

A Symbolic Reading of Mythological Scenes on a Fragmentary Bronze Shield Band from Olympia

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Abstract: The research deals with a fragment of a bronze shield band from Olympia, signed by its maker, the artist Aristodamos of Argos. This shield band fragment is now preserved in the J. Paul Getty Museum, number 84.AC.11, and it is dated to about 580 BC. The shield band fragment consists of two mythological scenes: the first depicts Helen and Menelaus with the goddess Athena, and the other shows Deianeira, the wife of Heracles, and the Centaur Nessos. The artist's choice of these mythological scenes of the bronze shield band might add significant value to the artifact. The study explores the symbolism of these two mythical scenes, focusing on their deliberate selection for the shield band and the symbolic message that the scenes convey to the warrior-soldier, considering that such mythological images were primarily directed toward the one who bore the shield. Since the mythological depictions were visible only to the warrior himself, they may have held a personal or motivational function. In addition, the study investigates the intended purpose and nature of the shield band and to what extent such iconographic themes were common among the bronze shield bands discovered at Olympia. Despite its historical and artistic significance, this object has not received sufficient scholarly attention, and a comprehensive study remains lacking. The study represents unique insights into the object's artistic and cultural dimensions and is the first attempt to explore it in depth. In this study, the researcher will rely on descriptive, analytical, comparative, semiotic, and symbolic approaches.

Keywords: Shield band – Myth – Symbol – Soldier – Olympia - Argos.

قراءة رمزية لمشاهد أسطورية على بقايا طوق ترس برونزي من أوليمبيا

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الملخص: تتناول الدراسة جزءًا متبقيًا من طوق ترس برونزي من أوليمبيا 'Ολυμπία' بتوقيع صانعه الفنان أريستوداموس 'Ἀριστόδαμος' من أرجوس 'Ἄργος'، وهو محفوظ الآن في متحف جيه بول جيتي J. Paul Getty Museum تحت رقم سجل 84.AC.11، ويؤرخ له بحوالي عام ٥٨٠ ق.م. وتتكون القطعة المتبقية من طوق الترس من مشهدين أسطوريين: الأول يصور هيليني 'Ἑλένη' ومينيلائوس 'Μενέλαος' والربة أثينة 'Ἀθηνᾶ'، والآخر يصور ديانيرا 'Διῖάνειρα' - زوجة هيراكليس 'Ἡρακλῆς' - والكينتاوروس نيسوس 'Νέσσος'. ولعل اختيار الفنان لهذه المشاهد الأسطورية على طوق الترس البرونزي يضيف أهمية على الأثر. تتناقل الدراسة رمزية هذين المشهدين الأسطوريين من ناحية اختيارهما بالتحديد على طوق الترس، وتفسير الرسالة الرمزية التي يحملها المشهدين بالنسبة للجندي المحارب؛ باعتبار أن المشاهد الأسطورية المصورة على طوق الترس يراها الجندي وحده، وأن هذه المشاهد الأسطورية موجهة إليه في الأساس. بالإضافة إلى التعرف على المغزى المصنوع من أجله طوق الترس، وماهيته، ومدى ذبوع طرز مثل هذه المشاهد في أطواق التروس البرونزية التي تم العثور عليها في أوليمبيا. وبالرغم من الأهمية التاريخية والفنية لهذه القطعة الأثرية، فإنها لم تحظ باهتمام علمي كاف، ولا تزال الدراسة الشاملة مفقودة. تُقدم هذه الدراسة رؤية أصيلة في أبعادها الفنية والثقافية، وهي أول محاولة لاستكشافها بعمق. وسوف يعتمد الباحث في هذه الدراسة على المنهج الوصفي، والتحليلي، والمقارن، والسيميولوجي، والرمزي.

الكلمات الدالة: طوق ترس، أسطورة، رمز، جندي، أوليمبيا، أرجوس.

Introduction:

Several shields, belonging to the hoplite soldiers ὀπλίται, were found at Olympia between the last quarter of the seventh century and the sixth century B.C. These shields represent a significant source for the study of Greek mythology. The inner grip of the shield, through which the warrior passed his left arm to hold the shield tightly, was secured by a bronze band, commonly known as the shield band or shield strap. These bronze bands were often decorated with small relief panels or plaques that depict various scenes drawn from well-known Greek myths.¹

The shield was one of the key items of personal protection for the Greek warrior, serving both defensive and offensive purposes. For the Greek hoplite, it was no less important than the sword, spear, or armor.² The Greek term ὀπλίτης *hoplite*, meaning "armed soldier," is derived from ὄπλον *hoplon*, which originally referred to a type of shield used by such warriors.³ The war shield was also known in Greek as ἀσπίς *aspis*,⁴ and it was carried by Greek infantrymen. It is often referred to as the "Argive shield," named after the city of Argos, which is traditionally credited with its invention.⁵ Argos is thus considered the origin of the circular war shield. The Shield's inner band, or grip ring,⁶ is known in Greek as τελαμών *telamon*.⁷

¹ Thomas H. Carpenter, "The Trojan War in Early Greek Art," in *The Greek Epic Cycle and its Ancient Reception: A Companion*, eds. Marco Fantuzzi and Christos Tsagalis (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2015), 183.

² For Greek war shields, their forms, significance, and development, see:

George Henry Chase, "The Shield Devices of the Greeks," *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 13 (1902): 61-127.

Nicholas Sekunda, "Hoplite Shield Devices," *Osprey Military Journal* (2000): 16-22.

François Lissarrague, "Looking at Shield Devices: Tragedy and Vase Painting," in *Visualizing the Tragic: Drama, Myth, and Ritual in Greek Art and Literature. Essays in Honour of Froma Zeitlin*, eds.: C. Kraus, et al. (Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2007), 151-164.

Gregory F. Viggiano and Hans Van Wees, "The Arms, Armor, and Iconography of Early Greek Hoplite Warfare," in *Men of Bronze: Hoplite warfare in Ancient Greece*, eds.: Donald Kagan and Gregory F. Viggiano (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2013), 57-63.

³ Henry G. Liddell, Robert Scott, and Henry S. Jones, *Greek-English Lexicon, with a Revised Supplement* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), s.v. ὀπλίτης, ὄπλον.

⁴ Diod. Sic., 15.44.3.

⁵ Kevin Rowan De Groote, "A Core Difference! The Varying Hoplite Shield Designs and their Effects on Economic Value, Performance and Combat Effectiveness," *International Journal of Military History and Historiography* (2021): 2. For Argive shields, see:

Anthony Snodgrass, *Arms and Armor of the Greeks* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1999), 54-69.

Adam Schwartz, *Reinstating the Hoplite: Arms, Armour and Phalanx Fighting in Archaic and Classical Greece* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2009), 25-54.

⁶ Emil Kunze, *Archaische Schildbänder: Ein Beitrag zur frühgriechischen Bildgeschichte und Sagenüberlieferung. Olympische Forschungen, Band 2* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1950), 215.

⁷ Hom., Il., 2.388, 11.38, 18.480.

Regarding the form and structure of the war shield, its outer surface was typically decorated with what is known as an ἐπίσημον *episemon* – a symbol or sign – most often depicting a scene drawn from traditional mythology, and this outer image was, naturally, visible to the enemy. Every bronze shield featured a band, which functioned as an interior bronze grip. This inner shield band was also decorated, but with a sequence of mythological scenes divided into separate panels – usually around six or seven – each presenting an independent mythological episode with its own distinct motif (see Figure 1). These scenes were not necessarily connected to each other in a narrative sequence. The purpose of these panels – more precisely, these mythological scenes – was for the bearer of the shield to view them. Nevertheless, it is likely that the artisan responsible for creating the sequential panels for the bronze shield band had a conceptual framework in mind when selecting from among the countless mythological episodes offered by the rich epic and folkloric Greek tradition to include in each shield.¹

The bronze shield bands discovered at Olympia are considered significant archaeological artifacts in ancient Greece, primarily dating to the Archaic period. These bands were unearthed at the Temple of Zeus in Olympia, a major religious center in the city. Typically made of bronze and decorated in high relief, the shield bands were sewn onto the leather linings inside the shields to provide reinforcement and serve as ornamental elements. They were frequently dedicated as votive offerings to the god Zeus. Undoubtedly, these bronze bands reflect the deep interconnection between art, religion, and military culture in ancient Greece.

In fact, the mythological scenes depicted on each individual shield band were not thematically connected. Both Kunze and Bol have addressed this notion, yet neither scholar was able to determine the underlying basis, principle, or criteria by which the artist selected these mythological episodes. They were also unable to identify any clear link between the separate panels. Nevertheless, it is possible to view each scene as part of a broader conceptual and ideological framework, wherein every mythological episode functions as – an exemplum or paradigm – a meaningful and symbolic model in its own right.²

It is worth noting that the arrangement of the panels was not organized according to a chronological sequence of events, as might be expected in a narrative. Rather, the scenes were selected for their significance to the identity of the warrior. The meaningful narrative

¹ Kunze, *Archaische Schildbänder*, 215, 217.

Mikhail Y. Treister, "A Bronze Matrix from Corfu in the Ashmolean Museum," *Mitteilungen des Deutschen Archäologischen Instituts, Athenische Abteilung* 110 (1995): 84ff.

Nanno Marinatos, "The Life Cycle of the Archaic Hero," in *Myth and Symbol I. Symbolic Phenomena in Ancient Greek Culture: Papers from the First International Symposium on Symbolism at the University of Tromsø, June 4-7, 1988*, ed.: Synnøve des Bouvrie, (Bergen: Norwegian Institute at Athens, 2002), 153-154.

² Kunze, *Archaische Schildbänder*, 49ff.

Peter Bol, *Argivische Schilde* (Berlin: De Gruyter, 1989), 39.

Marinatos, "The Life Cycle of the Archaic Hero," 154.

sequence of these mythological scenes reflects the hero's journey and life rather than a linear storytelling structure.¹

The study centers on a small relief from a bronze shield band originating from Olympia, crafted by Aristodamos of Argos around 580 B.C. This relief is considered an important artifact of early Archaic Greek art. The surviving fragment of the bronze shield band is notable for its mythological imagery and the rare signature of the artist. The artifact is currently housed in the J. Paul Getty Museum, number 84.AC.11 (see Figure 2).² This small bronze relief was once part of a war shield, a common votive offering presented at the Temple of Zeus in Olympia. The shield may have been a personal gift – either from a retired soldier or as an expression of gratitude following a military victory.³ As for the shield bands, the range of newly introduced themes is remarkably extensive; surviving examples demonstrate that many of the scenes depicted were drawn from everyday life as well as from mythology.⁴

The artist of the shield band:

An important inscription appears on the shield band: ΑΡΙΣΤΟΔΑΜΟΣ ΕΠΟΙΦΕΣΕΗ ΑΡΓΕΙΟΣ, reading: Ἀριστόδαμος ἐποίησε Ἀργεῖος "Aristodamos of Argos made (it)." Aristodamos of Argos was an active Greek bronzeworker in Argos during the sixth century B.C. He is known through his signature on the bronze shield band that forms the focus of this study. The Archaeological Museum of Olympia, no. B 236,⁵ houses another fragment of a shield band, attributed to Aristodamos and depicting a mythological scene of Ajax with the body of Achilles. Aristodamos' signature is considered one of the earliest known inscriptions by a Greek bronzeworker.⁶

The artist's signature appears on weapons such as this shield band, and it may represent a new phenomenon among bronze artisans – a way of asserting their identity and making themselves known to the public, much like well-known pottery painters who often signed their ceramic works. This practice reflects an emerging awareness of authorship and individual craftsmanship in Archaic Greek art.⁷

¹ Marinatos, "The Life Cycle of the Archaic Hero," 157.

² Getty Masterpieces, *Masterpieces of the J. Paul Getty Museum: Antiquities* (Los Angeles: The J. Paul Getty Museum, 1997), 30.

<https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/103VMA> (accessed May 1, 2025).

³ Ioannis Chalazonitis, Chaido Koukouli-Chrysanthaki, and Dimitria Malamidou, "ΕΝΤΟΣ ΑΜΩΜΗΤΟΝ: An Argive-Type Shield from the Sanctuary of Oisyme," *Annual of the British School at Athens* 113 (2018): 199.

⁴ Claude Rolley, "Les Bronzes Grecs et Romains: Recherches Récentes," *Revue Archéologique* (1991): 286.

⁵ Doris Vollkommer-Glökler (ed.), *Künstlerlexikon der Antike. Band 1 A - K* (München & Leipzig: K.G. Saur, 2001), s.v. Aristodamos.

⁶ Jeffrey M. Hurwit, *Artists and Signatures in Ancient Greece* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 2015), 97.

⁷ Elena Walter-Karydi, "Die Entstehung des beschrifteten Bildwerkes. Zur Funktion und Eigenart der frühgriechischen Schriftlichkeit," *Gymnasium* 106 (1999): 296, pl. 2, 2.

The city of Argos, located in southern Greece, was a prominent center for bronze work in antiquity, producing both shields and statues. For an artist to sign his work in this manner and at such an early period was highly unusual. Aristodamos is among the earliest known Greek artists to have his creations signed, a practice that reflects a new sense of professional identity and pride in craftsmanship.¹ It is also known that Corinth was a leading center to produce high-relief bronze work. Nevertheless, there is at least one strong piece of evidence – namely, the shield band under study – that confirms the active involvement of Argive craftsmen in this artistic field as late as around 580 B.C.²

The description of the mythological scenes on the bronze shield band:

Only two scenes survive from the bronze shield band. The first depicts the recovery of Helen from Troy by her husband, Menelaus, king of Sparta, and the goddess Athena stands to the right of the scene. The second scene portrays the Centaur Nessos abducting Deianeira, the wife of the hero Heracles. The names of the figures are inscribed beside each character.

This bronze shield band fragment was mentioned in the J. Paul Getty Museum Journal in 1985, with the following description: "The fragment preserves two small metopes in relief and a small portion of landscape features (rocks?) from a third incomplete scene. The upper register of the two more complete panels depicts the abduction of a female figure by a male wearing armor and holding a drawn sword. The presence of the goddess Athena – identified by the inscription ΑΘΑΝΑΙΑ "Athena" – on the right indicates that the couple represented are Helen and Menelaus. The lower panel shows the abduction of Deianeira by the Centaur Nessos. Both names are inscribed: ΝΗΕΣΟΣ ΔΑΙΑΝ "Nessos, Deianeira". In addition, the artist signed the work retroactively: ΑΡΙΣΤΟΔΑΜΟΣ ΕΠΙΟΙΗΣΕΗ ΑΡΓΕΙΟΣ "Aristodamos of Argos made (it)." This represents the earliest known signature of a Greek artist of a bronzeworker."³

In the first scene, Menelaus occupies the center, facing right, while turning his head to the left. He holds a drawn sword in his right hand and grasps the hand of Helen, who stands on the left side of the scene. However, the depiction of Helen is partially missing due to the fragmentary nature of the relief. At the far right of the scene stands the goddess Athena – or possibly a statue of her – shown in profile and facing left. At the bottom center of the panel, between Menelaus and Helen, a lizard is depicted. The second scene portrays the Centaur Nessos – a mythical creature with the upper body of a man and the lower body of a horse – moving to the right while turning his head to the left toward Deianeira, who is seated on his back. She faces him, raising her left hand in front of his face. The upper left corner of the scene depicts a swan looking toward Nessos and Deianeira.

¹ <https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/person/103JVD> (accessed May 1, 2025).

² Mikhail Y. Treister, *Hammering Techniques in Greek and Roman Jewellery and Toreutics*, ed.: James Hargrave (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 56.

³ John Walsh, "Acquisitions/1984," *The J. Paul Getty Museum Journal* 13 (1985): 166-167.

The symbolism of the two mythological scenes depicted on the shield band:

It is well known that the mythological scenes on Greek artifacts are primarily derived from the rich body of Greek mythological tradition. By decoding the symbols embedded within these mythological representations, we can gain a deeper understanding of the cultural landscape of ancient Greece and the vital role of myth in shaping collective identity and belief systems. The bronze shield band at the center of this study presents two myths that were evidently among the preferred narratives in that region of Greece.

Regarding the first scene, which depicts Menelaus reclaiming Helen, this moment – Helen's return to Menelaus following the fall of Troy – was a popular subject among Greek artists. Such representations appear on numerous vase paintings and relief sculptures from both Greek and Roman periods.¹ According to mythological tradition, Helen had chosen Menelaus from among her suitors to be her husband, and he became king of Sparta following the death of Tyndareus. Later, Zeus and other gods decided to make Helen the center of a conflict that would eventually lead to the Trojan War. Menelaus had lived with his brother in Mycenae or Argos, but after marrying Helen and succeeding her father, he ruled over Sparta.

Perhaps one of the most frequently depicted mythological scenes on the bronze shield bands discovered at Olympia is a typical representation of a warrior holding a raised sword, moving to the left, while leading a woman behind him by the wrist. This scene is commonly identified as the recovery of Helen by Menelaus, or alternatively as her forced abduction following the Greek victory and the fall of Troy.² However, the scene may also allude to other narratives, such as the capture of Chryseis, Theseus' abduction of Persephone (Kore), or any other bride or female figure taken by force. This motif reflects a significant cultural theme in Archaic Greek society, where the abduction or possession of women symbolized the honor of the warrior. Moreover, it served as a visual marker of male virility, indicating the hero's transition into manhood and maturity. Menelaus's grasp of Helen's wrist represents a form of physical union between husband and wife. Similar scenes – depicting a man seizing a woman by the wrist – are found in representations of various mythological couples such as Zeus and Hera, and Hector and Andromache, as well as other famous couples in Greek mythology. As a result, the same mythological motif could be used on bronze shield bands, with or without minor modifications, to refer to a range of different figures, while the underlying symbolic message remains unchanged.³

The scene of Menelaus reclaiming Helen is rich in symbolism and reflects various themes from Greek mythology and literature. Here are some key points: Menelaus

¹ Kenneth Hamma, "Two New Representations of Helen and Menelaos," *The J. Paul Getty Museum Journal* 11 (1983): 123.

² Kunze, *Archaische Schildbänder*, 163-167.

Karl Schefold, *Myth and Legend in Early Greek Art* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 1966), pl. 57b.

Bol, *Argivische Schilde*, 74.

Lowell Edmunds, *Stealing Helen: The Myth of the Abducted Wife in Comparative Perspective* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 2015), 306-307.

³ Marinatos, "The Life Cycle of the Archaic Hero," 154-155.

reclaiming Helen symbolizes the restoration of marital and societal order. Helen's abduction by Paris disrupted the natural order, leading to the Trojan War. Her return signifies the end of chaos and the restoration of proper balance. This scene can also be considered a moment of redemption and forgiveness. Despite Helen's role in the war, her return to Menelaus signifies the possibility of reconciliation and mending broken relationships. Menelaus's recovery of Helen can symbolize the Greeks' victory over Troy. Helen, being the cause of the war, represents the ultimate prize and the proof of the Greeks' triumph. The scene highlights the enduring power of love and loyalty. Despite the betrayal and the passage of time, Menelaus's quest to reclaim Helen affirms the strength of his loyalty to her. In many interpretations, Helen's recovery is influenced by the gods and fate, reflecting the belief in divine intervention and the predetermined nature of human destiny in Greek mythology. Each of these aspects adds depth to the narrative and reflects the complex interaction between human emotions, societal values, and divine influence in ancient Greek literature.

Menelaus is depicted in various artistic traditions, such as on painted pottery – either as seizing or leading away his wife Helen during the fall of Troy, the very event prompted by the effort to recover her. In some visual representations, Menelaus appears to capture Helen, while in others, he does not pursue her with violent intent.¹ The iconography of Menelaus and Helen at the end of the Trojan War, after ten years of conflict and the sack of the city, generally follows two distinct narrative types: one shows Menelaus chasing a fleeing Helen, while the other portrays him leading her away peacefully. Kahil conducted a detailed study of these artistic representations involving Menelaus and Helen. She argues that the violent depictions of Helen's capture are inspired by Lesches' lost epic, the *Little Iliad*, whereas the non-violent, reconciliatory scenes draw from Arctinus' lost epic, the *Sack of Ilion* (*Iliou Persis*).²

While the goddess Athena appears in this scene alongside Menelaus and Helen, other artistic variants of the same episode feature different deities, such as Aphrodite or Apollo. This raises a significant question: why did the artist choose to depict Athena rather than Aphrodite, especially considering that Aphrodite was traditionally regarded as Helen's divine ally? To address this, we may turn to literary sources, which clearly position Athena as a staunch supporter of the Greeks, whereas Aphrodite consistently sides with the Trojans. In this context, Berger argues that Helen could not have expected assistance from Athena, since the goddess was openly hostile toward the Trojans. Moreover, Helen was implicated in the theft of the Palladion, the sacred statue of Athena in Troy, a further offense that would have alienated the goddess.³

Thus, we may argue that the artist's choice to include Athena in the scene serves to emphasize that Menelaus is the true hero of the depiction. On one hand, Athena is traditionally the divine helper of Greek heroes; on the other hand, she is a staunch ally of

¹ Guy Hedreen, "Image, Text, and Story in the Recovery of Helen," *Classical Antiquity* 15, no. 1 (1996): 152.

² Lilly Kahil, "Helene," in *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae IV (1), (Eros-Herakles)* (Zürich und München: Artemis Verlag, 1988), 540, 546.

³ Ernst Berger, *Der Parthenon in Basel: Dokumentation zu den Metopen* (Mainz: Verlag Philipp von Zabern, 1980), 38-39.

the Greeks, who aided them in their triumph over the Trojans. In this way, the visual message is directed toward the hoplite, the warrior who beholds the scene on the shield band. At the same time, another symbolic layer emerges: Menelaus grasping Helen's wrist formally resembles a bridegroom leading his bride by the wrist to her new home. This imagery might evoke personal reflections in the viewer, reminding a married soldier of his own wife, offering an idealized vision of marriage for an unmarried warrior.

As for the other scene on the shield band, depicting Deianeira and the Centaur Nessos, it corresponds to a well-known mythological narrative. According to the myth, sometime after their marriage, Heracles and his wife, Deianeira, reached the river Evenus during their journey. Nessos, a centaur who served as a ferryman, offered to carry Deianeira across the river while Heracles swam. However, once they reached the opposite bank, Nessos attempted to abduct and assault Deianeira. From across the river, Heracles reacted immediately, shooting a poisoned arrow – dipped in the blood of Hydra – at the Centaur.¹

The Centaur is a mythological creature with the upper body of a human and the lower body of a horse, and it occupies a significant place in both Greek mythology and art. The myth of Nessos is among the most important narratives involving the Centaurs, focusing on Nessos' attempted rape of Deianeira.² Jebb describes Deianeira as one of the most beautiful women in all Greek Literature.³ Another prominent myth involving the Centaurs is the battle between the Centaurs and the Lapiths, which also centers on an attempted abduction of women. During the wedding feast of Pirithous, the Centaurs, in a drunken frenzy, attempted to seize the Lapith women, resulting in a violent clash. After a fierce struggle, the Centaurs were ultimately defeated and banished from their homeland on Mount Pelion.

The myth of Nessos and Deianeira embodies the savagery of the Centaur as depicted in Greek art, highlighting the violence of this hybrid creature, part human and part animal. The Centaur is consistently portrayed as a threat to mortal women, emphasizing his dangerous and uncontrolled nature.⁴ Similarly, the Amazons were depicted as a barbaric and wild race, whereas the Greeks represented themselves as a civilized and progressive people. Thus, the portrayal of Greek heroes fighting the Amazons served as a symbolic continuation of the Greek conquest over all forms of barbarism, savagery, and moral

¹ Soph., *Trach.*, 555-561; *Apollod.*, *Bibl.*, 2.7.6.

² Paul V. C. Baur, *Centaurs in Ancient Art: The Archaic Period* (Berlin: Karl Curtius, 1912), 10-31.

F. Diez de Velasco, "Nessos," in *Lexicon Iconographicum Mythologiae Classicae VI (1-2)*, (Zürich und München: Artemis Verlag, 1992), VI (1): 838-847, VI (2): 534-555.

<https://www.theoi.com/Georgikos/KentaurosNessos.html> (accessed May 1, 2025).

³ R.C. Jebb, *Sophocles: The Plays and Fragments, with Critical Notes, Commentary and Translation in English Prose*, Part V (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1892), xxxi.

⁴ Schefold, *Myth and Legend in Early Greek Art*, 24.

Page DuBois, *Centaurs and Amazons: Women and the Pre-History of the Great Chain of Being* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1982), 97-98.

Jan N. Bremmer, *Becoming a Man in Ancient Greece and Rome: Essays on Myths and Rituals of Initiation* (Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2021), 58.

corruption.¹ Tarbell argues that the popularity of depicting Centaurs and Amazons in Greek art is due not only to their association with well-known and noble exploits but also to their capacity to provide an inexhaustible source of artistic themes. Furthermore, these mythological subjects reflect a fundamental Greek concept: the contrast between civilization and barbarism, with the Centaurs and Amazons embodying the latter.² Burkert aptly described the Centaurs as "wild forest men who still belong to the context of initiation rituals."³

Among the Greek – and later Roman – myths centered on uncontrollable desire, which gained popularity in Italian Renaissance art, the myth of Nessos' abduction of Deianeira stands out as one of the most striking, yet one of the least explored.⁴

Regarding the symbolism of the Centaur in Greek literature and art, the centaur represents the duality of human nature, embodying both rationality and civility (the human aspect) and primitive instincts and savagery (the horse aspect). This juxtaposition highlights the ongoing tension between reason and instinct within human beings. In many myths, the Centaur is depicted as a wild, untamed creature prone to drunkenness and violence, often reflecting the Greeks' fears of untamed nature and the dangers of losing control over one's basic instincts.⁵ Battles between the Centaurs and humans, such as the battle with the Lapiths at the wedding of Pirithous, symbolize the struggle between civilization and barbarism. These conflicts are frequently depicted in Greek art, especially in temple sculptures and pottery. As a creature of the earth and forests, the centaur occupies a liminal space between the civilized world and the natural world, often symbolizing transformations, boundaries, and the unknown.

The Greek society's rejection of the crime of physical rape is evident in various mythological narratives, which consistently show that those who attempt to commit such acts meet with severe punishment, often culminating in death. The rapist is portrayed as being overtaken by a temporary lust that blinds him to the consequences of his actions. In this state of psychological and mental disorientation, he resorts to sinister behaviors, such as plotting abduction, deception, or seduction to achieve his goal.

Heracles is frequently depicted in artistic scenes fighting the Centaurs.⁶ Although Heracles himself does not appear in this particular scene, he remains present in the mind of the warrior who views it within the grip of his hand. He is the hero who will avenge his

¹ DuBois, *Centaurs and Amazons*, 29.

² Frank B. Tarbell, "Centauromachy and Amazonomachy in Greek Art: The Reasons for Their Popularity," *American Journal of Archaeology* 24, no. 3 (1920): 230-231.

³ Walter Burkert, *Structure and History in Greek Mythology and Ritual* (Berkeley & Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1979), 30.

⁴ Yael Even, "Nessus's Abduction of Deianeira: A Subject for All Seasons," *Explorations in Renaissance Culture* 31, no. 2 (2005): 189.

⁵ Not all Centaurs are depicted negatively. Chiron, a wise and kind Centaur, was a renowned teacher and healer who mentored heroes such as Heracles, Achilles, and Asclepius. The depiction of Chiron contrasts with the more common image of the Centaur, suggesting the possibility of harmony between the animalistic and human aspects of nature.

⁶ Thomas H. Carpenter, *Art and Myth in Ancient Greece* (London: Thames and Hudson, 2021), 187.

wife against the one who humiliated her and violated her sanctity. In mythological art, Heracles is often portrayed as a symbol of strength, perseverance, and heroic struggle. The inclusion of scenes from Heracles' labors likely aimed to inspire the bearer of the shield with the same steadfastness and resilience.

Regarding the creatures depicted in the two scenes, the first features a lizard, while the second includes a swan. The depiction of the lizard in Archaic Greek vase painting indicates its symbolic association with power and portent and often an omen of disaster. Lizards appear frequently in Archaic art, especially in scenes of actual or impending violence.¹ The scene depicting the recovery of Helen by Menelaus is considered one of violence, as the hero retrieved his wife on the night of Troy's fall.

The swan is associated with the goddess Aphrodite, the deity of love and beauty, erotic charm, and allure, so the swan symbolizes sexual desire. The swan often appears in scenes of romantic seduction, with one of the most famous myths being the seduction of Leda by Zeus, who assumed the form of a swan. The swan, as depicted in the decoration of Greek vase painting, is associated with the girl's journey toward physical maturity and her preparation for marriage. The swan is viewed as a creature with a distinctive nature characterized by masculinity and combativeness, making it an ideal symbol for the attacking warrior. Although the swan does not initiate aggression, it defends itself vigorously and ultimately prevails. However, the swan is a peaceful creature whose natural strength grants it the confidence to defend itself against aggressors.² In this context, the swan can be interpreted as a symbol of Heracles, who, according to the literary version of the myth, saved his wife from the assault of Nessos. Heracles defended his masculinity and demonstrated his heroism in a defensive act that concluded with his victory through the slaying of Nessos. Therefore, the soldier should conquer to keep his household safe and invulnerable, so he must achieve victory.

In ancient Greece, the terms "soldier" and "warrior" were closely intertwined. The soldiers, such as the hoplite, played a prominent role in battle, while warriors were held in high regard for their honor and bravery, especially in Spartan society. Although all citizens were expected to be prepared for combat, the term "warrior" often connoted exceptional skill, discipline, and valor in battle. The hoplite phalanx relied fundamentally on the principle of mutual defense, whereby each soldier protected not only himself but also the man to his left with his shield. This formation was not merely a tactical necessity but also a physical manifestation of communal cohesion and interdependence—a central tenet of the Greek polis.

The soldier's shield represents the physical barrier between life and death. Certain scenes depicted on shields held symbolic significance for the bearer. Sexual union and marriage are considered pivotal stages in a warrior's life, symbolizing the transition from youth to mature warriorhood. Marinatos points out that each scene on the bronze shield bands focuses on a particular stage in the life cycle and professional path of the warrior,

¹ Jeffrey M. Hurwit, "Lizards, Lions, and the Uncanny in Early Greek Art," *Hesperia* 75 (2006): 124.

² Christina Avronidaki, "Swan Riddles in Boeotian Red-Figure Vase-painting," in *ΦΥΤΑ ΚΑΙ ΖΩΙΑ: Πflanzen und Tiere auf griechischen Vasen. Akten des Internationalen Symposiums an der Universität Graz, 26–28 September 2013 (CVA Österreich Suppl. 2)*, eds: Claudia Lang-Auinger and Elisabeth Trinkl (Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2015), 239–247.

the mythological hero, and even the god. The stages range from the hero's adolescence to his death and are marked by various accomplishments: glory in battle, the defeat of monsters or wild animals, the abduction of women, and the subjugation of enemies of wild women such as the Amazons. Sexual union and marriage are also important – not because marriage is seen as an achievement, but because it signifies a transition to a new stage. However, it is worth noting that the arrangement of the panels was not dictated by the chronological sequence of events as they might occur in a narrative, but rather by their relevance to the identity of the warrior.¹

It is natural for artists from Argos to depict the most prominent mythological scenes associated with their city or the Peloponnese Region. They employed mythological narratives featuring Menelaus and other renowned heroes. This also applies to the gods: the goddess Athena is depicted alongside Menelaus and Helen, and it is well known that both Athena and Hera are the patron deities of the city of Argos.

Conclusion:

The bronze shield band from Olympia, crafted by Aristodamos of Argos, is a significant artifact that offers valuable insight into the symbolic use of mythological scenes in Greek art. The war shield itself serves as a symbol of protection and defense, and through the mythological scenes depicted on the shield band, the artist Aristodamos may have imbued the shield with an additional layer of symbolic protection through messages directed at the warrior.

Naturally, each mythological scene depicted on the bronze shield band is independent and not linked to the others in terms of narrative sequence. However, multiple scenes may be related through their underlying meaning or symbolism – for instance, scenes involving the acquisition of a woman or those symbolizing the warrior's marriage, such as the two scenes featured on the shield band under study. It is worth noting that the warrior did not need a complete narrative; a single image could evoke the entire myth along with its embedded symbols and moral lessons. The mythological scenes and iconic forms enabled the warrior to grasp, interpret, and internalize the symbolic content at a glance, particularly in civic or military contexts. Certain historical events may have influenced artists who crafted bronze shield bands to depict specific mythological scenes that echoed those events, thereby focusing on symbolic representation that could serve as cautionary reminders to the warrior against repeating past mistakes.

Aristodamos, in these two scenes, places a particular emphasis on the female figures – Helen and Deianeira. The former is recovered by her husband, Menelaus, after having been abducted by Paris and taken from Sparta to Troy. In this context, Helen is portrayed as the rightful possession of the hero or warrior depicted beside her. Deianeira, on the other hand, is the wife of Heracles, yet Nessos – a Centaur known for his lust, aggression, and recklessness – attempts to rape her. In this case, the woman is not a rightful companion of the figure depicted with her. Thus, the two scenes stand in stark contrast: one features Menelaus, the courageous hero who defends his wife and honor; the other Nessos, who embodies lust, impulsiveness, and greed. From this opposition, a symbolic message emerges for the warrior bearing the shield: he must choose which kind of man he

¹ Marinatos, "The Life Cycle of the Archaic Hero," 156-157.

aspires to be – the warrior who upholds his honor or the opportunistic soldier who seeks spoils and gain at the expense of dignity and valor.

In summary, the mythological scenes depicted by Aristodamos of Argos on the bronze shield band encapsulate a blend of culture, moral, and military ideals such as courage, discipline, self-sacrifice, and self-restraint. Together, these elements reinforce the values of protection, honor, and excellence that were central to Greek society and its martial traditions.

Figures

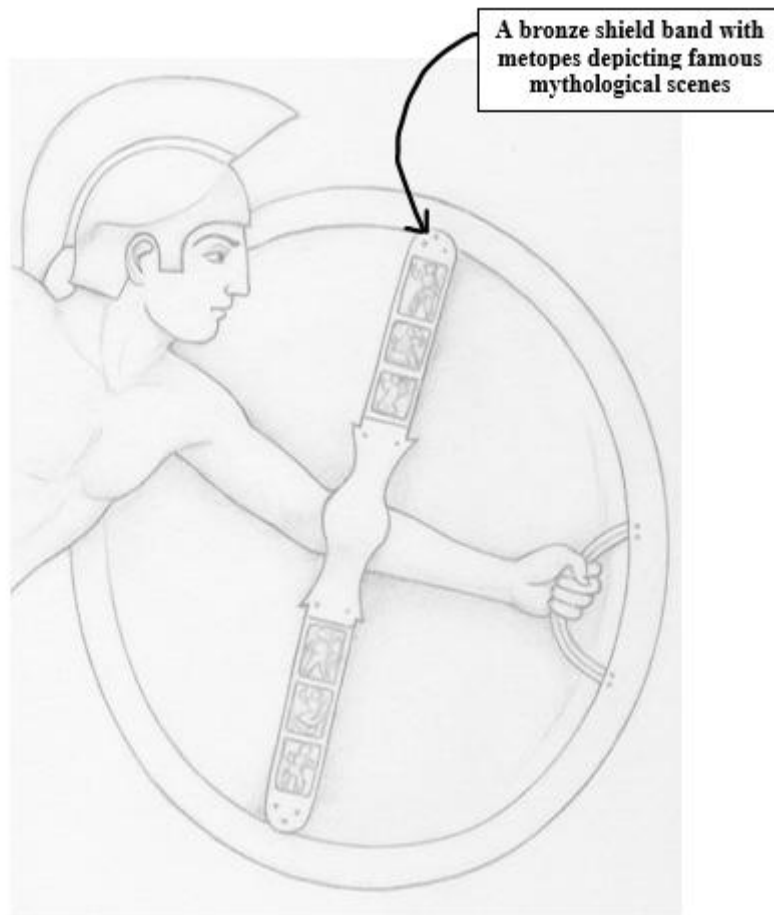


Figure 1

A drawing of an Argive shield with a bronze shield band



Figure 2

Shield band fragment by Aristodamos of Argos, ca. 580
B.C. The J. Paul Getty Museum, no. 84.AC.11.

<https://www.getty.edu/art/collection/object/103VMA>

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