecting is shown; in the city being sacked the fate his protection may avert. The latter is double-edged, for although suggesting Perseus can avert evil, it must also hint at the destruction he is capable of towards wrong doers. There may well be an unstated parallel between Seriphus and the city being sacked, since it comes immediately after the description of Perseus with Medusa's head. (Perseus' intention,

\(^7\) See Fränkel (above, note 3) 108–12. But contrast van Groningen (above, note 2) 117 and 121, who finds no logic behind the descriptive sequence of the poem, and van der Valk (above, note 2: REG 79 [1966]) 453, who believes the shield description was inserted to compensate for the brevity of the battle scenes.


\(^9\) That the Perseus description dovetails with the description of the city at war and that this dovetails with the description of the city at peace is significant. The enjambment creates an artificial "sense block."
known from Pindar Pyth. 10 and 12, was to free his mother held captive in Serapis by Polydectes. Perseus, utilising Medusa's head, turned Polydectes and the Seripheans to stone. Though these subsequent events are not mentioned there is a strong possibility that the poet intends the listener to fill out the details.) Through the juxtaposition of the two cities with the Perseus digression the poet has carefully outlined what was missing in the actual description of Perseus. Perseus, it is implied, is a protector of the weak (his mother who has a parallel in the image of the city at peace) and a punisher of evil (the Seripheans and Medusa who have a parallel in the image of the city at war). In this manner the poet emphasises the function of Perseus as alexikakos. Heracles too is an alexikakos (fidei defensor as Janko terms him). (For some the purpose of the poem is to describe Heracles in this well known role.)\textsuperscript{10} The point need not be laboured: Cycnus (and his conspirator father) is not just a brigand, he is also impious for he has desecrated the temple of Apollo.\textsuperscript{11} Heracles has done the world a good job by ridding it of this sinful villain.

There are other similarities between Heracles and Perseus.\textsuperscript{12} They were related (Eur. Alc. 509): Heracles was the great grandson of Perseus. Both had an immortal father and a mortal mother. In this poem both heroes triumph over seemingly indomitable opponents. Both are assisted by the goddess Athena. Other parallels, but this time extraliterary, between the two heroes are offered by the late Protoattic Nessus vase. In this amphora, according to Cook, "intended like the big Geometric pots as a marker for a grave," there is on its neck a depiction of Heracles killing Nessus. "Below, two Gorgons take off in pursuit of Perseus (wisely out of sight), while their sister Medusa collapses behind them."\textsuperscript{13} The parallel between the Aspis,


\textsuperscript{11} The scholiast on Pindar Olympian 10. 15 judges Cycnus an even bigger villain. See further Janko (above, note 8). Worth consulting for information on artistic depictions of the Heracles-Cycnus battle is F. Vian, "Le combat d'Héraclès et de Kyknos d'après les documents figurés du VIe et Ve siècle," REA 47 (1945) 5–32 and note also C. M. Bowra, Greek Lyric Poetry (Oxford\textsuperscript{2} 1961) 122. On the relation of the Aspis to contemporary art see Cook (above, note 1), and J. L. Myres "Hesiod's 'Shield of Heracles': Its Structure and Workmanship," JHS 61 (1941) 17–38.


\textsuperscript{13} See J. M. Cook, Greek Pottery (London 1960) 68–70. See too J. Harwit, The Art and Culture of Early Greece (Ithaca 1985) 165 ff. Another possible link between Heracles and Perseus may be offered by Pindar, Pythian 10. The myth of this poem refers to Perseus' visit to the land of the Hyperboreans and his slaying of Medusa; significantly at the very outset of this ode (v. 2–3) Heracles is indirectly invoked.
Gorgons and this picture is obvious. The Nessus amphora “may perhaps be dated about 625 B.C.,” to within, at the best, 25 years of the Aspis. Thus, within at least one artistic mind there was a similarity between the exploits of Heracles and Perseus. Enough, at any rate, to place them on the one vase. The similarity may be even more deep. In the final section of the poem Heracles is described as utilising the advice of Athena and not only managing to repulse the attack of Ares but even to wound him in the leg (v. 458 ff., note also v. 359 ff.). The ability to defeat an immortal in battle implies that the victor has himself a “share” of immortality. To a limited extent, that is, the victor conquers death. (It is worth remembering that Heracles in other contexts—the labours involving Geryon, Cerberus, and the Apples of the Hesperides—“conquers” death). Heracles’ action may parallel that of Perseus when he conquers those kēres of death, the three Gorgons. Both heroes “conquer” death and this capacity may be further emphasised by the depictions on the previously mentioned Nessus amphora. The vase was intended as a grave marker and the inclusion of both heroes must in some way suggest the triumph of the dead person over normal human limitations, a triumph as it were over death. The dead person presumably was wished the capacities of Heracles and Perseus.

The structure of the poem also assists in the comparison of the two heroes. The “doublet” relationship provides a rough shape for the poem. Heracles at either end provides a frame, while Perseus, more or less in the centre, provides a focus. Over the next few paragraphs I hope to demonstrate this point and, further, to emphasise some of the contrasts between Perseus and Heracles.

The description of the shield begins, more or less, at v. 139 and concludes at v. 320. The centre of the shield description, therefore, is approximately at v. 228. The combat section—the core of the poem—is v. 57–480. The centre of this section, numerically speaking, is v. 228. (If one were to include v. 1–56 then the numerical centre of the poem is v. 240.) It should be apparent that the centre, say v. 230, is in the middle of the Perseus interlude. Needless to say, one ought not place too much faith in figures, especially in as imprecise and interpolated a poem as this. Even

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14 For observations on the structure of the poem see the introduction to Russo’s edition (above, note 3); Thalmann (above, note 1) 62–64; van der Valk (above, note 2: REG 79 [1966]) 454, 459, 460; his earlier article (above, note 2: Mnem. 6 [1953]) 268–69; van Groningen (above, note 2) 117; and José Vara Donado, “Contribución al conocimiento del Escudo de Heracles: Hesiodo, autor del poema,” CFC 4 (1972) 315–65, 323 ff.

15 On the authenticity of v. 1–56 see Wilamowitz, “Lesefrüchte,” Hermes 40 (1905) 116–25, 122, who believes v. 1–56 belong to the rest of the poem. So too Russo (above, note 3) 33 n. 34. See also L. Anderson “The Shield of Heracles — Problems of Genesis,” C & M 30 (1969) 10–26, passim; J. Schwartz, Pseudo-Hesiodia (Leiden 1960) 458–66; and van Groningen (above, note 2) 107 and 120, who treats the poem, including v. 1–56, as a whole. M. L. West, The Hesiadic Catalogue of Women (Oxford 1985) 136 (and 136 n. 9), believes the lines are inauthentic. Their authenticity will not affect the conclusions of this paper; what matters is the relationship of Heracles with the depictions (especially Perseus) upon the Shield.
so, the force of the sums may suggest a poem which is shaped about the Perseus interlude. (Thus v. 139–215 and v. 237b–320 balance about Perseus in v. 216–237a).

The texture and content of shield description may justify this contention. Outline of the physical construction of the shield begins at v. 141, but of its actual subjects at v. 144. Each of the subjects described up to and including Perseus begins with the formula en or en de (v. 144, 154— but note v. 155 and 156—, 161, 168, 178, 191, 197, 201—but note v. 204—, 207, and finally v. 216). Each new subject for description begins a line. The en/en de formula provides the poet with a simple means of "paragraphing" his narrative. It deserves note, furthermore, that the descriptions within each of these paragraphs are brief and often undetailed. The subjects depicted are supernatural creatures—hostile or beneficent gods—, immortal monsters, mythological prodigies such as the Centaurs or the Lapiths, animals such as boars, lions, or fish, but significantly there is only one human. This is a fisherman whose presence, partly obscured by Apollo’s regal fish the dolphins, doubtless acts as a transition to the mortal Perseus. Observe especially that there is no real individuation in this section of the poem. There are only personified symbols or groups.

Compare the texture and content of v. 237b–320. Where in v. 139–215 the narrative is paragraphed, imprecise, almost staccato, the narrative of v. 237b–320 dovetails or enjamb. The description of the city at war “enjambs” unexpectedly with the description of Perseus in v. 237. Similarly the description of the city at peace “enjambs” by beginning unexpectedly in mid-line in v. 270b. Within these sections the same tendency for “enjambed” narrative is evident. Inside the section on the city at war descriptions enjamb one with another—note v. 242, and especially v. 248. Within the section on the city at peace, this is more pronounced. There the description of wedding festivities dovetails with a description of agricultural pursuits (v. 286), as agricultural pursuits dovetail with a description of hunting and athletic activities (v. 301). The content of these lines may also be distinguished from v. 139–215. In that section there were a series of ostensibly unrelated tableaux which depicted, primarily, the non-human. In v. 237b–320 attention is directed relentlessly towards the human, even in the long section where the kères, the fates and aclišus are limned—their function is to heighten concentration upon the misfortunes of the city at war. The narrative of v. 139–215 was episodic. In v. 237b–320 it is “organic”: that is to say, the individual elements unequivocally contribute to the linked portraits of war and peace.

There are more than contrasts. One important similarity between v. 139–215 and v. 237b–320 is that in both there is no real individuation of subjects. Attention is given primarily either to horrendous personifications of abstract forces or to groups of individuals. V. 216–237a distinguish themselves from both v. 139–215 and v. 237b–320 through the strong individuation of a single creature, Perseus. He is the only character (and the
only mortal character) to be singled out within the shield depiction for extended description. The point is crucial. The individuation of Perseus is that which makes him stand out from what precedes and from what follows. It is this individuation, coupled with the textual and content dissimilarities between v. 129–215 and v. 237b–320, which provides the shield depiction with its characteristic shape.

If the points made above can be accepted, the structure of the poem is as follows:

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The exactness of the numeration is of no great significance. (The Aspis is a heavily interpolated poem). Of more significance is the ring structure within and without the shield depiction, which results from this tabulation. Such a tabulation, by isolating Perseus and consequently contrasting him with the framing Heracles, helps to elucidate the thematic concerns of the poem. Perseus, it has been implied, is the key to the Aspis. The key to an interpretation of the role of Perseus is offered by comparing and contrasting him with Heracles. The structure forces the comparison. As is often the case, it is the dissimilarities rather than the similarities which are crucial.

Within the poem itself Heracles is shown unequivocally as the victor. In spite of the ferocity of Cycnus and his divine assistant there is never any doubt as to the outcome of the conflict. Although the outcome of Perseus' flight is known, the poet has chosen to represent the hero in a most vulnerable and unheroic light; that of the fugitive. In v. 216–237a Perseus seems to have little chance of escape: the Gorgons' pursuit is ferocious, their description with snake and fear emblazoned vestments is terrifying. The Gorgons had a traditional association with death; sometimes they are described as death kères.16 While Perseus' ability to defeat Medusa and to wield the Gorgon's head suggests an extraordinary ability, the frightening depiction of Sthenno and Euryale suggests that he is not wholly in control. A further indication of the role of Perseus for this poem is his proximity to the brief description of the dance of the immortals in v. 201–206. Thalmann has emphasised this.17 To paraphrase crudely his argument: the depiction of the peace of the dance of the immortals is the yard stick against

16 See E. Vermeule, Aspects of Death in Early Greek Art and Poetry (Berkeley 1979) 139–41.
17 Thalmann (above, note 1) 62–64.
which the actors of the rest of the poem are found sadly wanting. The absence of violence and death in v. 201-206 highlights the presence of violence and death in all of the other contexts of the poem. Without agreeing or disagreeing with Thalmann's other conclusions, it could be stressed that v. 201-206 is one of the few sections of repose in the frenetic poem. It is difficult not to contrast this with the description of Perseus. The near juxtaposition of Perseus with the "dance of the immortals" tells against an easy comparison of Perseus and Heracles. The contrast underscores Perseus' mortality and the vulnerability alluded to above.

The similarities between Heracles and Perseus insist that account is taken of their dissimilarities. The most urgent of the latter is the subjection of Perseus to mortality. Theme and structure, therefore, conspire. By highlighting Heracles and Perseus—structurally and thematically—the poet insists upon the listener's contemplation of his theme. But is this theme of death, an important implication of the contrast between Heracles and Perseus, important for the poem as a whole? Attention now must be turned to the deployment of this theme elsewhere in the Aspis.

II

The two most persuasive readings of the Aspis are those of Fränkel and Thalmann. Both scholars maintain that war and violence rather than death are the real themes of the poem. For the sake of clarity, it might be best to summarise their views. Fränkel interprets the poem thus: "The defeat of a violent robber, who is a son of War (Ares), by the greater warrior Heracles, who achieves peace and security for men and gods, serves as a framework within which the full horror of war and mortal combat is represented. This is the real theme. For this purpose the poet employs a form which he borrowed from Homeric epic [sc. the description of the warrior's shield]." Thalmann builds upon this: "The images on the shield, then, reflect the encounter that is about to take place. Heracles will face Ares' son Cynus and the war god himself, carrying a shield that exposes the grotesque ugliness of war . . . . But the case is not that simple. If Heracles' shield comments on war in general, it comments on its owner's particular actions within this poem, and its message rigorously excludes the notion of heroic glory." How does the shield depiction make this comment? "The pictures on the shield make an implicit statement about war. It is monstrous, irrational, an activity proper to beasts in which man also engages."

18 Fränkel (above, note 3) 110.
19 Thalmann (above, note 1) 64.
20 Thalmann (above, note 1) 63. He also states: "at the centre of the poetic account lie three scenes of gods (v. 191-206), which stand out from the five scenes that precede and the five that follow them. In these flanking parts there is a general progression from monstrous personifications of war and violence through strife in the animal world to warfare among
An alternative to this view, however, might take the function of the essentially artistic representations of the shield at their face value. The representations on the actual shield of Heracles are of a familiar type. "Terror symbols" as they are termed in other contexts, their function seems to have been apotropaic.\(^{21}\) Parallels for most of these symbols may be found in contemporary art. They appear to have been especially common on stelae, on various types of weaponry and upon temples.\(^{22}\) Their function as apotropaic symbols, while not entirely agreed upon,\(^{23}\) must have entailed a threat of death against the sacrilegious, or the opponent, or the polluter. The Gorgon head upon a shield or pair of greaves threatens the assailant with the fate of the Seripheans. The function of the terror symbol (a Gorgon, say, or a Griffin) atop a stele or on a funeral urn must have been similar: the threat of destruction for the tomb disturber. The function of the terror symbol upon a temple gable threatens a like punishment upon any person rash enough to cause pollution at the holy place. Death, we must conclude, is the threat intended by the various monsters on the Aspis. The link, therefore, between the terror symbols and the suggested functions of Perseus should be apparent. The contrast between Perseus and Heracles emphasised the theme of death. The use of "terror symbols" or, as it could be said, of death symbols complements what is already an apparent theme. To return to the reading proposed by Fränkel and Thalmann: the shield, rather than offering a series of images which display the grotesque ugliness of war, may offer a stylised series of images which starkly threaten death. But, we should be clear, the conscious parallel drawn between Perseus and Heracles raises the intent of the poem above the merely representational. The terror symbols hint at a larger poetic concern which is not war, but death.\(^{24}\)

The theme of death is apparent throughout the shield description. V. 178–190, describing the conflict between the Lapiths and the Centaurs provide an instance. The depiction is perhaps a type of terror symbol, hinting at the destruction awaiting an opponent. By the time this poem may have been composed, however, Centaurs had a precise association with Heracles. An audience in the sixth century would have been familiar with the myth describing Heracles' death by Nessus' cloak and doubtless have drawn a parallel between the Centaurs and Heracles.\(^{25}\) The undercurrent of mankind." van Groningen (above, note 2) 117 notes that v. 144–200 concern themselves primarily with war.


\(^{22}\) See Robertson (above, note 21).

\(^{23}\) Contrast Robertson (above, note 21) 48 for example and Vermeule (above, note 16) 90–91.

\(^{24}\) A brief reading of v. 264–70, of v. 248–57 or of the medieval (if genuine) v. 151–53 may emphasise the point.

\(^{25}\) The story of his poisoning and self-immolation predates this poem. Fr. 25, 18–25 in Merkelbach’s and West’s edition of Hesiod’s poems mention Deianeira, Lichas and the robe as
this myth, therefore, may be death. It deserves to be noticed, furthermore, that the appearance of Ares (v. 191–196) and Athena (v. 197–200) may link with this conflict. Van Groningen\textsuperscript{26} speculates that the two gods may be placed here because they participated in the conflict between the Lapiths and the Centaurs. The appearance of the gods may link the shield depictions with the conflict of the outer myth where both gods appear on opposing sides.\textsuperscript{27} In other words, they may reinforce the relevance of the Centaurs to Heracles, and so re-emphasise the undertone of the theme of death.

V. 168–177, which describe the conflict between the lions and boars, may create a similar effect. In funerary art and literature from the sixth century onwards the lion was depicted as a protector of the body of the dead. Vermeule quotes this epigram (a lion is speaking) as typical of the literary tradition:\textsuperscript{28}

\begin{quote}
\begin{align*}
\text{θηρῶν μὲν κάρτιστος ἔγὼ, θυατῶν δὲ ἔγὼ νῦν} \\
\text{φρουρῶ τῶδε τάφῳ λαίνῳ ἐμβεβαιώς.}
\end{align*}
\end{quote}

Lions (always victorious) and boars are often depicted in combat in literary and artistic artefacts. Vermeule interprets one funerary example from the sixth century thus: “When the lion and the boar are shown together in the sphere of death, as on the Clazomenian sarcophagos ... the lion should win and become guardian of the body.”\textsuperscript{29} Now Heracles was usually associated with lions and, although his lion-skin is not mentioned in this poem, he is twice compared to a lion (v. 402 and v. 426)—although he is once compared to a boar (c. 387). In the simplest sense the lion and boar conflict may be seen as a parallel to the Heracles and Cycnus conflict. In the more complex sense Heracles, the metaphorical lion, acts as a protector against death. There is a seeming conflict between the roles of Heracles in these two sections of the poem; in one the hero is by implication the victim of death, in the other the conqueror of death. The conflict may be resolved, however, by thinking of the various sections of the poem as variations on a single theme of death. This “relexive” poem provides a series of versified reactions to a single pervasive notion. The poet has not been strict or laboriously logical in the manner by which he has strung together the reactions.

Another instance of the theme of death acting as a backdrop or undertone to these terror symbols is provided by v. 161–167 which refer to

\textsuperscript{26} van Groningen (above, note 2) 117, notwithstanding their presence in the Iliadic shield.

\textsuperscript{27} Janko (above, note 8) 40.

\textsuperscript{28} [Simonides] \textit{Anth. Pal.} 7. 344a. I owe this reference to Vermeule, (above, note 16) 233, n. 7; on page 88 of the same work she cites Antipater, \textit{Anth. Pal.} 7. 426. See also \textit{RE} 13 (1927) 968–90, s.v. Löwe.

\textsuperscript{29} Vermeule (above, note 16) 90–91. Compare Robertson’s comments cited above, note 21.
the twelve snakes. The snake was a profoundly ambivalent emblem. Associated, on the one hand, with healing and longevity\(^{30}\) snakes were, on the other hand, viewed with considerable fear (so Medusa). The ambiguity is present in this poem: the snake-haired head of Medusa in Perseus' hands brings death to the Seripheans and deliverance to Danaë. Snakes were also associated with Heracles (the tale of the Lernaean Hydra, or the snakes of Pindar's *Nem.* 1 are relevant) where they seem intended to emphasise his superhuman abilities. Snakes, especially associated with Perseus and Heracles, betoken life or death. There is, therefore, another variation on the theme of death.

I doubt that the *Aspis* has a simple meaning. It is at once about the saviour warrior, Heracles, the *alexikakos*, it is also about the intrusion of evil and violence into life, it is also about war. But none of these themes provides the poem with a real thematic unity. This is provided by the notion of death. The poem offers what is best described as a series of variations on the theme of death. The *Aspis*, a reflexive poem, takes the theme of death and unanalytically responds to this in verse. The response—and surely it is a puzzled response—is worked in a series of *tableaux* borrowed from Homer and from contemporary art. The structure of the poem, as its actors, is designed with a modicum of care to reflect a central preoccupation.

III

Critics often point out the taste of the poet of the *Aspis* for the macabre. This seems to reflect his conception of death. Death is violent, terrifying, and often as not painful. Indeed the martial ambience of so much of the poem may serve to emphasise the horror of death. But it is the macabre elements of the *Aspis* which have brought it into disrepute. For many readers the poem is so insistent in its striving for horror as to become strained and almost gratuitous. Why such strained insistence? The poet may indeed have been morbid. It seems more likely, however, that he is reflecting the attitudes of his society. To demonstrate this I would like to draw some parallels with the Middle Ages. These may suggest an alternative explanation for the presence in the *Aspis* of the macabre.

Philippe Ariès, in his long study analysing medieval and modern attitudes to death,\(^{31}\) maintains that in the later Middle Ages there was a shift

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30 See Aristophanes, *Plut.* 733 ff. C. Kerényi, *Asclepius* (London 1960) e.g. figs. 40 and 41 offers depictions pairing Asclepius and snakes. The goddess Hygeia was represented also with a snake—see figs. 33 and 34.

iu popular attitudes to death. Ariës states: "Individualism triumphed in an age of conversions, spectacular penitences, and prodigious patronage, but also of profitable businesses; an age of unprecedented and immediate pleasures and of immoderate love of life." Individualism, he suggests, was the product of burgeoning economic prosperity. Increased prosperity brought with it a greater sense of individual worth and with this a greater love of life. Death, the destruction of life and the individual, became a far greater threat. This is the explanation offered for the persistent fascination in funerary texts for the macabre. Death, personified, is represented in an increasingly macabre fashion because it is seen as such an unwarranted threat to life.

The intrusion of death is represented by a variety of macabre iconography. Three examples will suffice: the transi, the "triumph of death," and the danse macabre. The transi, or half-decomposed corpse, became one of the most important minor characters "in the macabre iconography of the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries." Ariës describes the depictions of the "triumph of death" in this manner: "Death, in the form of a mummy or skeleton, stands with his symbolic weapon in hand [the scythe], driving a huge slow chariot drawn by oxen. One recognises this vehicle as the heavy cart used for holiday processions, inspired by mythology and intended for the grand entry of princes into their loyal towns. Here it is driven by a prince whose emblems are skulls and bones... But whatever its appearance the chariot of Death is an engine of war, an implement of destruction that crushes beneath its wheels—and sometimes beneath its fatal shadow—a large number of people of all ages and conditions." The danse macabre is described "as an eternal round in which the dead alternate with the living. The dead lead the dance; indeed they are the only ones dancing. Each couple consists of a naked mummy, rotting, sexless, and highly animated, and a man or woman dressed according to his or her social condition and paralyzed by fear and surprise. Death holds out its hand to the living person whom it will draw along with it, but who has not yet obeyed the summons." As with the representations of the transi and of the "triumph of death," the danse macabre was extremely common in

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32 Ariës, The Hour (above, note 31) 606, and Images (above, note 31) 158.
33 Ariës, The Hour (above, note 31) 113.
34 Ariës, The Hour (above, note 31) 118.
the late Middle Ages. The three representations of the macabre iconography of the period, to repeat, have been taken not as the product of a sadistic or morbid psychology, but of one too little morbid, too much enamoured with its own individualism and life. The suggested parallel may be becoming obvious. The “macabre iconography” of the _Aspis_ may be representative not of a morbid psychology but of a psychology not unlike that of the late Middle Ages. The depiction of death in the _Aspis_, commonly described as macabre, is the product of an individualistic temperament. The attitudes of this reflexive poem may be quite typical of their era.\(^{36}\)

It is usual to place the composition of the _Shield_ somewhere between 590 and 570 B.C.\(^{37}\) It is said not to be Boeotian, but to have been composed in one or another of the “centri progrediti di cultura e di arte, certamente fuori di Boezia.”\(^{38}\) Cook and Shapiro\(^{39}\) demonstrate the similarities between scenes in the _Aspis_ and those in Attic and Corinthian pottery. While Attica will not represent its compositional provenance, the conditions of Attica in this period may well be similar to those experienced by the poet of the _Aspis_. The improved conditions in Attica in the period 600–500 B.C. hardly need stressing. Amongst other things one might note that Solon won Salamis from Megara, gave the lead to the Amphictyons in the Sacred War, while in the Hellespont about 590 Athens had some success at Sigeum. In 566 state claims were strengthened by the institution of the Panathenaic festival, and about the same time by the institution of the games at Eleusis. By mid-century Attic pottery adopted a leading position in the Greek world, and thus encouraged the export of Athenian goods. The coinage maintained its strength.\(^{40}\) If it is correct to see an upsurge in individualism in these centuries the improved economy and social standing of regions such as Attica are doubtless responsible. Also crucial was the widespread personal “deracination” brought on in these centuries of colonisation. The removal from home, family surrounds, often family itself placed the person more seriously “on his own.” Isolation from the inherited

\(^{36}\) The point has been observed independently of the admirable study by C. Sourvinou-Inwood, “To Die and Enter the House of Hades: Homer, Before and After” in _Mirrors of Mortality_ (above, note 31) 15–39.

\(^{37}\) Russo (above, note 3) 34. So too Myres (above, note 11) 178; Cook (above, note 1), _passim_; and J. Ducat, “La Ptoion et l’histoire de la Béotie à l’époque archaïque,” _REG_ 77 (1964) 283–89, attempting to correct Guillon (above, note 10), who places the poem in the second half of the seventh century; and J. A. Davidson, “Quotations and Illustrations in Early Greek Literature,” _Eranos_ 53 (1955) 124–40, 137. The most recent discussion to confirm these dates is that of Janko (above, note 8) 40–44.

\(^{38}\) Russo (above, note 3) 34. Contra van der Valk (above, note 2: _REG_ [1966]) 451.


\(^{40}\) See, for example, N.G.L. Hammond, _A History of Greece to 322 B.C._ (Oxford 1967) 165 f.
norms of family and community may have encouraged individual self-reliance and self-centredness.  

Symptomatic of these tendencies was the sudden efflorescence of "personal" lyric poetry in the previous century and the emergence of personal religion (Eleusinian religion and, possibly, Orphism). The emergence of seemingly altruistic reformers such as Solon points to a reformation of values, of a mentalité whose origins and whose concerns are insistently individualistic. The parallels between this period and the late Middle Ages, as Sourvinou-Inwood notes, are more than superficial. But this is not the place to suggest these parallels. The point is to demonstrate that the death-obsession of the Aspis may not be the result of morbid psychology, but the result of a sane psychology in an age of burgeoning prosperity and of individualism. There is ample evidence that the people of the late Middle Ages were obsessed with death. The seventh and sixth centuries in Greece have not left a great deal of evidence, archaeological or literary, by which we might be able to assess easily the contemporary attitude to death. Nonetheless, it is conceivable that the Aspis is the result of a shift in the attitude to death, a shift which has been posited by Sourvinou-Inwood.

The changes cannot be examined here in detail. Certain aspects, however, deserve mention. The aristocratic funerary ideal, perhaps typified by the Homeric funeral, seems to reflect the value system of its class. Prolonged prothesis — even to the point of putrefaction, the extravagant display of wealth at a funeral, an extravagant place of burial, may reflect the aretē, the timē, the social standing of the dead person. The extravagance of the funeral rites may be designed in part to guarantee the remembrance of the dead person and to reinforce his family's social standing within its own immediate community and within neighbouring communities. But note: such funerary customs presuppose that, at the very worst, the dead man's reputation may survive death. (Indeed, thanks to the survival of his genos it must.) Notice, furthermore, that death is a social, even communal


42 By Sourvinou-Inwood (above, note 36) 39.


45 They are alluded to by Sourvinou-Inwood (above, note 36) 36 ff.
process.\textsuperscript{46} Death is honoured by the family and in the preservation of the family the dead man is enabled to transcend death. That we witness the emergence (or rediscovery or re-emphasis) of individualist values (doubtless the product of the weakening of the family) in the Archaic period is frequently asserted.\textsuperscript{47} One important way by which the deracinated individual assailed in poetry the aristocratic tradition was through a rejection of memoriality. Without the security of a strong genos in which to preserve his memory the possibility of remembrance after death is questioned.

As early as the seventh century Archilochus (133 West) questions memoriality:

\begin{quote}
{oùtis aúdoiōs met' āstōn oudei perisphēmos thānōn gínetai: charin de māllon tou' zōou diōkomēn
(o)̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣̣"} Steisichorus (245 Page), not too many years later, appears to echo the sentiment. (Charis here seems to mean “renown.”)

\begin{quote}
θανόντος ἀνδρός πάσα †πολιάτ †ποτ’ ἀνθρώπων χάρις
\end{quote}

Although a poet such as Simonides is responsible for many funerary epigrams (which in their very plea for remembrance of the dead person bespeak a fear of personal oblivion), he exhibits, at least once (fr. 581 Page), a profound scepticism in memoriality, or the kleos aphthiton which for the aristocrat might be seen as a weapon against death:\textsuperscript{48}

\begin{quote}
tīς κεν αἰνήσει νόων πίσυνος Λίνδου νοέται Κλεόβουλον,
ἀναιοῖς ποταμώι᾽ ἀνθεσί τ’ εἰαρινοῖς
ἀείνον τε φλογὶ χρυσάες τε σελάνας
καὶ θαλασσαίασι δίανισ᾽ ἀντία θέντα μένος στάλας;
ἀπαντά γάρ ἔστι θεόν ἴσαιν· λίθων δὲ
καὶ βρότεις παλάμαι θραύντι· μοροῦ
φωτὸς ᾧ ἄδε βουλα.
\end{quote}

The suggested shift in the attitude to death reflected by these views on fame after death may well reflect some of the causes for Solon’s supposed laws attempting to limit the extravagance of funerals and burial practices.\textsuperscript{49} There were limitations on the size of the cortege in an ecphora, upon the size of grave monuments, upon their decorations, upon the ways in which the dead could be praised. It is customary to link the large scale or extravagant funeral with the aristocratic or strongly based family society:

\textsuperscript{46} The section on the aristocratic mode of Homeric death in Sourvinou-Inwood (above, note 36) deserves consultation.
\textsuperscript{47} See Burn (above, note 41), and Sourvinou-Inwood (above, note 36).
\textsuperscript{48} In some quarters the attitude persisted. Compare Sophocles, Ajax 266–67, and the more comical Euripides, Alcestis 725–27.
\textsuperscript{49} See Garland (above, note 43) 22 and 34. See also S. Humphreys, (above, note 43) 101. The ancient source is Cicero, de Leg. 2. 64.
funerals provided a good opportunity for a demonstration of kin solidarity and their display of wealth.\textsuperscript{50} Significantly it is in the 590's that the ceramic funeral urn is replaced by \textit{stelae}.\textsuperscript{51} \textit{Stelae}, it could be argued, place the \textit{individual} more firmly at odds with his immortality.\textsuperscript{52}

The new attitude may also be reflected in the many artistic representations of themes related to death in the sixth century.\textsuperscript{53} But perhaps the new attitude may be seen most clearly in a poem roughly contemporary to the \textit{Aspis}, the \textit{Homeric Hymn to Demeter} (note especially v. 480–482). In an aetiological allegory the poem depicts the origins of the increasingly popular Eleusinian rites. The very existence of these individualistic rites indicates a fear of death which is alien to the Homeric and aristocratic mode.

It is sometimes stated that the fear of death is not something which is typical of Greek culture in any period.\textsuperscript{54} Yet anxiety about death, however indirectly expressed, seems more typical of some eras than of others. The expression is indeed oblique—no Roman or Christian skeletons here: instead it was expressed by a distrust in memoriality, by a change in funeral rites and iconography, by an upsurge in religious cult addressing itself to the problems of the survival of the soul. The concern and anxiety which I contend the \textit{Aspis} reflects on death, therefore, has ample parallels in several areas. Indeed a normal man of the period might be expected to express such a concern.\textsuperscript{55} The securities of an older world had been broken down in the uprooted Archaic period.

Are there parallels for the macabre? They seem to exist not so much in the actual personifications of death, but in the depictions of deaths or figures associated with death. Terror symbols have already been mentioned. Their popularity was delimited by the Archaic period. In the sixth century there were, particularly on a grave \textit{stelae}, examples of horrendous Gorgon heads.\textsuperscript{56} The sphinx (herself one of the death \textit{kères} and often set atop grave \textit{stelae};\textsuperscript{57}) may be depicted ripping open the bellies of opponent men.\textsuperscript{58} There are frightening representations of Hecate, half dog-bodied, eating corpses in the
underworld. Artistic representations of war—itself a poetic symbol of death—may be sometimes so explicit as to be best labelled macabre. Cerberus first appears on pottery at the beginning of the sixth century, as do the first references to Charon. The representation of Achilles about to plunge a spear into the lower neck of the Amazon Queen Penthesileia—seems in this period to have been popular in art and literature. There is in the depiction an element of the macabre, with its linking of love, violence and death. Eros, strangely confused with Death and his brother, Sleep, seems to play a role in the iconography of the macabre. Nor, in the cultic sphere, should one overlook the rites of Dionysus, whose waxing popularity may be dated to the sixth century. The tales of Pentheus, of the daughters of Minyas, of Bacchantes rending live animals or even children limb from limb are potent emblems of the macabre. Van der Valk has pointed out that the most obvious literary parallels for the depiction of the macabre are contained in Hesiod's Theogony (note the descriptions of the offsprings of Night, v. 211 ff. and 295 ff., of Cronus' eating of his own children, v. 466 ff., of the Gigantomachy, v. 687 ff., or the denizens of Hades, v. 767 ff.). The Odyssey itself is not without elements of the macabre. These few examples from iconography, cult, and literature ought to have demonstrated that the macabre does not go without parallel in the Archaic period—and indeed it may have been more popular than is usually allowed.

While in no sense intended to provide a justification in artistic terms for the Aspis, these examples do make the poem more credible. The Aspis is not the product of a morbid psychology or one out of tune with its age (a late debased product of a defunct oral epic tradition), rather it is the product of an individual firmly rooted within the mentalité of his time.

59 See Vermeule (above, note 16) 109.
60 See the reproductions of Vermeule (above, note 16) 103.
61 See Garland (above, note 43) 54.
62 See Garland (above, note 43) 55.
63 Vermeule (above, note 16) 158–59, discusses the archaic artistic representation of this scene. In literature there is the Aethiopis. On which see G. H. Huxley, Greek Epic Poetry from Eumelos to Panyassis (London 1969) 147–49.
64 According to Hesiod, Theogony 744 f. Sleep and Death were children of Night. Pausanias 5. 18. 1 describes a chest of Cypselaus, dedicated at Olympia about 570 B.C., depicting more or less the same. Vermeule (above, note 16) 153 ff. outlines the link between Eros, Sleep and Death.
65 See Bum (above, note 41) 345 ff., who associates the emergence of the Dionysiac rites with the mysteries of Eleusis, Orphism and Pythagoreanism.
66 van der Valk (above, note 2: Mnem.6 [1953]) 266.
67 The extreme popularity of this poem in artistic circles may provide further evidence. See, passim, Shapiro (above, note 39), and F. Vian (above, note 11).
In this reading of the pseudo-Hesiodic *Shield of Heracles*, above all I have attempted to suggest that rather than being an analysis of the horror of war and of mortal combat, the poem is concerned with death. The *Aspis* offers a series of variations on this theme. While the poem may not be great art, it is of profound interest as an artefact. It represents a puzzled, at times disorganised, at times stolid attempt to represent the most fundamental of all problems. Above all, it may show us how Greeks of one period reacted to the paradox of their existence.⁶⁸

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