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The Aegis and the Armour of Achilleus

It is a common theme in hero myths of Greek and other traditions that supernatural accoutrements are crucial to the hero’s exploits. Although it has been argued that supernatural elements are consciously played down in the *Iliad,* two divinely made objects receive considerable attention in this poem. These are the aegis and the armour of Achilleus. These objects have certain common elements in the text, including their appearance, their provenance and their effect on mortals. This article demonstrates the correspondences between the aegis and the armour in terms of their form and their function. The first section examines the physical characteristics of the aegis. It includes a brief overview of physical descriptions of the aegis in pre-Classical and Classical literature, outlining the ways in which the representation of the aegis in the *Iliad* is atypical of the literary tradition. The physical descriptions

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1 I would like to thank Chris Mackie, Parshia Lee-Stecum and Djoymi Baker for their guidance and assistance. I would also like to thank the anonymous reviewers, whose thoughtful comments and criticisms were greatly appreciated. Greek references are from the Loeb edition: Homer, *Iliad,* ed. A. T. Murray, rev. W. F. Wyatt, (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1924; 1999). English translations are my own.


3 Achilleus has two sets of armour in the *Iliad.* The first set of armour plays an extremely significant role in the *Iliad,* and has a complex mythic history as a wedding gift from the gods to Achilleus’ father Peleus. Correspondences between this set of armour and the Hephaistean armour of Memnon, son of the goddess Eos, have been the subject of much scholarly discussion: for a summary of the debate, see J. Burgess, *The Death and Afterlife of Achilles* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009), 28, n.6. However, for the purposes of this article I confine the discussion to the second set of armour, which is made for Achilleus by Hephaistos in Book 18. Its manufacture is described within the text, thus allowing for identification of provenance, materials and method of manufacture.

4 There are many physical representations of the aegis in the visual arts from this period, and the visual sources may follow their own iconographic traditions. As issues of methodology arise when comparing traditions in separate media, I have limited this study to literary representations. For a comprehensive treatment of visual representations of the aegis, see the excellent studies by Monique
of the aegis in the *Iliad* show certain correspondences with armour, particularly the armour of Achilleus. The role of the aegis as a type of interim armour for Achilleus in Book 18 suggests that the close correspondence between the objects is intentional and is drawn for a particular creative purpose. The second section of the article examines the functions and effects of the aegis and the armour. Both the aegis and the armour have powers to protect, to inspire and to terrify. This association suggests that the armour shares with the aegis a divine status and supernatural power. It enhances the status of the armour as a powerful supernatural object that plays a crucial role in the heroic exploits of Achilleus.

1. Physical correspondences

i. The aegis in the *Iliad*

The aegis of the *Iliad* is apparently metallic, handcrafted, and the gift of Hephaistos. It is mentioned in the *Iliad* in eleven passages. It is wielded by three Olympian gods, and on two occasions it is used by a god to place over a mortal. In the *Iliad*, as in other early Greek texts, the aegis is strongly associated with Zeus through the use of the epithet ἀγώγος, ‘aegis-bearing’, of which there are thirty-seven instances in this epic. While the references to the function of the aegis are quite extensive, the physical details are only briefly mentioned.

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4 Athene wields it at 2.445ff, 5.738ff and 21.400ff, and at 18.203–4 she places it around the shoulders of Achilleus. Apollo wields it at 15.308, 318 and 361, and at 24.20–21 he places it over the corpse of Hektor. Zeus wields it at 4.167–68 and 17.593.

5 Hom. *Il.* 1.222, 2.157, 2.348, 2.375, 2.491, 2.598, 2.787, 3.427, 5.115, 5.396, 5.635, 5.693, 5.715, 5.733, 5.742, 5.815, 6.420, 7.60, 8.287, 8.352, 8.375, 8.385, 8.427, 10.278, 10.553, 11.66, 12.209, 13.826, 14.160, 14.252, 15.242, 15.380, 17.176, 21.420, 22.221. Martin West identifies the original meaning of Zeus’ epithet ἀγώγος as ‘riding on a goat’, and relates this epithet to the tradition of Zeus riding a goat up to the heavens, found in a fragment of the Orphic theogonies (*Orphica* fr. 236 (ii) Bernabé), in Martin L. West, *Indo-European Poetry and Myth* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 248. There is no indication that this association is known to the poet of the *Iliad*, however, and in the epic the association of Zeus with the aegis is strong. The sense of Zeus’ ownership of the aegis is suggested at 15.229-30, in which Zeus directs Apollo to take the aegis and wield it to support the Trojans.
In the *Iliad*, the aegis is described as if it were an object crafted from gold. It is twice referred to as χρύσεως (‘golden’). Of course, this word need not be taken as a description of a metallic substance: it may simply describe colour, as with the golden cloud which Zeus draws around Mount Olympos. However, the descriptions of the aegis suggest that the gold refers to metal in its tangible form, rather than simply the colour. In Book 2 the gold of the aegis has been crafted. The notion of crafting suggests that the aegis is literally composed of gold or woven from golden thread. This is described in Book 2, in which Athene carries the aegis:

αἰγίδ’ ἔχουσ’ ἑρίτμιον ἀγὴραον ἀθανάτην τε,
τῆς ἑκατόν θύσαιοι παχρύσεωι ἰέρεθονται,
πάντες ἕυπλεκέες, ἑκατόμβιοι δὲ ἐκαστος

… holding the aegis, precious, ageless and immortal,
from which hang a hundred all-golden tassels,
all carefully plaitted, and each worth a hundred oxen

In this passage, each tassel is given an economic value in rational exchange, being worth a hecatomb, a hundred oxen. Elsewhere in the text the same value is applied to the gold armour of Glaukos. The fact that the gold has a value in rational exchange suggests that the gold is of a material form rather than simply an impression of colour. This is reinforced by Richard Janko’s observation that the aegis is referred to as ἑρίτμιος, a term which is used elsewhere in the text to describe gold in its material form, as a prize of honour offered by Agamemnon to Achilleus. Therefore

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7 ibid., 14.350–51.
8 Robert Parker suggests that Hephaistos ‘can be responsible only for the golden tassles, as a metallic aegis scarcely fits the passage in the *Iliad* (24,20 f.)’, Robert Parker, ‘Aegis’, *Brill’s New Pauly. Antiquity volumes*, eds. Hubert Cancik and Helmuth Schneider. Brill Online, 2012. 14 November 2012, http://referenceworks.brillonline.com.ezp.lib.unimelb.edu.au/entries/brill-s-new-pauly/aegis-e109870. However, no other fabric or manufacturer is mentioned, and for Hephaistos to embellish an existing object or to create something only partially metallic would be at odds with his technique in creating other objects in this text, including the bronze houses of the gods on Olympos (1.605–8), the trinkets and clasps for Eurynome and Thetis (18.400–3), the golden sceptre of Agamemnon (2.100–8; 2.268), the armour of Diomedes (8.194–95) and the second set of Achilleus’ armour (18.46–616):
11 ibid., 2.447, 15.361.
the gold cited in the passage above should be taken as its fabric rather than simply its colour. The physical descriptions of the aegis mention gold but no other material.

The aegis of the *Iliad* is the product of craft. It is described not as monstrous or animal, but manufactured. The aegis is decorated with θόσανοι (‘tassels’) and while Pindar uses this term to describe the tufts on the golden fleece,\(^ {13} \) the poet of the *Iliad* specifies that these tassels are crafted rather than natural. They are described as ἐὖπλεκὲς (‘carefully plaited’ or ‘well woven’),\(^ {14} \) an adjective that emphasises technical creation.\(^ {15} \) This is reinforced by the detail that the aegis was a gift to Zeus from Hephaistos.\(^ {16} \) Hephaistos is a god strongly associated with craft, and the poet reinforced this connection by referring to him in this passage as χαλκεύς (the ‘bronze-smith’).\(^ {17} \) The *Iliad* is the only extant source that suggests Hephaistos is the creator of the aegis.

In the *Iliad*, the aegis bears the image of the gorgon, or, indeed, the actual head. In Book 5, the aegis is decorated with the head of the gorgon, which is accompanied by the grim personifications of Φόβος (‘Rout’), Ερίς (‘Strife’), Άλκη (‘Battle Strength’) and Ἑως (‘Onslaught’).\(^ {18} \) Such monstrous elements are relatively unusual in the *Iliad*, and they contrast with a scheme in which the aegis is apparently metallic, the product of craft and the gift of Hephaistos. However, comparison of these details with those found in other ancient literary sources suggests that these aspects of the representation in the *Iliad* are atypical of the literary tradition.

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\(^ {14} \) Hom. *Il.* 2.449.
\(^ {15} \) The term is used elsewhere in the *Iliad* to describe the baskets of chariots, another technical creation (23.436).
\(^ {17} \) ibid., 15.310.
\(^ {18} \) ibid., 5.738–42. Some scholars have disputed the authenticity of this passage, suggesting that this reference to the gorgon’s head is an interpolation and an anachronism as it differs from contemporary iconographic representations. Halm-Tisserant suggests a date of 550 BCE: Halm-Tisserant, ‘Gorgonéion’, 254–78. Hartswick suggests the motif was introduced ca. 540 BCE: Hartswick, ‘Gorgoneion’, 275–78, 290. Marx suggests 540 BCE: Marx, ‘Gorgoneion’, 227ff. However, the imagery of the Gorgon is very appropriate to the apotropaic function of the aegis in the *Iliad* (see section 2, \textit{iii} below), and is therefore thematically appropriate to the associations of the aegis in the *Iliad*. 

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A brief appraisal of the literary tradition provides a context in which to examine the aegis of the *Iliad*. While there is wide disparity in the characteristics of the aegis in pre-Classical and Classical literature, certain broad tendencies emerge. Aside from those in the *Iliad*, references to the aegis in early Greek literature contain little physical detail. Although the aegis is mentioned in the *Odyssey*, this reference includes no physical description. Of the three references in the Pseudo-Hesiodic *Shield of Herakles*, only one alludes to physical appearance, describing the aegis as ἐρέμυός (‘dark’). References to Zeus ἀγιόχος are relatively numerous in pre-Classical sources, yet while these references suggest a strong association between the aegis and Zeus, they provide no physical detail. In later texts the aegis is most commonly represented as an organic product. It is often portrayed as the hide of an animal or monster that has been killed or flayed by a god. The association of the aegis with goatskin may derive from a real or invented etymology that connects ἀγιος with ἀγ-, the stem of the noun meaning ‘goat’. Herodotos suggests that artistic representations of Athene’s aegis are inspired by the goatskin garments worn by Libyan women. Elsewhere the aegis is associated with the hide of a monster rather than a goat. For example, in Euripides’ *Ion* the aegis is a garment made from the skin of the gorgon, which is killed by Athene in battle. In Euripides’ *Rhesus*, the aegis is

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19 This is not intended to be a comprehensive treatment of the topic, but rather a general overview of some of the most frequently represented elements. For a more comprehensive treatment of this topic, see P. Stengel, ‘Aigis’, in *Real-Encyclopädie d. Klassischen Altertumswissenschaft*, ed. A. Pauly et al. (1894), 970–71. Halm-Tisserant, ‘Gorgonéion’, 245–75.


21 *Shield of Heracles*, 200, 244, 444.


23 In addition, some sources describe the aegis as elemental in nature, for example Aeschylus’ *Libation Bearers* (593) is suggestive of a thunderstorm; this example corresponds to the context in which the aegis is used at *Il* 17 593–6; see Stengel, (1894), 971. Janko, *The Iliad: a Commentary*, 230, 261.


25 Hdt. 4.189.1.

decorated with the severed head of the gorgon.\textsuperscript{27} In both Apollodoros’ \textit{Library},\textsuperscript{28} and the account of Diodorus Siculus,\textsuperscript{29} the aegis is the hide of a monster killed by Athene in the Titanomachy. In later sources and scholia, the aegis is the skin of Amalthea, the she-goat who nursed Zeus. Her hide is flayed and worn by Zeus for protection during the Titanomachy.\textsuperscript{30} The physical descriptions in non-Iliadic sources generally depict the aegis as organic, monstrous and a trophy from a kill.

iii. Why does the aegis of the \textit{Iliad} differ from other sources?

The contrast between the depiction of the aegis in the \textit{Iliad} and in the later sources is striking. A number of explanations have been suggested. According to Paul Stengel, the poet’s representation of the aegis is consistent with the contemporary state of the mythic tradition, in which the aegis was imagined as a shield. If this is the case, then the contrast with the later sources may simply be an example of the diachronic development of myth. Stengel claims that ‘it seems to be without doubt that the singers of the \textit{Iliad} and their contemporaries thought the aegis to be a shield’.\textsuperscript{31} Nonetheless, Stengel himself acknowledges that at times the Homeric aegis is depicted in a way that is inappropriate to the idea of the aegis as a shield,\textsuperscript{32} although he attempts to reconcile the differences in his article. However, in view of the absence of alternative physical descriptions in early literature, there is little evidence to confirm that theory.

An alternative view is that the differences in the physical descriptions of the aegis reflect the existence of two distinct traditions of the aegis: its origins and nature. Monique Halm-Tisserant suggests that two traditions coexisted from a very early stage. She argues that one strand of tradition is in keeping with what is represented in the \textit{Iliad}, in which the aegis is made by Hephaistos as part of Zeus’ armoury, and the other strand associates the aegis with Athene.\textsuperscript{33} This would allow for the

\textsuperscript{27} Eur. \textit{Rhes.} 306.
\textsuperscript{28} Apollod. \textit{Bibl.} 1.6.2.
\textsuperscript{29} Diod. Sic., 3.70.3–5, cited in Janko, \textit{The Iliad: a Commentary}, 191.
\textsuperscript{31} Stengel, ‘Aigis’, 970.
\textsuperscript{32} ibid.
\textsuperscript{33} Halm-Tisserant, ‘Gorgonéion’, 256–7; Janko suggests that Zeus and Athene each have their own
differences in physical detail between Zeus’s aegis in the *Iliad* and Athene’s aegis in later tradition.

A third possibility, however, is that the poet of the *Iliad* may be departing, for his own reasons, from the traditional representation. Stengel remarks that the *Iliad’s* presentation of an armour-like aegis contains inconsistencies.\(^{34}\) These inconsistencies may suggest that the poet’s representation is not entirely integrated with contradictory, pre-existing elements. The disparity with the alternative physical representations may indicate that the poet of the *Iliad* is redefining the aegis and adapting the tradition for a particular creative purpose. The physical details represented in the *Iliad* suggest a close physical correspondence with armour, particularly the armour of Achilleus. Indeed, it is the common physical characteristics of aegis and armour that set this representation of the aegis apart from those in the other literary sources.

The most striking difference between the Iliadic and non-Iliadic aegis is the metallic fabric. The description of the aegis in the *Iliad* makes no apparent association with goatskin or any animal hide. In order for the poet to suggest a parallel between the aegis and a shield, it would be unnecessary to suppress this motif. In this text, hide is an unremarkable, even appropriate fabric for a shield: the shield of Aineias is fashioned from hide.\(^{35}\) However, while the non-organic composition of the aegis is not essential if it is to resemble a shield per se, it is essential if it is to resemble the shield of Achilleus, which is forged by the smith god in Book 18. This shield is composed entirely of metal, with two outer layers of bronze, a central layer of gold and two inner layers of tin. The layer of gold is apparently of the greatest strength and significance, providing superior protection against spears.\(^{36}\) The golden layer is also most closely associated with the divine craftsmanship of the shield, for when the spear of Aineias penetrates the outer layers of the shield, the poet emphasises that it is the gold, which is ‘the god’s gift’, which stops the spear.\(^{37}\) Thus the metallic aegis in the *Iliad*. In support of this he refers to the separate traditions of the creation of Athene’s aegis in later sources: see Janko, *The Iliad: A Commentary*, 191. However, the tradition of the creation of Athene’s aegis is not attested in the *Iliad*, as the only reference to the origins of the aegis within the text makes it the gift from Hephaistos to Zeus (15.308-10). In the absence of definitive evidence to the contrary, I treat all references to the aegis in the *Iliad* as to the same object.

36 ibid., 20.259–72.
37 ibid., 20.268.
composition of the shield of Achilleus is of significance in the text, and similarly the aegis appears to be composed not of hide but rather of metal.

The reference to Hephaistos as χαλκεύς, a smith or bronze smith, draws attention to the specific skills and materials he uses to create gifts and items for gods and mortals in the epic. These gifts include the bronze houses of the gods on Olympos, the trinkets and clasps for Eurynome and Thetis, the golden sceptre of Agamemnon, and the armour of Diomedes. Of course, the most significant gift from Hephaistos within the text is the armour of Achilleus, the creation of which receives 148 lines of narrative description. While the reference at 15.308–10 is the only passage in the epic in which Hephaistos is referred to as χαλκεύς, this term occurs on three other occasions in the Iliad. In each instance χαλκεύς refers to creators of armour, including the armour of Menelaos and Sarpedon. The use of this term to describe Hephaistos as the donor of the aegis suggests that he uses the same skills to create the aegis as the other χαλκεῖς use to create armour. This enhances the impression that the aegis is crafted from metal.

The aegis of the Iliad is not entirely at odds with the physical representation in later sources, as it includes the motif of the gorgon's head. This monstrous imagery is relatively unusual in this text, in which overtly monstrous elements are seldom mentioned. There are, however, other references to the gorgon in the Iliad, most notably in the arming scene of Agamemnon. Agamemnon's shield is decorated with the image of the gorgon, accompanied by Δείμος (‘Terror’) and Φόβος (‘Rout’). This demonstrates that the gorgon's head is an appropriate decoration for a shield within the context of the Iliad. Thus the inclusion of the gorgon motif provides a link with the monstrous associations of the aegis within the literary tradition, yet it remains consistent with the correspondences to armour suggested in the Iliad.

38 ibid., 1.605–8.
39 ibid., 18.400–3.
40 ibid., 2.100–8, 2.268.
41 ibid., 8.194–95.
42 ibid., 18.468–616.
43 ibid., 4.187, 4.216 (Menelaos), 12.295 (Sarpedon).
44 ibid., 11.36–37. The poet of the pseudo-Hesiodic Aspis Herakleous, includes the head of the gorgon in that description of Herakles’ shield, but with the significant difference. On that shield the head is concealed in a bag held by Perseus (223–5). This would seemingly negate the apotropaic function of the Gorgoneion, see section 2.iii below.
The physical association of the aegis with the armour of Achilleus is greatly strengthened by its strategic appearance in the narrative when Achilleus is without armour of his own. In Book 18, the aegis is placed in the void created by the loss of Achilleus’ first set of armour. The absence of the armour is emphasised repeatedly in the preceding scenes, as is Thetis’ command to Achilleus to stay out of the fighting until she has brought new arms from Hephaistos to replace them. When Iris brings a message from Hera to urge Achilleus to rise up to defend the body of Patroklos, both Iris and Achilleus acknowledge the absence of the armour. However, as he rises, Athene fills this void by draping the aegis around Achilleus’ shoulders. Thus in this scene the aegis seems to function as a substitute or interim replacement for armour. In this way, the function of the aegis as armour seems to determine its physicality. In other words, the objects are made to resemble each other physically to set the scene for suggesting an analogy of function.

2. Functional correspondences

The physical parallels between aegis and armour begin to take on particular significance in the Iliad when we examine the functions of the objects on the battlefield and in the overall themes of the epic. The aegis is a powerful supernatural object that exerts influence over mortals according to the intention of the bearer. In the Iliad, the aegis is an object made by the gods and deriving power from the gods. However, the power resides in the aegis itself and can be wielded and directed by whichever god bears it. It has the power to influence events on the battlefield, and it is used to bring to fulfilment Zeus’ plan for Achilleus and for Troy. In the poem, the armour of Achilleus functions in a corresponding way. The analogy of function suggests that the armour, like the aegis, is an important divine object with the power to influence the outcome of the battle.

Within the Iliad, the aegis and the armour function in distinct ways. Each object demonstrates magical powers of protection. Each has the ability to affect mortals emotionally and physically, to inspire and to terrify. The power within each object

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45 ibid., 18.21, 18.82–85, 18.130–32, 18.188, 18.197.
47 ibid., 18.188–91, 18.197.
48 ibid., 18.204–5.
is directional, and can be used to the benefit or detriment of an individual or group. While the power may be harnessed and directed by the user, the power is inherent in the object itself. Thus each object has the power to influence the outcome of conflict on the battlefield.

i. Protective function

As we have seen, the aegis in the *Iliad* is physically armour-like. However, its protective power is exceptional beyond that which is given by ordinary armour. It has a supernatural dimension and protects both the deathless and the dead. An example of the power to protect immortals occurs in Book 21, when Ares and Athene face each other on the battlefield.\(^{49}\) In this passage, Athene apparently uses the aegis in the manner of a shield, to protect her own body from the spear of Ares. The poet refers to the formidable protective powers of the aegis, which is impervious even to the lightning bolt of Zeus.\(^{50}\) Thus the functional correspondence with armour is clear, and the degree of protection is superlative.

The aegis also has protective powers of a supernatural nature. In Books 22–24, the body of Hektor is repeatedly assaulted by Achilleus, who drags it behind his chariot in order to damage it. Apollo uses the aegis to cover (κάλυπτε) the corpse in order to protect it from being torn.\(^{51}\) Apollo’s use of the aegis in this passage corresponds to the protective use of shields by mortal warriors. In Book 8, Aias uses his shield to cover (ἀμφεκαλυψε) and protect his injured brother Teukros until he is removed from the battlefield.\(^{52}\) These lines are repeated in Book 13, in which Antilochos covers the corpse of Hypsenor with his shield to protect the body until it can be carried away to the ships.\(^{53}\) In these examples the shield is used to protect the injured

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\(^{49}\) Hom. *Il.* 21.400–2. There is some inconsistency in the manuscripts over whether this passage refers to the aegis or in fact to Athene’s shield. The confusion is not helped by the context, as both objects are appropriate to be carried into battle by the goddess. However, I am treating this as a reference to the aegis since it is described using the epithet ὀσσακώσσαν (‘many tasselled’). This is, as Richardson notes, a common epithet of the aegis in the *Iliad,* and is used to describe the aegis on four other occasions and is not used in relation to any other object; Nicholas Richardson, *The Iliad: A Commentary,* Vol. 6, ed. G. S. Kirk (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 88.

\(^{50}\) Hom. *Il.* 21.401.

\(^{51}\) ibid., 24.18–21.

\(^{52}\) ibid., 8.331–34.

or dead warrior in a simple, physical way, until he can be rescued and removed from further assault on the battlefield. In contrast, the aegis protects in a metaphysical or magical way. Unlike Teukros and the corpse of Hypsenor, Hektor’s corpse is not removed from the danger of further assault, in spite of the fact that the gods suggest this approach. Instead, the corpse is protected from physical damage and decay by the power of the aegis. The aegis protects in the same metaphysical way as the application of ambrosial oil by Aphrodite in book 23. Thus the protective function of the aegis extends beyond its superficial resemblance to armour.

The armour of Achilleus also offers protection of an exceptional nature or degree. It is apparently impenetrable. When Aineias throws a spear at Achilleus in Book 20, the spear cannot penetrate the shield. Its superior protective properties are attributed to its divine origins, and thus are beyond the understanding of the mortal Achilleus; he does not comprehend ‘how it is not easy for the glorious gifts of the gods to be overpowered by mortal man, nor will they give way’. According to the poet, it is the central layer of gold, rather than the two outer layers of bronze, that has the power to stay the spear: ‘the gold checked it, the gift of the god’.

These verses suggest that there is a metaphysical dimension to the protection offered by Achilleus’ armour, corresponding to the magical protective powers of the aegis.

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56 Griffin (1980) regards the poet’s comment that the shield of Achilleus is not easily broken (20.265–6) as ‘pregnant irony’ that falls short of actually stating that it is impenetrable (32); although Mueller (1984) disputes the idea that the armour of Achilleus is magical, he considers that it may be impenetrable by virtue of Hephaistos’ workmanship (127–8).
57 Hom. Il. 20.265–66.
58 ibid., 20.268.
59 It is tempting to assume that because actual gold would be comparatively weak, it can only be a supernatural power that holds back the spear. Of course, it cannot be assumed that the poet has observed or considered the comparative density of metals. However, observation of untarnished gold could account for the poet’s choice of this metal for the immortal, ageless aegis (2.447) and the divine armour.
ii. Inspirational function

At times the mortals benefit from the proximity of the aegis and of the armour. Both objects have a power to inspire mortals on the battlefield. One type of inspiration associated with the aegis is simply the awarding of victory. The gods use the aegis to bring glory and victory to those they support. This is described in Book 17, when Zeus takes up the aegis and gives victory to the Trojans at the expense of the Achaians.\textsuperscript{60} Apollo uses the aegis to similar effect in Book 15, when he shakes it, terrifying the Achaians in order to give glory to the Trojans.\textsuperscript{61} The gods also use the aegis to inspire courage and strength for battle. Athene uses the aegis in Book 2, when the Achaian warriors are preparing to return to battle without Achilleus. The goddess carries the aegis amongst the Achaians in order to inspire them and to fill them with eagerness for battle:

\[ \sigma \upsilon \tau \epsilon \ \pi \alpha \varphi \alpha \sigma \sigma\sigma \upsilon \sigma \sigma \delta \epsilon \sigma \sigma \upsilon \tau \lambda \alpha \nu \lambda \chi \alpha \iota \omega \nu \delta \tau \rho \nu \nu \sigma \nu \sigma \iota \epsilon \iota \iota \delta \varepsilon \iota \omega \delta \varsigma \tau \omega \ \epsilon \nu \iota \delta \zeta \sigma \tau \iota \omega \ \zeta \lambda \lambda \iota \kappa \lambda \nu \eta \varepsilon \sigma \tau \iota \omega \beta \sigma \varsigma \upsilon \tau \iota \nu \eta \xi \iota \iota \iota \iota \iota \iota \iota . \]

With this [the aegis], rushing about, she darted through the Achaian host rousing them to go; and she stirred up strength in each man's heart to wage war without ceasing and to fight on.\textsuperscript{62}

The inspirational effect of the aegis on these warriors is described using similes of fire and shining. In Book 2 their armour gleams as \( \pi \delta \rho \ \alpha \iota \delta \eta \iota \lambda \nu \ \epsilon \pi \iota \varphi \lambda \epsilon \gamma \epsilon \iota \ \alpha \sigma \pi \epsilon \tau \o \nu \ \omicron \lambda \iota \nu \) (‘destroying fire inflames a great forest’).\textsuperscript{63} The consequent appearance of the inspired warriors is described using terms such as \( \alpha \upsilon \gamma \iota \) (‘flare’ or ‘aura’) and \( \alpha \gamma \lambda \lambda \iota \) (‘gleam’).\textsuperscript{64} The alliterative effect of these words serves as an aural reminder of the aegis, strengthening the association of the aegis with the fiery inspiration it produces. The close association between the aegis and inspirational fire is attested in Book 18, in which Athene both drapes the aegis around Achilleus' shoulders and kindles a flame around his head.\textsuperscript{65} This fiery aspect relates the aegis thematically to

\textsuperscript{60} Hom. \textit{Il.} 17.593–96.
\textsuperscript{61} ibid., 15.320–27.
\textsuperscript{62} ibid., 2.450–52.
\textsuperscript{63} ibid., 2.455.
\textsuperscript{64} ibid., 2.456.
\textsuperscript{65} ibid., 18.204–14.
its creator, Hephaistos, who is associated in the *Iliad* with sacred fire,\(^{66}\) technological fire,\(^{67}\) and with the destructive \(\theta\varepsilon\pi\delta\alpha\varepsilon\ \pi\upsc{y}r\) (‘god-kindled fire’) that he turns on the river Skamandros.\(^{68}\) Thus the fiery associations are an appropriate reminder of the divine creator of the aegis and of the formidable power at his disposal.

The armour of Achilleus shares the inspirational function of the aegis and its association with fire. Achilleus is inspired by the sight and proximity of the armour, and that inspirational effect is expressed through the imagery of fire and shining. When Thetis brings the armour to Achilleus, the mere sight of it affects him, and he is inspired with fiery rage:

\[
\alpha\upsilon\tau\omicron\ \alpha\chi\omicron\lambda\lambda\omicron\delta\acute{s}
\quad \omega\varsigma\ \epsilon\in\delta\acute{\iota}, \ \omega\varsigma\ \mu\nu\ \mu\alpha\lambda\lambda\omicron\ \epsilon\delta\upsilon\ \chi\omicron\omicron\omicron\omicron, \ \epsilon\nu\ \delta\epsilon\ \iota\ \delta\sigma\sigma\epsilon
\quad \delta\epsilon\iota\nu\ominus\ \upsilon\pi\delta\ \beta\lambda\epsilon\varphi\acute{\alpha}\rho\omicron\omicron\ \omega\varsigma\ \epsilon\iota\ \sigma\epsilon\lambda\alpha\varsigma\ \epsilon\zeta\epsilon\varphi\acute{\alpha}\acute{\alpha}\nu\epsilon\theta\eta\nu
\]

But as Achilleus beheld (the arms), so the anger came over him utterly, and his eyes showed forth terribly from under their lids, as if they were aflame;\(^{69}\)

The inspirational effect of the armour, suggested through a fire simile, is externalised as it shines out through Achilleus’ eyes. The effect is repeated in a passage later in the same book, when he puts on the helmet and his eyes blaze like fire.\(^{70}\) The hero’s *aristeia*, his moment of greatest excellence in battle, is conventionally preceded in Greek epic by an arming scene. As James Armstrong has demonstrated, the arming scene is typically formulaic, although the poet of the *Iliad* deviates from this formula in significant ways which illuminate aspects of character, theme or plot.\(^{71}\) As Cedric Whitman notes, throughout the arming scene preceding Achilleus’ *aristeia*, the armour itself is described using a series of similes of earthly and celestial fire.\(^{72}\) The shield is likened to the moon, perceived as a fiery heavenly body,\(^{73}\) and to a blazing

\(^{66}\) ibid., 2.425–26.
\(^{67}\) ibid., 18.412, 468–77.
\(^{68}\) ibid., 21.342.
\(^{69}\) ibid., 19.15–17.
\(^{70}\) ibid., 19.365–66.
\(^{73}\) Hom. *Il.* 19.347.
signal fire. In the ensuing battle, the appearance of the armour is compared to the brightest star, and to the rising sun. This fiery imagery seems particularly appropriate in light of the centrality of fire to the tradition of Hephaistos, the creator of the armour, and the role of fire in forging the armour. As Whitman has demonstrated, Achilleus’ aristeia is described with an unprecedented amount of fiery imagery. This may be attributed to the fiery inspiration he receives from Hephaistos’ armour. The inspiration felt by Achilleus when he looks at and puts on his armour corresponds to the fiery effect of the aegis and its power to inspire valour and victory.

iii. Apotropaic function

The aegis and the armour also have the power to affect mortals in a harmful way. Both objects have the power to inspire fear and confusion in the opposition and to cause them to turn away and flee. This is best described as an ‘apotropaic’ function, the power to turn away an enemy. However, the aegis differs from other apotropaic devices in that it can apparently be directed at a chosen target as opposed to simply warding off evil. The aegis is decorated with the gorgon’s head, probably the definitive apotropaic device in Greek myth. Some scholars have disputed the authenticity of this passage, suggesting that this reference to the gorgon’s head is an interpolation and an anachronism, as it differs from contemporary iconographic representations. However, literary and iconographic representations may be influenced by traditions specific to their own genre and media, and thus comparison to the archaeological record is insufficient to reject the authenticity of this passage. Indeed, the inclusion of the reference to the gorgon is thematically appropriate to the apotropaic function of the aegis in the Iliad, and it is therefore consistent with the representation of the aegis in this text.

75 ibid., 22.26–32.
76 Hom. Il. 22.135.
77 Whitman, Homer and the Heroic Tradition, 139ff.
78 Hom. Il. 5.741–42. For a discussion of the role of the gorgoneion in myth, see Marx, ‘Gorgoneion’, 237, passim.
This apotropaic function is described in Book 15, in which Apollo uses the aegis to aid the Trojans in battle. The nature of the aegis’ power is clear from the words of Zeus, who instructs Apollo to take the aegis and ‘shake it hard to scare the Achaian fighters’. The effect of the aegis is clearly demonstrated by the reactions of the Achaian warriors, and this is emphasised by a comparison of when it is held still and of when it is shaken:

δφρα μὲν αἰγίδα χειρὶν ἔχει ἀτρέμα Φοῖβος Ἀπόλλων,
tόφρα μάλ’ ἄμφοτέρων βέλε’ ἢπτετο, πίπτε δὲ λαός.
αὐτάρ ἐπεὶ κατ’ ἐνώπια ἰδὼν Δαναῶν ταχυπόλων
σεί’, ἐπὶ δ’ αὐτὸς ἄυσε μάλα μέγα, τοῖς δὲ θυμῶν ἐν στήθεσιν ἔθελξε, λάθοντο δὲ θουρίδος ἀλκῆς.

As long as Phoibos Apollo held the aegis motionless in his hand so long the missiles of both sides took hold. Yet when he looked full into the faces of the Danaans of the swift horses And shook it, and himself shouted very greatly, the spirit in their breasts was spellbound, and they forgot their impetuous strength.

The Achaians respond to the aegis by turning away and fleeing: ὅς ἐφόβηθεν Ἀχαῖοι ἀνάλκης· ἐν γὰρ Ἀπόλλων / ἦκε φόβον (‘so the Achaians fled in weakness; for Apollo set them to flight’). Apollo is apparently able to direct the power of the aegis against the Achaians, who respond with fear, confusion and flight. Thus the apotropaic power inherent in the aegis can be directed according to the will and purpose of an Olympian god.

The aegis evokes a similar response in Book 18, although in this instance Athene uses its apotropaic powers against the Trojans, her purpose being to benefit and glorify Achilleus. By arming him with the aegis, Athene singles out Achilleus as an instrument of Olympian power, a power to overwhelm mortals with fear. Athene puts the aegis around Achilleus, whilst kindling a flame around his head and

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81 ibid., 15.318–22.
82 ibid., 15.326–27.
83 ibid., 18.203–4.
joining the hero in a great war cry.\textsuperscript{84} The Trojans’ reaction to the display is described in terms similar to the reaction of the Achaians in Book 15, above: their hearts are shaken, the chariot horses turn and flee, and, in the ensuing panic, many die on their own chariots and spears.\textsuperscript{85} The apotropaic nature of the aegis is thus demonstrated through the reaction of mortals on the battlefield.

Similarly, the reaction of mortals demonstrates the apotropaic power of the armour of Achilleus. In this respect the armour is described as functioning in a manner closely analogous to the aegis. Although, as discussed above, Achilleus is inspired by the sight of his armour, other mortals respond to it as to the aegis: they react with trembling and terror, and feel compelled to turn away or flee. When Thetis brings the armour to Achilleus, the Myrmidons are overwhelmed by trembling and fear, and they turn away: Μυρμιδόνας δ’ ἀρα πάντας ἔλε τρόμος, οὐδὲ τις ἔτηλ / ἄντην εἰσιδόειν, ἀλλ’ ἔτρεσαν (‘But trembling took hold of all the Myrmidons, and no man dared to look with his face towards it, but fled in fear’).\textsuperscript{86} Their fear is attributed to the sight of the arms themselves, despite the fact that Achilleus is not wearing them. When Achilleus enters battle, the fearful reactions of the Trojans are attributed to the sight of the armour in which he is clad. From the moment Achilleus steps onto the battlefield, the very sight of the hero ‘shining in all his armour’ causes the Trojans to tremble with terror:

\begin{quote}
Τρώας δὲ τρόμος αἰνός ὑπήλυθε γυῖα ἐκαστον, \\
δειδότας, ὁθ’ ὀρῶντο ποδώκεα Πηλείωνα \\
teύχεσι λαμπόμενον \\
\end{quote}

But dire trembling entered the limbs of each of the Trojans in terror, when they saw swift footed Peliades shining in all his armour\textsuperscript{87}

It is the sight of the armour, gleaming like the flare of a star, which causes Priam to groan aloud and to plead Hektor to turn back.\textsuperscript{88} Yet it is during the encounter between Hektor and Achilleus that the implicit parallel between the armour and the

\textsuperscript{84} ibid., 18.205–18.  
\textsuperscript{85} ibid., 18.222–31.  
\textsuperscript{86} ibid., 19.14–15.  
\textsuperscript{87} ibid., 20.44–46.  
\textsuperscript{88} ibid., 22.25–36.
aegis is used to greatest effect.

The scene in which Hektor turns and runs from Achilleus is a completely unexpected turn in an epic in which foreshadowing is a common literary device. Elsewhere in the narrative, events of great importance are prefigured, often more than once. While the death of Hektor is anticipated, his flight from Achilleus is not. Instead, Hektor has repeatedly stated his resolution to stand and face Achilleus and to fight to the death. Given the strong sense of duty associated with this character, his flight is unexpected and difficult to explain. Yet if the armour of Achilleus is regarded as having an apotropaic function, his action makes perfect sense. Christopher Mackie compares Hektor’s reaction to the armed Achilleus with the response of Perseus to the gorgon sisters of Medusa. Just as the aegis, decorated with the head of the gorgon Medusa, causes the hero to turn and flee, the sight of Achilleus’ armour stimulates Hektor’s flight. The scene is described thus:

But Achilleus came close by,
Equal to Enyalios, warrior of the waving helmet,
Brandishing the Pelian ash over his right shoulder,
The terrible spear; and around him the bronze was shining like the gleam
Either of fire igniting or of the sun rising.
And trembling seized Hektor at the mere sight, and he could no longer
Remain there, but left the gate behind and fled, put to flight;

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In this passage, the description of the armour is immediately followed by Hektor's reaction to what he sees. It is the sight of the gleaming armour that causes him to tremble and to flee. Thus the apotropaic function of the armour is evident. In a scheme in which the armour functions in a manner analogous to the aegis, Hektor can be regarded as fleeing from the magical power of the armour and the divine might it represents.

To conclude, it can be demonstrated that the aegis and the armour of Achilleus are closely analogous in the Iliad. Against a background where the objects apparently have similar physical properties and the same creator, they are described as functioning in a corresponding way. The parallel created between the two objects enhances the magical and divine status of the armour, suggesting a role similar to that of the aegis. In the Iliad, the aegis is made by the smith god and derives power from the divine. However, that power resides in the aegis itself and can be wielded and directed by whichever god bears it. It has the power to influence behaviour on the battlefield and affect the outcome of a battle. The analogy suggests that the armour of Achilleus should be regarded as having a similar power to influence the process and the outcome of the conflict. While this power is wielded by Achilleus, as the bearer of the arms, the parallel with the aegis suggests that this power is derived from its divine origins. Thus, when Achilleus appears on the battlefield clad in his Hephaistean armour, it is as an agent of the divine, encased in both a symbol and the accoutrements of Olympian power. If we consider the gifts of the gods to wield a magical power to inspire and influence mortals, this suggests that it is what the hero possesses, as much as what he is, that enables him to excel in the heroic encounter.

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