The Neo-Assyrian Shield

Evolution, Heraldry, and Associated Tactics

Fabrice De Backer

with the collaboration of
Evelyne Dehenin

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Cover image: Relief from King Ashurbanipal's palace at Nineveh depicting an Assyrian soldier kneeling next to a besieged Elamite city wall. Walters Art Museum. 28 × 20 × 2.5 cm. Wikimedia Commons.

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Acknowledgments

First of all, it would be appropriate to express a special thought for my grandfather. I hope that, wherever you are, you are proud of me, and that you value my work.

I would like to thank my grandmother for her confidence, her support, and her limitless enthusiasm.

My parents deserve, more than anyone, my recognition and gratitude, for without them, nothing would have been possible.

I must equally express thanks to my family for its enthusiasm and support.

This book would never have been possible without the incomparable help of Billie Jean Collins and the unfailing enthusiasm of Evelyne Dehenin, to whom I dedicate this study.

1
Introduction

This book presents the evolution of a peculiar part of the Neo-Assyrian soldiers' armor, namely, the shield. Combat techniques, which changed according to the type of weapon employed, will be presented as well, in chapter 5.[1] The written, visual, and material sources are collected and examined to elucidate the information they provide, directly or indirectly. The origins, practice, evolution, and vocabulary of shields are taken into account to present a typology of these objects. I provide the reader with comparanda from preceding, contemporary, and succeeding civilizations, according to textual, material, and visual evidence and examples. Numerous illustrations, schematics, and drawings are provided in order to allow the reader to view and understand the different phenomena that led to the development of different types of shields.

The result is a reference catalog of sorts that combines data from widely separated and competing disciplines. This volume combines archaeological, Assyriological, and art-historical approaches and is the first study to investigate a piece of ancient Near Eastern military equipment in such a practical and comprehensive way.

In addition, art historians are seeking ways better to identify the dating of looted objects, and because the only data available to do so are usually the objects by themselves, a reference catalog and chronological sequence such as that offered here can help with that task.

Another advantage of this book, in this period of reenactment mania, is an analysis of the means of manufacturing of shields. Reenactors will appreciate having access to accurate, specialized, and scholarly data on which to base their reconstructions, rather than relying on the poorly

conceived and executed props so in evidence in big-budget Hollywood productions. Scholars and amateur reenactors may even find some common ground here. Open discussion and experimentation between the two groups would allow both sides to benefit from each other's experience and knowledge.

A great deal has been written about Neo-Assyrian iconography, iconology, its military, and more, but never in such a real-world, practical way. Needless to say, the aim of this work is to serve as a basis for further research until new data and evidence become available.

A Note on the Illustrations Appearing in This Book

The numerous drawings presented in this work derive from the various inscriptions and reliefs commissioned by the Neo-Assyrian Kings for public display. All illustrations dating to the reign of Assurnasirpal II are taken from his palace at Nimrud. Those dating to Shalmaneser III are from the inscribed bronze bands that decorate the famed Balawat Gates. Everything identified as Sargon II comes from his palace at Khorsabad. Finally, those illustrations attributed to Sennacherib or Assurbanipal come from one of the royal palaces in Nineveh.

A Note on the Origins of the Shield

Shields have a long history in the ancient Near East, reaching back into the Bronze Age and beyond. A full exposition is beyond the scope of the present work. However, references to and/or speculations about the origins of specific shield types will be given as we go along.

A Note on the Use of the Shield

The first objective of a shield is to protect, in a practical manner and with the least weight, the exposed side of a combatant, that is, the side that is not occupied in striking and countering the adversary's blows. Shields also served to form makeshift ramparts or to block the crenels of a battlement. Certain models also permitted an active defense against the adversary's blows and missiles, this being a kind of shield-to-shield

combat that was still practiced in the Middle Ages and at the beginning of the Renaissance.

Yet, the shield also served several functions that, though less known, were certainly in frequent use during the Neo-Assyrian period. For example, in addition to permitting the use of particular combat tactics and formations, it also allowed for the transport of injured or fallen combatants, with two men seizing the anterior and posterior ends of certain shield types (fig. **1.1**). In humid countries, the soldiers of Neo-Assyrian armies were doubtlessly confronted with strong rains, during which they perhaps sheltered themselves under their shields, as they also must have done under a burning sun.

A related peculiarity might have been the use of swords or shields for particular operations as luminous signaling devices when the sun permitted. In this case, the outer side would have to have either been covered with, or composed of, an extremely clean and polished metal, which would have been a rarity in this period given the questions of cost, weight, maneuverability, and efficiency. Still, certain votive shields made by neighboring, contemporary cultures were composed entirely of metal, and could certainly have been lustrous at the time of their employment as, for example, were the Urartean shields now in the British Museum.

The Order of Classification

At the beginning of the Principate in the *Lex Pugnandi,*[1] Augustus organized the *armaturae* of contemporary gladiators according to the size of the shield that they handled. He gathered together the models of shields and separated them into two categories: the *parmae*, or all of the smaller models, and the *scuti*, the large, rectangular, curved shields. His classification forms the base of the classification used in this work as well.

The repertory of shields has been classified into two distinct groups according to their general shape, either circular or rectangular. In this study, I have chosen to place the circular shields first, as their appearance is the one most often observed on the bas-reliefs of Assurnasirpal II and because very little evidence appears in the iconography in previous reigns. I have identified a total of eight shield types in the Neo-Assyrian sources, four of which fall into the former category, and four of which fall into the latter category.

Nomenclature

As a general rule, the Akkadian terms *ša arîti*, "the one with a shield," *amêl arîti*, "shield-man," and *ṭāb arîti*, "shield-soldier" all three served to designate a foot soldier who bore a shield, along with a another weapon, such as a lance.[2]

Three additional terms were used to distinguish different types of "shield bearers" pertaining to the Neo-Assyrian army.[3] Yet, despite the work done by linguists thus far, none of these terms provide more specific information about their particular forms or uses. For the Neo-Assyrians, the distinction must have been much more evident, a distinction we no longer, unfortunately, have the opportunity to make. The terms are:

naš (bearer [of]) *kababi* (*kababu*(*m*) = shield, with no further details)[4]
naš (bearer [of]) *tukši* (*tukšu*(*m*) = shield, made of leather, Babylonian)[5]
naš (bearer [of]) *arîtu* (*aritu*(*m*) = shield, made of leather, wood, or metal)[6]

One clue as to the morphology of shields used by the charioteers can be gleaned from the title of a certain type of soldier, the LÚ.3.*šu* (*tašlīšu*) *ša arîti*, or "Third Charioteer (shield bearer) equipped with a sword." The generic Akkadian term *arîtu* identifies without a doubt either the circular shields used by the chariot drivers during their charges, or the shield used from the third millennium BCE on to protect teams on siege missions, this being the task of the third member of the chariot team in the first millennium.

Lexicon

The following terminology pertains to the components of the shield and will be used throughout the text:

hull: a hollowed center point of the shield's umbo (boss), in which a handle is fixed with the purpose of receiving the hand of a shield-bearing solider (fig. **1.2**).

cover: supplementary layer(s) of fabric, leather, or metal, intended to reinforce the smooth inner side of the shield and, eventually, to receive the insignia of a particular fighting unit (fig. **1.3**).

enarmes: handles of the shield suspended across the back of the shield, generally in pairs, only permitting a passive defense and tending to absorb and ward off blows (fig. **1.4d, e**).

guige: a strap affixed to the interior side of the shield or to the handle that allows the bearer to wear it on the back, under the arm, slung across the shoulder, or to attach it to moving vehicles during long marches or chariot charges and the like. This feature also minimized, without a doubt, the risk of possible loss of the shield, even in combat, especially so if the guige was passed over the opposite shoulder from the shield (fig. **1.2**).

handle: a single handle, serving to manipulate the object in order to resist attacks, which implies an active defense (fig. **1.4a, b, c**).[7]

orle: an element consisting of organic or metallic materials, designed to reinforce the contour of the object against powerful attacks against the waistline (figs. **1.5, 1.6**).

foot: the lower side of a shield, often positioned on the ground when the object is not in use for a long period of time, or when the combatant has disposed of it.

dish: the central and principle part of the shield, made of organic and/or metal materials, the main function of which is to protect the surface of the combatant's body against potential strikes and to sustain these attacks.

rivet: a metallic object, generally with a hemisphere-shaped head on one end, and designed to maintain the orle or the umbo in the position given to it by the user or manufacturer of the shield.

umbo (boss): a metallic dome, generally in the form of a disc or a hemisphere, and designed to reinforce the front and sometimes also the hand of the shield's user.

In addition, certain shield models would have been given a cover for traveling, in the form of leather or fabric envelopes, with slightly larger dimensions than the shield's shape, and provided with a simple but effective fixation system, in the manner of Roman imperial *scutii* (fig. **1.7**).

The Manufacture of Shields

Brunaux and Rapin discuss the rapid and efficacious manufacturing processes of certain shields, as reported by Caesar and Polybius.[8] Accord-

ing to Polybius, a shield is composed of a base of wood and leather pasted together with cloth. Caesar, in *Gallic War*, on the other hand, indicates that the Atuatacas, a Gallic tribe from Belgium, produced their shields with the aid of braided rushes reinforced with leather, which resulted in very light and effective shields. All of these resources were available in Mesopotamia during the Neo-Assyrian period and, despite the absence of contemporary documentation for shield manufacture, we cannot discount the possibility of their use. Moreover, we know that the Neo-Assyrians reserved large spaces for the cultivation of rushes, with the specific goal of manufacturing shields (figs. **1.8, 1.9**).[9]

According to the appearance of the shield's exterior, it seems that this outside surface was perhaps constituted of wooden slats stuck together, or of braided wicker. They were possibly reinforced either with very small and thin pieces of wood upon the interior surface, or with pasted pieces of cloth, leather, or felt. They would have been covered by a plaque of metal, held in place by a central, circular, hollow umbo, and encircled with a band of stitched leather or riveted metal (figs. **1.10–13**).

The motif in "brickwork" apparent in some Neo-Assyrian reliefs suggests, though this remains only a hypothesis, that certain exterior surfaces were reinforced with a series of metallic pteruges (strips) stitched upon the leather cover of the shield's front (figs. **1.14–16**). These would have been limited to only one layer of thickness so as not to sacrifice the object's overall lightness in order to favor its defensive capabilities. The shield used by the horseman that is represented upon the comb from the Scythian Solokha kurgan (fourth century BCE), provides a good example of this practice (fig. **1.17**). This hypothesis should not necessarily pose too many problems, given the adaptability of this type of protection to different curved surfaces like coats of scale armor, and the mastery with which the Neo-Assyrians had developed this technique.[10]

Doubtlessly, the rubbing caused by sprigs of dried wicker, along with sweat, which would spread across the backs of combatants' hands, caused an entire series of abrasions and inflammations on the superior phalanges of their fingers (fig. **1.18**). For this practical reason, I searched for the parrying motion used by contemporary combatants who would still use a comparable material, as much in structure as in principle, and have found it in the photograph of a Zulu warrior (fig. **1.19**). It thus seems logical that, with the goal of comfort and ergonomics, the combatants of the

Neo-Assyrian period who handled this type of equipment would have equipped it with a small fold of light material—wool, for example—in order to protect themselves against these specific sorts of injury, which, at the time, could have been fatal.

The Employment of the Shield

At the level of the individual, the employment of a shield led the warrior who wielded it to innovative paths of victory or defeat, as this soldier would be attentive to both arms in his possession. The object permitted a warrior to practice two modes of combat simultaneously, offering two advantages that he could consolidate, namely, the attack and the defense. With only this, the well-trained soldier could already surpass others, even when alone.

At the tactical level, the methods for achieving victory were developed even further once additional arms (bow, lance, sword, etc.) and additional formations of units (cavalry, infantry, chariot regiments, heavy or light, etc.) were used, conjointly or not. For example, the use of a certain number of warriors equipped with swords permitted the Roman *testudo* formation (fig. **1.20**). The use of long lances or pikes enabled well-trained soldiers to combat in phalanx, either Greek or Macedonian. The *sheltron*, a formation of lancers disposed in circles, with shields and lances raised, made for a good defense against cavalry charges (fig. **5.107** and p. 114). Many other military strategies that could be cited here will be addressed below.

Here I would like to illustrate just two practices used by the Neo-Assyrians that were made possible by the use of shields, using examples far removed from them in time and place, of other warriors in similar contexts. Naturally, I do not propose to establish a causal link between these, but the comparison is, nevertheless, informative.

In the twenty-first century AD, the sarcophagus shield permits the functionaries of a unit of the Intervention Group of the National Police of Lyon (GIPN) to train themselves for the approach of an entrenchment held by hostile and armed forces (fig. **1.21**). The appearance of this object, and the usage to which it is put, strongly recalls certain representations of the archers of Neo-Assyrian sieges.

The assault teams of the GIPN of Lyon are composed of a unit chief and two pairs of functionaries. Each team consists of the carrier of a bul-

letproof shield and a marksman, both of whom are equipped with an armored outfit comprising a helmet and a bulletproof vest (figs. **1.22, 1.23**). This very much resembles numerous scenes representing Neo-Assyrian archers in teams with lancers (e.g., figs. **5.39, 5.40** below).

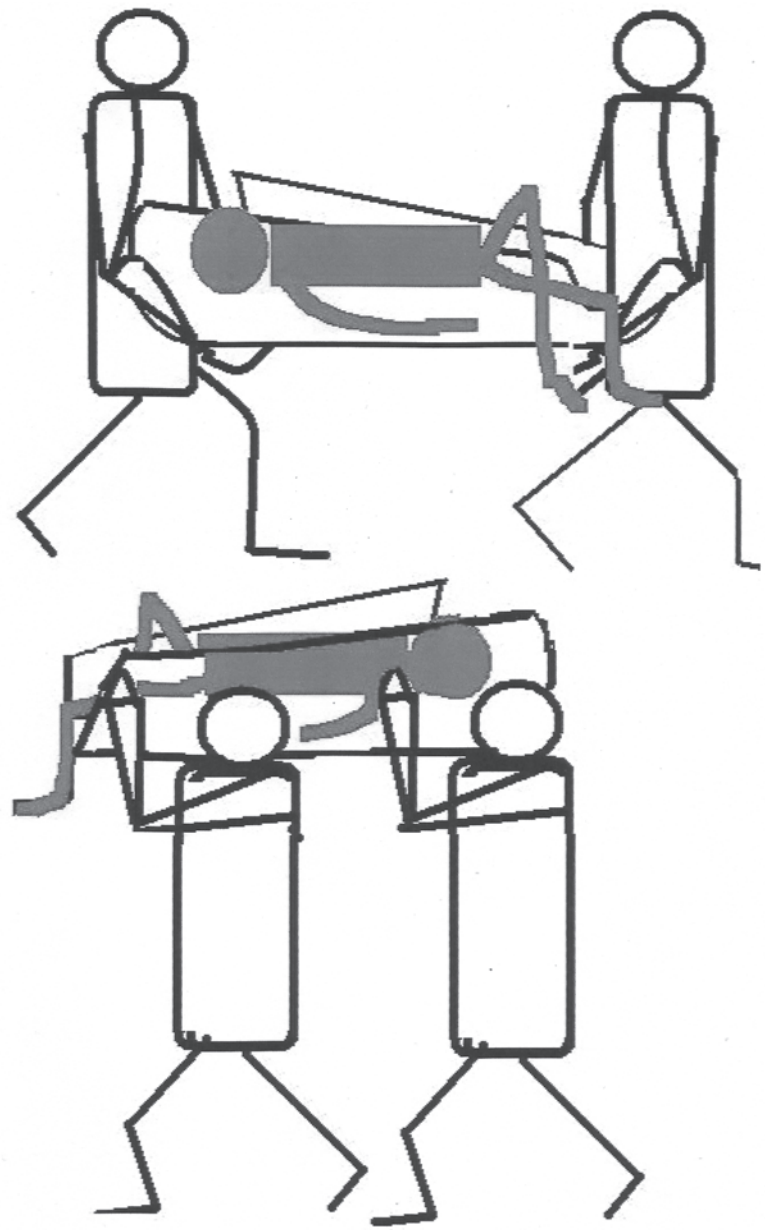


Fig. 1.1. Possible transport of the dead or wounded, with the help of a shield, in the Neo-Assyrian army. Author's illustration.

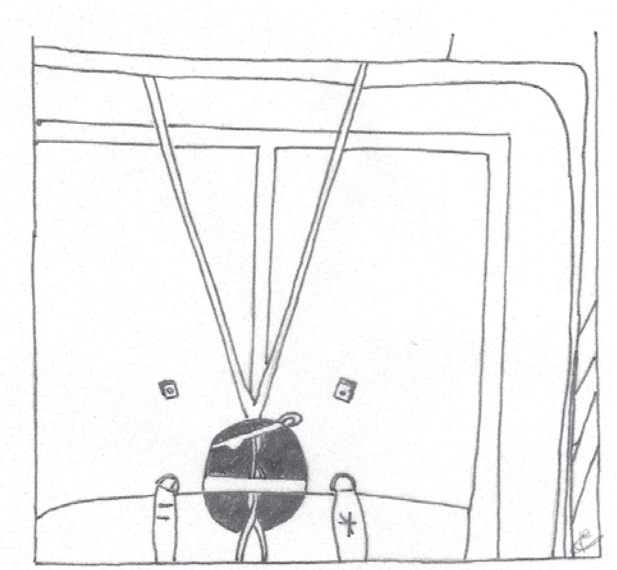


Fig. 1.2. Fixation system for the guige to the hull on the inner side of the shield. (Illustration by Evelyne Dehenin, taken from Amt, http://www.larp.com/legioxx/scutum.html.)

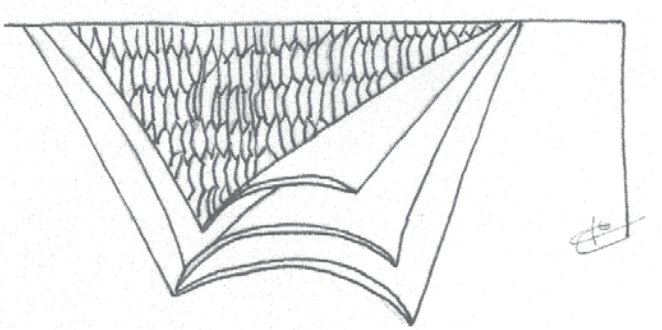


Fig. 1.3. Various layers of leather and cloth covering the front of the shield. (Illustrated by Evelyne Dehenin, taken from Connolly 1979, 15, fig. 2.)

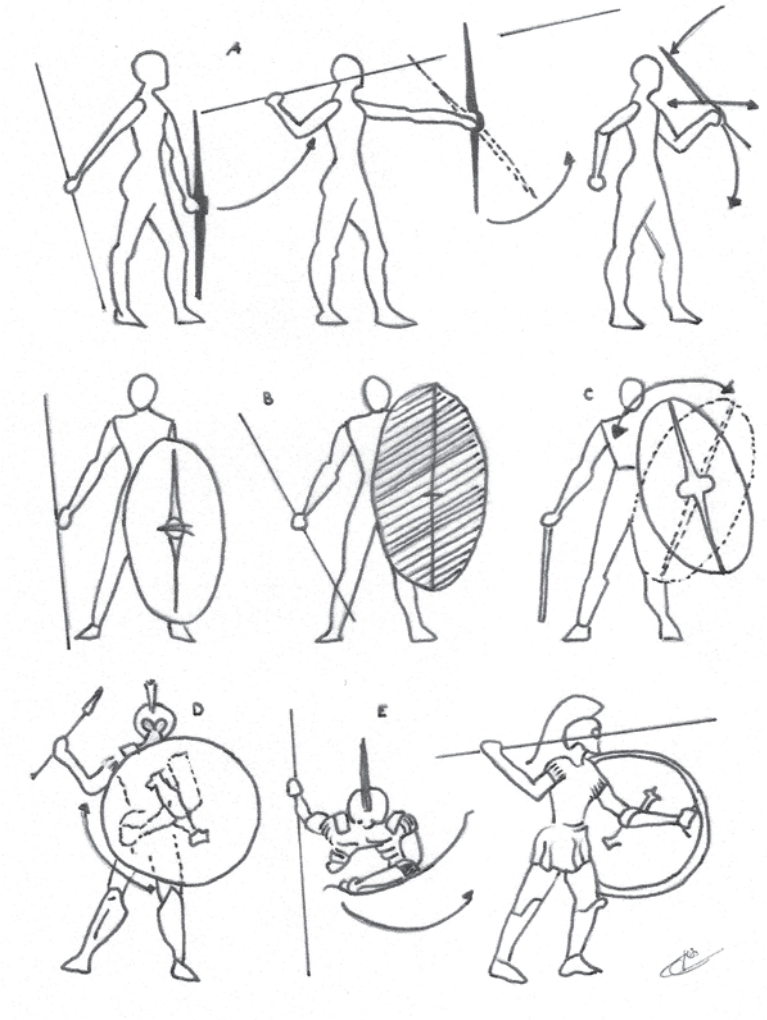


Fig. 1.4. Diagram illustrating the modes of combat, which are contingent upon the means of suspending the shield. The top two tiers show the use of a handle, and the last shows the use of enarmes. (Illustration by Evelyne Dehenin, taken from Brunaux 1988, 17, fig. 10.)

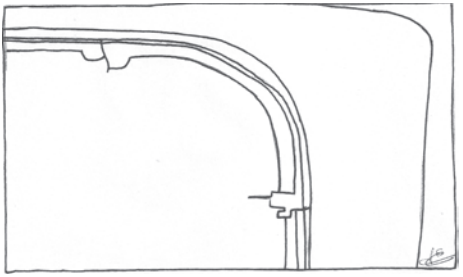


Fig. 1.5. Detailed illustration of the metallic orle from the experimental reconstruction of a Roman *scutum.* (Illustration by Evelyne Dehenin, taken from Amt, http://www.larp.com/legioxx/scutum.html.)

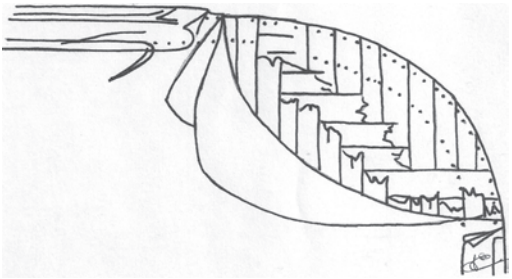


Fig. 1.6. Detailed illustration of a cloth orle, sewn onto the contour of a Roman shield, discovered in Egypt. (Illustration by Evelyne Dehenin, taken from Connolly 1976, 18.)

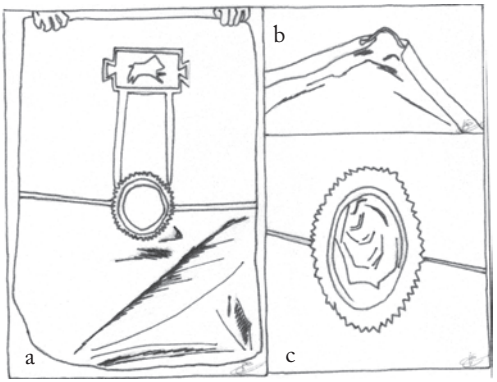


Fig. 1.7. Front (a), angle (b), and center (c), made for the experimental reconstruction of a travel cover for a Roman shield from the imperial epoch. (Illustration by Evelyne Dehenin, taken from Amt, http://www.larp.com/legioxx/scutum.html.)

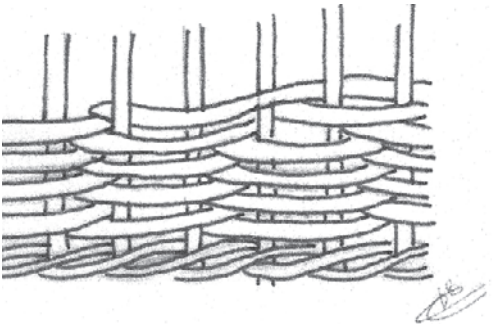


Fig. 1.8. Wicker can be braided in several different ways, and obtaining a relatively smooth and uniform surface is not as hard as it seems, for those who are accustomed to the process. (Illustration by Evelyne Dehenin, taken from Mortensen 2004, 53, fig. 1–2.)

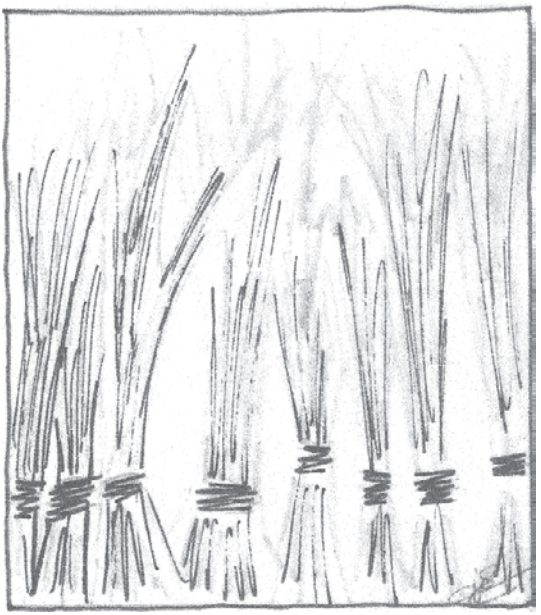


Fig. 1.9. Rushes require almost nothing in order to grow well, only earth and water, and can be used as a solid, light, and easily handled base material. (Illustration by Evelyne Dehenin, taken from Mortensen 2004, 15.)

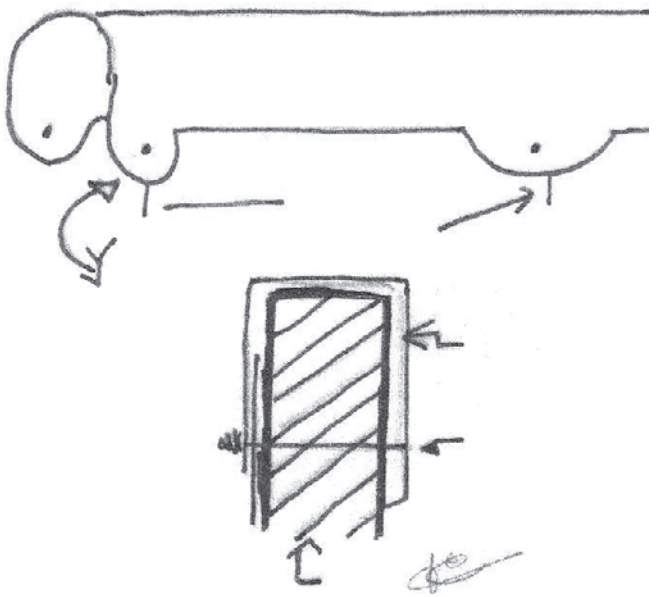


Fig. 1.10. Diagram used by Amt to construct the orle of a Roman shield and fix it to the object; seen in profile and in cross section. (Illustration by Evelyne Dehenin, taken from Amt, http://www.larp.com/legioxx/scutum.html.)

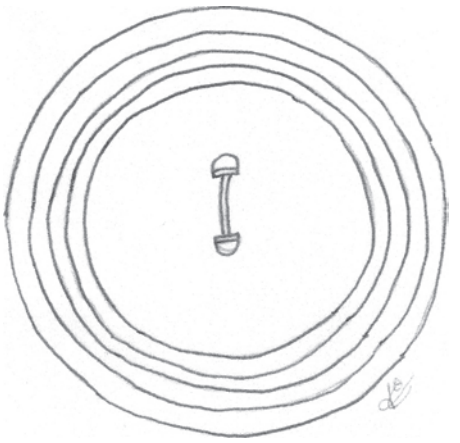


Fig. 1.11. Circular shield and dish in bronze, from Urartu in eastern Turkey, and dated to around the ninth or eighth century BCE. (Illustration by Evelyne Dehenin, taken from Vanden Berghe and De Meyer 1982, 134, no. 27.)

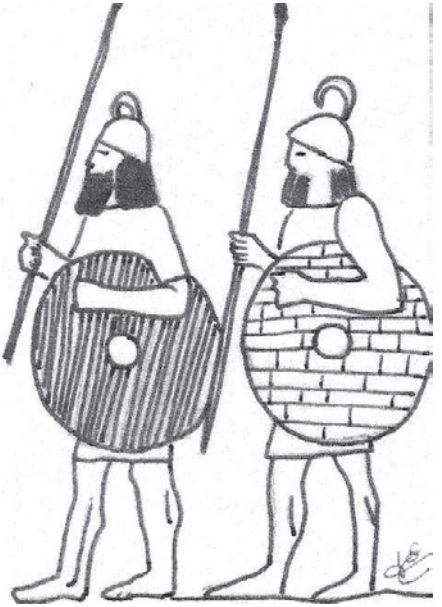


Fig. 1.12. Bas-reliefs representing Neo-Assyrian lancers, discovered at Arslan Tash and dated from the reign of Tiglath-pileser III. (Illustration by Evelyne Dehenin, taken from Thureau-Dangin 1931, pl. XI.)

Fig. 1.13. Light foot soldiers of Sennacherib, bearing their shields upon their arms during a march. (Illustration by Evelyne Dehenin, taken from Barnett 1998, pl. 481.)

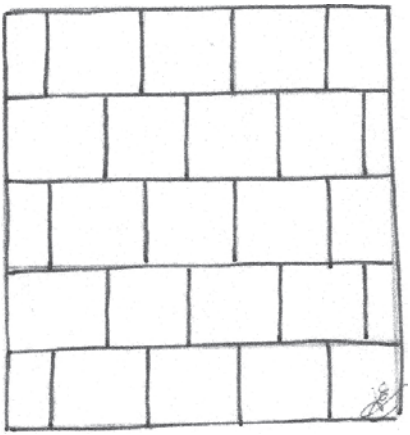


Fig. 1.14. The brickwork motif, as it appears in the visual representations. (Illustration by Evelyne Dehenin, taken from Madhloom 1970, pl. XXVII, no. 13.)

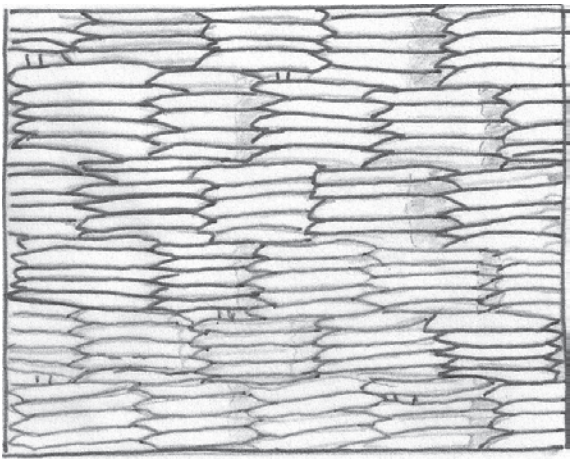


Fig. 1.15. A motif of braided wicker, similar in appearance to that which makes up the shields represented in certain Neo-Assyrian representations, more commonly called the "brickwork" motif. (Illustration by Evelyne Dehenin, taken from Mortensen 2004, 53.)

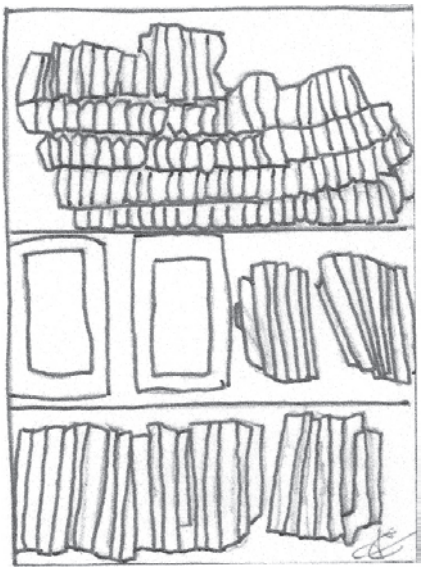


Fig. 1.16. Several examples of metallic scale armor, sewn together to form a breastplate or to reinforce the front of certain shields. (Illustration by Evelyne Dehenin taken from Mallowan 1966, 410, no. 336, a–e.)

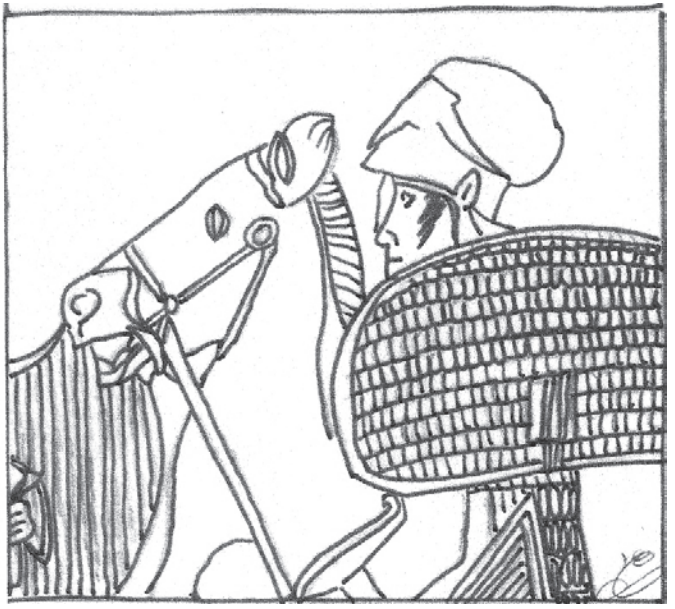


Fig. 1.17. A shield reinforced by metallic pteruges, appearing on the comb found in the Solokha kurgan dating to the fourth century C.E. (Illustration by Evelyne Dehenin taken from Cernenko 2003, 16.)

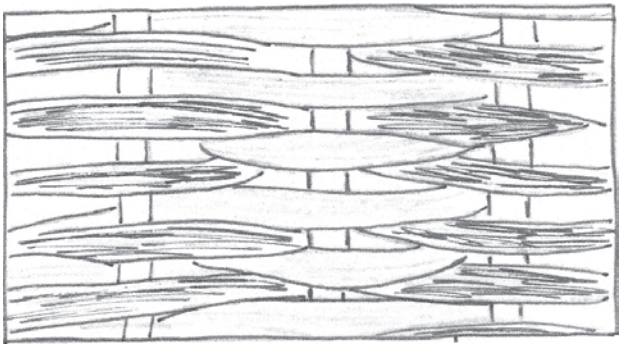
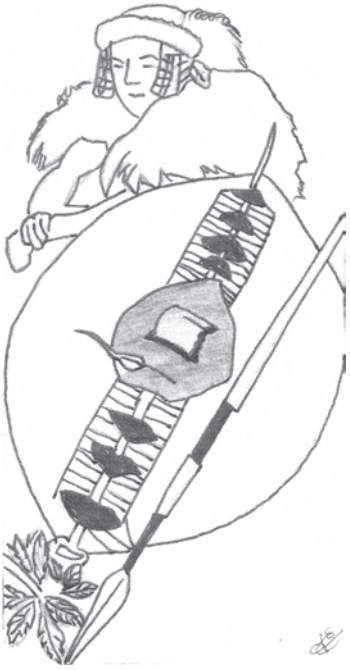


Fig. 1.18. Friction against the skin by a rigid, rough, and erodible support first causes abrasions and then infections, not to mention discomfort and itching. (Illustration by Evelyne Dehenin, taken from Mortensen 2004, 119.)

Fig. 1.19. Detailed illustration of a lining affixed by a Zulu warrior to his shield to avoid irritation and abrasion of the hand. (Illustration by Evelyne Dehenin, taken from Knight 1995, 45.)



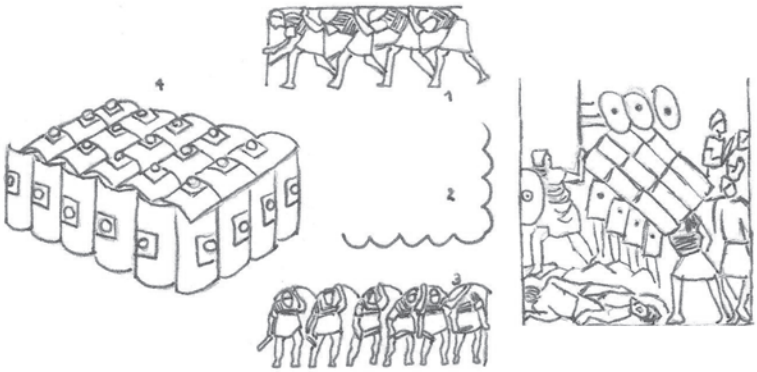


Fig. 1.20. The Roman *testudo*: 1) Section of the development in profile; 2) formation seen from above; 3) formation seen from the surface without the shields; 4) general appearance at the time when the *testudo* was adopted by infantry units; 5) Roman bas-relief from the Roman Imperial period, illustrating the *testudo* as put in practice during the siege of an enemy city. (Illustration by Evelyne Dehenin, taken from Connolly 1977, 11.)

Fig. 1.21. The sarcophagus shield offers an effective protection to several officers of the GIPN during an assault sustained from their held positions against armed gunmen. (Illustration by Evelyne Dehenin, taken from Micheletti 1998, 16.)

Fig. 1.22. Officers of the GIPN progressing under the cover of their bulletproof shield. (Illustration by Evelyne Dehenin, taken from Micheletti 1998, 10.)

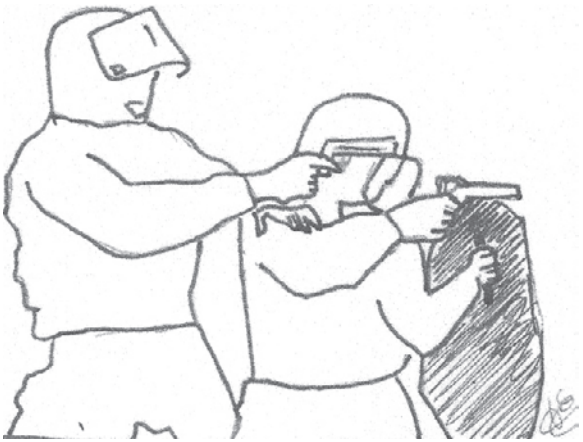


Fig. 1.23. Officers of the GIPN acting as a pair composed of a shield bearer and another officer who covers the first. (Illustration by Evelyne Dehenin, taken from Micheletti 1998, 11.)