

## Reading the Shield of Achilles in Aratus

Previous scholarship argues that Aratus writes hidden *signa* into his *Phaenomena*. As Volk argues, the λεπτή acrostic is a hidden *signum* that is strategically integrated into the meaning of the didactic poem. With this acrostic, Aratus draws a comparison between the stars arranged in the sky by Zeus and patterns concealed in the *Phaenomena* by the didactic poet (Volk 2012). Hunter discusses how the significance of this acrostic was understood by Aratus' contemporary readers as evidenced by Callimachus epigram 27 HE which, along with the Lives of Aratus and the scholia, addresses the ancient debate whether Aratus was stylistically more Homeric or Hesiodic. Building from Kidd's collection of allusions to the Shield of Achilles in the *Phaenomena* (Kidd 2004), and reviewing Hardie's comments about the early Greek tradition of star shields and the Hellenistic interpretations of the "Cosmic Shield of Achilles" (Hardie 1985), this paper argues that in addition to the hidden *signum* of the acrostic, Aratus also integrates the Shield as a hidden *signum* to exercise the addressee's ability to detect and interpret hidden patterns.

Before presenting the acrostic, Aratus alerts the addressee with certain clues: Humankind does not yet know everything from Zeus (Arat. 768-9) because much is still hidden, but more knowledge may soon be revealed (770). The moon communicates some things (773), and the poetic presentation of the moon calls upon the reader to detect the λεπτή acrostic soon to follow (783-7). The acrostic enacts the meaning of the larger didactic theme: to cultivate a reader who through the exercise of discovering the hidden *signa* in the poetics of Aratus will be better equipped to discover the hidden *signa* in the workmanship of Zeus.

In addition to the meaning signified by the moon, Aratus hints that there are other *signa* to be discovered and interpreted (776-7). Persistent allusion to the Shield of Achilles suggests that Aratus may also intend it as a *signum* analogous to the acrostic. Arat. 1118-19 instructs the addressee to observe the lowing (μυκηθμοῖο) of the cattle and the return to their

stalls as a *signum* presaging the onset of a storm. Aratus cunningly inverts the Homeric context to create an intertextual contrast in which to present two worlds: one where the *signum* is observed, and one where it is not. In *Iliad* 18.575, μυκηθμῶ marks the lowing sound of cattle which depart their stable heading toward a pasture along a river; one of the cattle is attacked by two lions, and its lowing (μεμυκῶς, 18.580) stands in stark contrast with that of the herd. In this agricultural scene, μυκηθμός signals danger for the herd. The sound of lowing cattle (μυκηθμοῦ) also signals danger in *Odyssey* 12.265. When Odysseus hears the lowing of cattle, he remembers the warning of Tiresias and Circe, but he is unable to avoid the danger because his men desire to rest from the journey. Since the warning sound is unnoticed or disregarded in each of these passages, there is a negative consequence for the cattle and the crew of Odysseus. In contrast to the cattle of the Homeric world, the lowing cattle in Arat. 1118-19 remain unharmed because of the *signa* established by the benevolent Zeus of the Stoics and serve as a pre-literate *signum* from Zeus (*pace* Volk) that exhorts humankind to prepare against the dangers of a storm. The redemption of the cattle becomes a theodicy linked to the story of Justice who, along with cattle, provided for the needs of humankind during the golden age (Arat. 112-13). Justice flew from the earth into the stars at the advent of the bronze age which produced men who were the first to taste the flesh of cattle (Arat. 132). Aratus therefore demonstrates through the interplay of Homeric allusion how humankind must intellectually avail themselves of the hidden traces of the golden age in the *signa* of the natural world.

#### Bibliography

- D. A. Kidd. 2004. *Aratus: Phaenomena*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Hardie, P. R. 1985. "Imago Mundi: Cosmological and Ideological Aspects of the Shield of Achilles."

*JHS* 105: 11-31. doi:10.2307/631519.

Hunter, R. L. 2014. *Hesiodic Voices: Studies in the Ancient Reception of Hesiod's Works and Days*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Volk, K. 2012. "Letters in the sky: Reading the signs in Aratus' *Phaenomena*." *AJP* 133: 209-40.