Just to look at all the shining bronze here,  
I thought I'd died and gone to heaven:  
Seeing bronze in the ancient Greek world

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Classical Inquiries

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For example:

In Odyssey 4, as soon as the young hero Telemachus arrives as a visitor to Sparta, home of king Menelaos and his queen Helen, he feasts his eyes on all the shining splendor of their royal palace. As he takes it all in, he cannot resist saying out loud that he has never before seen anything quite so dazzling. My essay here is about the visual power of bronze as it works its way into the imagination of ancient Greek verbal as well as visual art. [full article here]

Introduction

§0. In Odyssey 4, as soon as the young hero Telemachus arrives as a visitor to Sparta, home of king Menelaos and his queen Helen, he feasts his eyes on all the shining splendor of their royal palace. As he takes it all in, he cannot resist saying out loud that he has never before seen anything quite so dazzling. Here is how he says it: “just to look all the shining bronze here, I thought I’d died and gone to heaven.” Well, he doesn’t quite say it that way, and I will soon show the way he really says it, quoting and then translating the exact words. But the way I just dramatized what Telemachus says comes very close, in everyday English, to his own wording in the original Greek of Homeric poetry, which focuses on the gleam of the bronze as his very first impression. In the Homeric passage that I will soon be quoting, what first catches the young man’s eye is in fact all that shining bronze he sees, and then it’s the gold, then the electrum, then the silver, and finally the ivory. In this essay, I too will focus on the shining bronze. There is something special about bronze, the way it shines, especially when it reflects the light of a brightly shining sun. It’s as if the light that comes from the surface of the bronze were not really a reflection of light coming from some other source. No, it looks as if the light came directly from the bronze. That is in fact the impression you get from reading Homeric poetry, where khalkos ‘bronze’ is described generically as nōrops ‘shining’ (νώροπα χαλκόν, Iliad 2.578, etc.). As you read this poetry, you get the impression that this splendid metal is somehow streaming light from inside itself. As I say, it looks as if bronze did not reflect light coming from elsewhere. Rather, it looks as if the bronze interacted with such light, turning on or off its own light whenever the interacting light turned itself on or off. And it is exactly such an impression that I hope to explore in my essay here, which is about the visual power of bronze as it works its way into the imagination of ancient Greek verbal as well as visual art.

Telemachus is dazzled by the gleam of bronze
§1. I start the exploration by looking at a Homeric passage describing the very first impression experienced by the young hero Telemachus when he sees the splendor of the place of Menelaos and Helen. We join the action as Telemachus and his traveling companion, the young hero Peisistratos, son of Nestor, are both being escorted into the palace of Menelaos and Helen:

| 43 aútois δ’ εἰσῆλθον θέλων δόμων. οἷς δὲ ίδοντες | 44 βούλομαι κατὰ δόμω διστρέφεσι βασιλέως· | 45 ώς τε γὰρ ἥλιου αὐγὴ πέλεν ἡ σελήνης | 46 δῶμα καθ’ ὑμερεφὲς Μενελάου κυδαλίμω. | 47 αὐτὰ ἐπὶ τάρησαν ὀρόμενοι ἀφαλαισαν. . . |

They were escorted inside the heavenly [theion] palace. Seeing what they were seeing, they were filled with awe [thauma] as they proceeded through the palace of the king, that man whose origins are celestial. 45 There was a gleam [aiglé] there, which was like the gleam of the sun or the moon, spreading throughout that palace famed for its high ceilings, that home of radiant Menelaos. 47 But then, after they had feasted their eyes on what they saw...
The dazzling experiences of Telemachus and Odysseus compared

§8. The light emanating from all the bronze in the palace of Alkinoos is a close parallel, then, to the light that dazzled Telemachus in the palace of Menelaos. But the parallelism goes only so far. The light that dazzled Odysseus in the palace of Alkinoos is not being compared directly to the light emanating from the palace of Zeus himself, unlike the light that dazzled Telemachus in the palace of Menelaos. Or, to put the emphasis where I need to, I will now say it the other way: there is something special about the light emanating from all that bronze seen by Telemachus in the palace of Menelaos, and it is this special something that makes such a light comparable to the light that shines in the palace of the god Zeus himself. That special something, as we will now see, is the relationship of Menelaos to Helen, who is worshipped as the daughter of Zeus in her role as goddess of Sparta.

Helen of Sparta

§9. In a separate posting, to appear later, I study in some detail verses 55–57 of Theocritus Idyll 18, where we read about an annual return, in an eternal cycle, of the dawn’s early light when Helen and Menelaos re-awaken as newlyweds. These verses indicate that Helen as consort of the hero Menelaos was worshipped as the local goddess of the dawn in Laconia, the home territory of Sparta. Relevant to the status of Helen as Spartan goddess of the dawn is the Homeric context of the epithet Dios thugatēr ‘daughter of Zeus’ as it applies to her in the Odyssey (Διός θυγατέρ, 4.227). This epithet was re-assigned in Homeric diction from Eos the goddess of the dawn to other goddesses like Aphrodite. As we see in the Odyssey, Helen was one of those goddesses. And the epithet Dios thugatēr ‘daughter of Zeus’ applies to her at a very special epic moment in the Odyssey (again, 4.227): at this moment, we can see that she has finally left behind her temporary human existence at Troy and has returned to her permanent divine existence at Sparta.

The gleam that blinded Homer

§10. In the world of myth as we have seen it reflected in Odyssey 4, Menelaos the hero shared his palace with Helen the goddess, who was considered to be a daughter of Zeus in terms of Spartan traditions. In the corresponding world of ritual, on the other hand, the palace shared by Menelaos the hero with Helen the goddess was visualized as a sacred space known in Spartan traditions as the Menelaion. The remains of this Menelaion can still be seen on the heights of a compellingly beautiful site known by its ancient name as Therapne. In Pausanias (3.19.9) and, earlier, in Herodotus (6.61.3), we find informative references to this site as a place that was sacred to both Menelaos and Helen. In the separate posting to which I have already referred, I will describe this site as a kind of “Mycenaean heaven,” partly on the basis of the fact that some of the archaeological remains at Therapne can be dated as far back as the Mycenaean era. And, just as the palace of Menelaos can be seen as a “Mycenaean heaven,” I could argue that the palace of Alkinoos is a kind of “Minoan heaven.” But that is another story, which I will take up in the separate posting that I already mentioned.
§12. This heroic moment, when Achilles finally returns to the field of battle, is highlighted in the Iliad. It is said there that the gleam emanating from the new bronze armor of Achilles was so blindingly bright that none of his fellow warriors could even look directly at it (19.12–15). As I have argued in the book Homer the Preclassic, it is this gleam that blinds Homer himself, who is imagined as the only poet in the whole world who could conjure such a blinding vision in his own poetry.[4]

§13. In the rest of this essay, I offer an epitome of my relevant argumentation, where I go so far as to say that the substance of bronze, which is the substance of the armor made for Achilles by the divine smith Hephaistos, is a fitting symbol for the concept of the Bronze Age as the age of heroes.[5]

The gleam from the bronze Shield of Achilles

§14. The most essential part of a hero’s armor is his shield, and Homeric poetry focuses on the selas ‘gleam’ that radiates from the bronze surface of the Shield of Achilles:

§15. The linking of this bronze shield to the Bronze Age is expressed by the artifact itself. The poetry of the Shield of Achilles in the Iliad is designed to show that this bronze artifact can make direct contact with the Bronze Age. Contact is made through the selas ‘gleam’ that radiates from the bronze surface of the Shield, projecting a picture from the Bronze Age. This gleam radiating from the Shield of Achilles is being compared here in the Iliad to the gleam emanating from a lighthouse, and the image of that lighthouse evokes the tumultus of Achilles, which figures as a primal marker of the age of heroes.

§16. This radiant gleam, becoming universally visible as its light continues to spread all the way up to the aether, projects the world of heroes that we see pictured on the Shield. It is a picture of the Bronze Age, mirrored by the bronze of the hero’s Shield. With its vast array of details, this stupendous picture gives off a most dazzling view of the heroic age. And, as we just saw in the Life of Homer traditions, it was the gleam given off by the bronze armor of Achilles that dazzled Homer to the point of blindness (Vita 6.46–50). To say it another way: the picture of the Shield as envisioned by Homer is being projected, as it were, by its blinding gleam.[6]

§17. The gleam of the bronze Shield emanates not only from its form but also from the content of that form. The gleam comes not only from the armor, that is, from the shining metal of the bronze surface. The gleam comes also from what the armor means. That meaning is conveyed not only through the simile of the hero’s tumultus as a lighthouse but also through the picture made by the divine metalworker on the shining bronze surface of the Shield. In this context, I emphasize the Homeric description of Hephaistos as a khakeus ‘bronzeworker’ (Iliad 15.309). The picture projected by the gleam emanating from the bronze Shield is a picture made by a bronzeworker.

§18. This picture made by the divine artisan focuses on the Bronze Age. A shining example is the dazzling simile of the lighthouse, evoking the tumultus of Achilles. Another example is a simile that spotlights a scene created by Hephaistos. The spotlighting is achieved by comparing that scene with another scene—this one created by the premier mortal artisan of the Bronze Age, Daedalus himself:

§19. En de xorón poikílēs peri Klymiias deurhugés,' 1591 τῷ ἱκέλον οἶνον ἄποικον ἱπποπόδον καλλιπολκάμος Ἀριάδνη.

§20. The renowned one [= Hephaistos], the one with the two strong arms, pattern-wove [poikilein][7] in it [= the Shield] a khoros.[8] 1591 It [= the khoros] was just like the one that, once upon a time in far-ruling Knossos, 1592 Daedalus made for Ariadne, the one with the beautiful tresses [plokomai].
§19. On the surface, the craft that is used to create this picture of the work of Hephaistos is metalwork, specifically bronzework. Underneath the surface, it is of course the craft of poetry that creates the picture. And the greatest master of that craft is Homer, the poet whose creation of this picture led to the blindness caused by the dazzling light of heroic bronze.

Epilogue

§20. Most of the content in this posting for 2016.02.18 was composed in 2016.02.14, on Valentine’s Day. That date marks the first anniversary of the very first posting that was published in Classical Inquiries, on Valentine’s Day 2015.02.14. Given that fact—and the fact that the title for my latest posting quotes the title of the song “I thought I died and gone to heaven”—I am inspired to dedicate this posting to someone who happens to be my own personal hoped-for “Valentine.” The words of the song itself may not correspond exactly to my own story, but the sentiment as expressed in the title is I think a perfect fit for describing how I feel every time I even look at that someone I am mentioning, whose name is Holly.

Bibliography

GM. See Nagy 1990b.


HPC. See Nagy 2009|2010.


PH. See Nagy 1990.


Notes

[1] PH 346 (= 12§19) n42. See in general GM 256; PH 346–347 (= 12§§19–21); see also West 2007:235 and my further comments at Nagy 2010:336–337.


[3] See also Isocrates Helen (Oration 10) 63.


[7] Also attested at this verse, besides ποίκιλλε (poikillein), is the variant ποίησε (poieîn), with the neutral meaning of ‘make’.

[8] This word khoros can designate either the place where singing and dancing takes place or the group of singers and dancers who perform at that place.

Tags: bronze, Homer, Odysseus, Odyssey, Telemachus

2 Responses to Just to look at all the shining bronze here, I thought I’d died and gone to heaven: Seeing bronze in the ancient Greek world

Bill  February 18, 2016 at 7:52 pm (Edit)

Dr. Nagy,

Literally, a beautiful article. I particularly appreciate the comparison of Menelaus’ and Zeus’ palaces

Bill

Kathleen Vail  February 17, 2017 at 4:38 pm (Edit)

Dear Prof. Nagy,

Like Telemachus and Odysseus, I too am quite taken every time I read the descriptions of Menelaus’ and Alkinoos’ palaces. However, I have probably never been taken so profoundly by anything as I have by the