

## CERNERE ERAT: THE SHIELD OF AENEAS

A lecture to the Virgil Society, November 1975

by

D.A. West

In Homer's *Iliad* Achilles needed a new shield because he lost his original armour when Patroclus was killed fighting in it. His new shield carries representations of the sky, a city at peace with a wedding and a lawsuit in progress, a city at war with an ambush in a river bed, scenes from the farm, the vineyard, the hunt and the dancing-floor, none of them relevant to the plot of the *Iliad*.

In Virgil's epic Aeneas does not need a new shield. His original armour served him adequately throughout the siege of Troy and his subsequent wanderings, and he could still have the use of it. On the other hand, all the illustrations on the new shield are directly relevant to the political purpose of the poem. So, on the face of it, it appears that the shield of Achilles is a necessary and integral part of the *Iliad* while its illustrations are irrelevant to the poem; whereas the illustrations on the shield of Aeneas are relevant to the plot of the poem while the shield itself does not fit very easily. This is a tempting paradox, and a damaging conclusion seems to follow from it. 'Achilles needs to arm, but not Aeneas.' argues Becker.<sup>1</sup> 'Here Virgil has imitated a brilliant passage in his Homeric model in a place where it does not belong.' Eden<sup>2</sup> seems to take a similar view.

But this is not the whole truth. The illustrations on the shield of Achilles may be irrelevant to the plot, but this interlude of normal life in town and country, set in a poem of heroic valour, anger and death, has its own poetic relevance and effect. Similarly it is easy to say that Aeneas does not need a new shield and that his reason for getting one is that Achilles receives one in the *Iliad*, but this does less than justice to Virgil's design. He explicitly provides the motivation:

ne mox aut Laurentis, nate, superbos  
aut acrem dubites in proelia poscere Turnum.  
(8.613-4)

This is perfectly unobtrusive and credible in context, and indeed significantly contributes to Virgil's strategy. He is determined that the final part of his epic shall not be an anticlimax, and not simply for literary reasons. Aeneas' wars in Italy are the foundation of the Roman state, the beginning of the *gens Iulia* and the legendary authentication of the Augustan principate. This is all vital to the purpose of the *Aeneid*, and the acquisition of this new shield to combat this dread new Italian enemy helps Virgil in his attempt to build the poem up toward a climax:

maior rerum mihi nascitur ordo,  
maius opus moueo.

(7.43-4)

The Homeric imitation is smoothly and successfully welded into the texture of the *Aeneid*.

The illustrations on the shield of Aeneas represent vivid moments in the history of Rome . . . But why these particular moments? What is Virgil's criterion of selection? Warde Fowler<sup>3</sup> argues that these are 'scenes of escape from terrible perils both moral and material, ending with the Battle of Actium, the most wonderful escape of all.' But what about Mettus? Rome was not brought into terrible peril by his failure to keep his promise to assist Tullus Hostilius against the Albans. And what about Romulus and Remus? Was that a terrible peril? And what about the Sabine women? Warde Fowler's analysis does not fit the data.

Drew<sup>4</sup> produces a dazzling hypothesis. In B.C. 27 Augustus received from a grateful Senate a golden shield bearing the inscription CLUPEUS VIRTUTIS CLEMENTIAE IUSTITIAE PIETATIS ERGA DEOS

PATRIAMQUE. Drew argues that in the first scene on the shield of Aeneas, Romulus and Remus sucked VIRTUS from the udders of the wolf. In scene 2 CLEMENTIA was shown to the Sabines. In scene 3 the Romans dispensed IUSTITIA to Mettus; and Porsenna in 4 is famous for his IUSTITIA towards the Romans. In scene 5 is displayed the PIETAS of Manlius and the Salii and the Luperici, while scene 6 shows the punishment of IMPIETAS in Tartarus. Ingenious, but not convincing. If Virgil had intended to allude to the four virtues on the shield of Augustus, he would have articulated his allusions in such a way that readers would have perceived them. Virgil could not have expected anyone to taste VIRTUS in the milk of the wolf, or to see CLEMENTIA in the rape of the Sabines and what followed it, or to detect IUSTITIA in the war with Porsenna . . . The *Aeneid* is to be heard and understood. It is not a riddle.

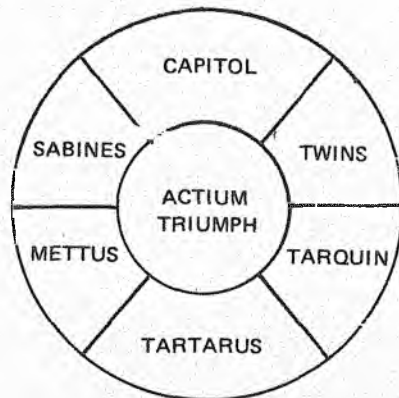
Otis<sup>5</sup> is less particular. He sees in these scenes the constant opposition of *uirtus*, *consilium* and *pietas* to the forces of violence in all Roman history. This is too general to be helpful. And general as it is it is not even true. Tell it to the Sabine women.

Eicholz<sup>6</sup> believes that Virgil has two criteria. First the incidents have been selected as chronological landmarks. This cannot be taken seriously, since between the war with Porsenna in 508 and the Catilinarian Conspiracy in 63-2 we have only the Gallic invasions of 390. To fill the gaps Eicholz advances a desperate explanation of the Salii as a timeless scene to give the impression of having traversed the whole of Roman history. 'Time is standing still' at the Salii. But Eicholz's second criterion is nearer the truth. These scenes are selected to make sense as plastic art. R.D. Williams' commentary makes the same point.<sup>7</sup>

The main purpose of this paper is to support and develop this proposition in the following form. 'The illustrations on the shield of Aeneas are so presented that they bring vividly before our eyes illustrations which would be conceivable and effective on a metal shield.'

This is not a popular view. 'Menti et animo ea cogitanda, non uidenda proponit' (Heyne-Wagner).<sup>8</sup> 'The never-ending attempts to reconstruct the shield are a complete waste of time: we should just make up our minds here too that we are dealing with a poetic, not a plastic work of art.' (Heinze).<sup>9</sup> 'Such attempts lead to no useful results, and are false to the intention of the poet.' (Szantyr supporting Heinze).<sup>10</sup> Das Konkrete Faktische tritt zuruck, statt dessen dringt ein anderes Ideeles, Symbolisches ein'. (Becker). 'The view that the episodes were chosen because of their visual suitability as pictures . . . can also be dismissed: some details simply cannot be "envisaged".' (Eden 164). The orthodox view is put most succinctly by Warde Fowler (100-1): 'It is futile to deal with this description on plastic principles and to look for divisions or compartments on the surface of the shield.' On this futility we shall now embark.

This shield is a round *clipeus*, and Virgil suggests the placing of the separate scenes. The Capitol is on top (*in summo*, 652); Tartarus, naturally enough, is at the bottom (*hinc procul*, 666); in the middle of the first half-dozen scenes (that is how Eden takes *haec inter*) is the sea encircled by dolphins (*et circum*, 673) with the Battle of Actium and the triple triumph of Octavian depicted in the middle (*in medio*, 675). The first four scenes are to be arranged somehow or other in the four panels that remain. The only guidance we receive is that the Sabines are not far from the Twins, and Mettus is not far from the Sabines (*nec procul hinc*, 635 and *haud procul inde*, 642).



I am not arguing that Virgil is describing a real shield. In fact Virgil makes it clear that this shield is supernatural, miraculous, impossible:

illic genus omne futurae  
stirpis ab Ascanio pugnataque in ordine bella.  
fecerat et . . .

No real shield could contain all the descendants of Ascanius and all the wars they ever fought. What Virgil describes is only a selection, (*fecerat et*). So the diagram is not a drawing of the shield, but only a representation of what Virgil actually says about these imaginary illustrations selected from a huge number of imaginary illustrations on this imaginary shield.

The most striking indication that we are meant to think of the shield in plastic terms is the frequent mention of colour. In the first line, 630, the cave of Mars is green, *uiridi*. Another is the choice of scenes which are frequently represented in Roman Art. No clearer example could be asked for than the Twins hanging from the udders of the she-wolf. Another is the choice of scenes where the line is of artistic interest. The bending back of the wolf's neck is an example. Another indication that we are meant to visualise, and in this case to visualise a work of art in metal, is the repeated reference to texture, to tactile qualities. The wolf's tongue licking the human infants into shape would be a challenge to any smith, despite the fact that Eden chooses this as his example of a detail that 'simply cannot be "envisaged".'

The Sabine scenes present many of these features. Crowd scenes are common on Roman reliefs. So are sacrifices. The fascination of perspective is suggested in *consessu caueae*, 636.

In the rending of Mettus the four-horse chariots are another favourite subject in Roman Art. Our sense of colour and our sense of texture are both stimulated by the brambles sprinkled with a dew of blood. This is a strong argument. The tale of Mettus is not included because of its historical importance or because it fills a gap in the chronological sequence or for any ethical or symbolical reason. Mettus is there for the perspective interest of the four-horse chariot and the blood dripping from the brambles.

The next scene, Horatius holding the bridge and Cloelia swimming the Tiber, are not, it must be admitted, particularly vividly described. This is a weak point in the argument – but they are scenes which would be amenable to artistic representation.

In 654 the pediment of the temple is a familiar artistic feature. The height of the Capitol is another reminder of perspective. The rough thatch of Romulus' cottage is an indication of texture. It is *recens* because the thatch was regularly renewed in the Augustan era.<sup>11</sup> The silver goose fluttering in gilded porticoes is an explicit evocation of the metalworker's art. The shrubs of 657, like the brambles of Mettus, indicate texture. The darkness well sets off the silver and gold. The Gauls' hair is gold, their clothes are gold. Their cloaks are striped and shining. Their necks are milky white with gold necklaces. *Sagulis*, 660, refers to national dress, a common fascination of Roman Art; so the flashing *gaesa* of 661-2, refer to the typical armour of a nation, and in addition exploit the glitter of the metal of the shield. Similarly the Gauls are protecting their bodies with their characteristic long shields. The leaping Salii and the naked Luperci exploit nakedness and line and movement, all of them dear to the eye of the artist. The wool-tufted bonnets of the *flamines*, like the upholstery of the matron's carriages in 666, are another allusion to texture. The fallen figure-of-eight ancilia are a reference to a characteristic piece of armour. The fact that they are fallen must have been indicated on the shield, either by their irregular placing on the ground, or by having some of them *still* falling.

In the scene in the underworld there is vivid evocation of artistic possibilities in the depth of the mouth of Dis, in Catiline hanging on a cliff, in the faces of the Furies, in the segregation of the pious and in Cato dispensing the law.

In the seascape 671-4, the swelling of the sea is an appeal to texture, its breadth to perspective. Colour is generously applied in 672 with gold and froth and blue-grey and grey. We can easily visualise the dolphins because we are told their arrangement (*circum*), their colour (*argento clari*) and the effect they have upon the texture of the sea.

The case seems to be made. In almost every line so far there is at least one point which brings vividly before our eyes an illustration which would be conceivable and effective on a metal shield. Instead of labouring through the description of Actium and the triple triumph which followed it, we shall make a selection of the possible observations.

Although it would not be possible to draw the indescribable composition of the shield, *clipei non enarrabile textum*, 625, Virgil does attempt to force us to visualise it by providing continual indications of relative placing. Starting from 675, we read that the fleets were in the middle of the circle of the sea; Augustus was on one side, Agrippa elsewhere on that same side 628, 632; on the other side Antony; behind him, Cleopatra, 685, 688, in the middle of the Antonine forces 696. From 698 onwards we see the Oriental gods and opposite them (*contra*) the Olympians, with Mars in the thick of things; the Dirae are swooping down on the battle from a great height; Discordia and Bellona are arriving in that order; Apollo also is above the fray, either by his temple on the headland of Actium, or high on the cliff at Leucas, or perhaps even aboard Augustus' flagship, (*astitit Augusti puppim super*, Prop. 4.6.29).

Notable in this passage is the technique of serial narrative familiar in Roman Art, whereby the character is displayed in different postures in the same picture to represent different phases in a narrative. So Cleopatra is first seen bearing down upon the enemy. In 704 Apollo stretches his bow, the Oriental forces turn and flee. In the next scene, we are approaching the Delta of the Nile. In the next we are in Rome.

Amongst the terms which suggest metalwork are *aeratas* referring to the bronze prows of the ships 675, *feruere* used of the foam, and *flammas* and *sidus* 680-1. In this context we may ask what colour Virgil means us to visualise for the shores of the Red Sea, *litore rubro*. *Stuppea flamma* is a flash of flame colour set off by the dense black of pitch smoke. *Rubescunt* will have its precise inceptive sense: the furrows of the sea (note the texture in *arua*) begin to grow red with fresh slaughter, that is, the corpses tinge the sea for a moment after they fall into it. Mars in 701 is *caelatus ferro* as befits the god of war. There is blood on Bellona's lash in 703.

Amongst the characteristic scenes of Roman Art we notice the lines of ships in 676 which afford the artist the same opportunity for perspective virtuosity as did the four-horse chariot which rent the body of Mettus; the triumph in 714; the sacrifice in the next line; the temples in the line after that; the god at his temple door accepting the abasement of the defeated; the bullocks sacrificed at the altars.

Amongst the perspective effects we shall mention only the emphasis upon height, *celsa in puppi* 680, *arduus* 683, *montis* and *turritis* 692-3, (the ships of Antony were large and had towers, according to Dio 50.23), *ex aethere* 701, *desuper* 705, *superbis postibus* 721-2.

This whole central panel is a virtuoso evocation of the iconography of foreign peoples, their dress, their arms and their religions. Against the *Iulium Sidus*, and the *corona naualis* of Agrippa we can set *inter alia* the *sistrum* of Cleopatra from the worship of Isis, the dog-faced Anubis, the Afri with their naked chests, the Euphrates visibly subdued (and *ibat iam mollior undis* is some allusion to texture), the two-horned Rhine and the God Araxes fretting at the new Roman bridge.

If we 'deal with this description on plastic principles', if we respond to the visual stimuli which Virgil has liberally supplied, our understanding of the poetry is improved at many points. Take Cleopatra. We know that her galleys with their three rams, one on top of another, are rowing into battle because we are told that the sea is churned up by their oars 689-90. The obvious inference is that the sails are tight and side-on to the wind, and we are driven to draw the inference because we have just been told that the enemy, sailing against her enjoys the favouring winds. How else do we know that the *uenti* are *secundi* for Agrippa in 682 if not by his billowing sails set at right angles to his line of advance? The set of the sails is a matter of obvious and necessary inference at this stage, but after Cleopatra turns to flight Virgil provides an explicit description. Cleopatra has been beating into the wind. Now in 707, she prays for the wind to blow. Her sails have been tight. Now she slackens them, and the queen is said to be feeding out the ropes (the sheets in nautical terms), not because Virgil has any notion that Cleopatra had to double as a deckhand, but because this is a vivid artistic device for representing her retreat.

Another advantage of the visual interpretation is in line 697, where we are told that there are two snakes, the symbol of doom, behind Cleopatra. She is still advancing. Therefore she is not aware of what there is coming up behind her. The best way of sensing the drama of this picture is to read the destruction of it in the Penguin translation by Jackson Knight. 'She has as yet no thought of the pair of asps which fate held in store for her.'

Finally, Cleopatra's return to Egypt. 'Virgil's poetry has a whole dimension that Horace's lacks' write Nisbet and Hubbard on *Odes* 1.37, quoting Aeneid 8.711 ff. One such dimension is the visualisation: the colours in polar tension which we have met more than half-a-dozen times already in this passage, but never so movingly as when we see the pallor of Cleopatra's skin against the red of her sailors' blood. Opposite her, that is on the other side of this section of the picture, in the direction in which the panic-stricken fleet is sailing, (we are now told that the wind is west-north-west, 710), opposite her (*contra autem*) waits the River Nile, shown as a recumbent deity. There is grief in every line of his huge body as he opens his voluminous draperies and calls the queen into the refuge of his blue-green breast and his *latebrosa flumina*, which convey at once the complex of streams in the delta, and that part of his effigy where drapery melts into water.

There is a possible objection to this interpretation. Surely, it might be argued, vivid representation is characteristic of poetry in general and of Virgil in particular. Is the visualisation on the shield different from the visualisation elsewhere in Virgil? We can meet this objection by appealing to a 'control'. The *post-hoc* prophecy on the shield can be compared with the *post-hoc* vision of Aeneas in the Underworld. This comparison has already been made by Griffith<sup>12</sup> in order to argue that the incidents on the shield are selected to avoid chronological overlap with the episodes of Aeneas' vision in the sixth book. This case does not hold up, principally because it does not provide a sufficiently positive criterion of selection; but the comparison vividly demonstrates that the incidents on the shield are very much more amenable to visual representation than the episodes in the vision. True there are vivid touches in the vision, (Virgil is never without vivid touches), notably the headgear of Silvius Aeneas and of Romulus, 769 and 779. But it is enough to read this vision in 6.756-886 to sense that the drive of the poetry comes much less from what is seen, and much more from emotion, (as in the Marcellus passage), from concept, (as in the prophecy of the Augustan Empire), and from great roll-calls of evocative proper names

hi tibi Nomentum et Gabios urbemque Fidenam,  
hi Collatinas imponent montibus arces,  
Pometios Castrumque Inui Bolamque Coramque

(6.773-5)

This paper has not argued that the shield of Aeneas was a real shield, or that there ever was a shield like this, or that it was 'primarily inspired by particular statue groups which Virgil had seen in Rome', (this a hypothesis rejected by P.T. Eden ad loc.), but rather that its illustrations would be conceivable and effective on a real metal shield.

This is one of the poetic purposes of the passage, and if we forget or deny it we fail to understand the poetry. But another, more important purpose, as emerges clearly from Binder's book, is the praise of Augustus. This is insinuated at many points. On 663 we have to remember that Augustus revived the Lupercalia (Suet. *Aug.*31); and on the same line that the Sali included the name of Augustus in their hymns when he celebrated his triumph in B.C. 27 (Drew 10-15); on 678 it helps to remember the words of the *Res Gestae*, iuravit in uerba mea tota Italia sponte sua. On 679 we note that Augustus was to dedicate a temple to the Penates in B.C.12. On 684 we note that the *corona naualis* was awarded to Agrippa after the defeat of Sextus Pompeius at Nauochos in B.C.36. On 720 we note that Augustus dedicated the great marble temple to Apollo in 28 B.C. In general the Augustan panel has pride of place in the centre of the shield and receives an allocation of 54 lines whereas the Republican scenes rate only 41 lines. As Aeneas receives a shield and sets out to do battle on behalf of the Rome that is to be, we may even remember that after Octavian had won a great war on behalf of Rome in B.C.27, he too received a shield, the *Clipeus Virtutis*.

The shield of Aeneas is of course an imitation of the shield of Achilles in Homer, but like any great *imitatio* in Classical Literature it is a complete recreation of its model. There is one tiny but crucial difference between Homer

and Virgil, and Pluss<sup>13</sup> has explained it. In Homer Hephaistos 'made this'. In Virgil 'had made it', (*fecerat, addiderat, distulerant, extuderat*). Homer is presenting the autopsy of the omniscient epic poet. Hephaistos made x and y, Homer saw him do so. But in Virgil the pluperfects take us into the mind and eyes of Aeneas. It is Aeneas' reaction to the shield which is the heart of the poetry.

Talia per clipeum, Volcani dona parentis  
miratus rerumque ignarus imagine gaudet  
attollens umero famamque et fata nepotum

Aeneas did not understand his own shield. But he marvelled at it, and took delight in its illustrations as he hoisted up on to his shoulder the fate of his descendants and went to do battle on their behalf. We understand more than Aeneas did, and I hope that we may also marvel and take delight not only in the visual aspect of the illustrations, but also in this mighty metaphor.

#### NOTES

1. C. Becker, *WSt* 77 (1964) 111-27, 'Der Schild des Aeneas'.
2. P.T. Eden, 'A commentary on Virgil Aeneid viii' (1975) Leiden, xix.
3. W. Warde Fowler, 'Aeneas at the site of Rome' (1918) Oxford, 103-5.
4. D.L. Drew, 'The allegory of the Aeneid' (1964) Oxford, 26-30.
5. B. Otis, 'Virgil' (1964), 341-2.
6. D.E. Eicholz *PVS* 6 (1966-7) 45-9.
7. R.D. Williams, 'The Aeneid of Virgil, books 7-12' (1973) London, 266.
8. C.G. Heyne, fourth edition by G.P. Wagner 'Publius Virgilius Maro' volume 3. 1 (1830-1) Leipzig, 366.
9. R. Heinze, 'Virgils Epische Technik' (1914) Stuttgart; (1957) Darmstadt, 401.
10. A. Szantyr *MH* 27 (1970) 28-40.
11. G. Binder, 'Aeneas und Augustus' (1971) Meisenheim, 186.
12. J.G. Griffith *PVS* 7 (1967-8) 54-65.
13. H.T. Pluss, 'Virgil und die epische Kunst' (1884) Leipzig.