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:

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

February 18, 2016 By Gregory Nagy listed under By Gregory Nagy

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 at 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:

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<td>1.426; 14.173; 21.438, 505; 1.426; 1.426; 8.321—</td>
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They were escorted inside the heavenly [theion] palace. Seeing what they were seeing, | 43 |
| | | | | |

| 48 | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| "I want you to notice something, son of Nestor, you who are so dear to my heart: | 71 |
| | | | | |

§2. At this point in Odyssey 4, the story proceeds to take the visitors through a series of welcoming rituals, followed by a grand dinner arranged by Menelaos as the gracious host (lines 47–70). And now the dinner conversation gets underway, starting with words of appreciation spoken by Telemachus and intended for Menelaos. Telemachus speaks here as a grateful guest, addressing his fellow guest Peisistratos, son of Nestor, but his words are really intended for Menelaos as the generous host. I will now quote these words of Telemachus as spoken to the son of Nestor—words that not only compliment Menelaos but also express most sincerely the young guest's awestruck reaction to the splendor of the king's palace:

§3. As I noted already in the Introduction, what first catches the young man's eye here is in fact all that shining bronze he sees. And then it's the gold, then the electrum, then the silver and ivory. The light that he sees streaming from the bronze envelops everything with its radiance, and it's just like heaven for the young man.

§4. "Thought I'd died and gone to heaven." The colloquial saying that I just quoted, which has become the title of a popular song recorded in 1991 by Bryan Adams, captures the young man's awareness that he has just experienced something celestial. The reduced theology of this kind of imagined heaven resembles the celestial realm of the ancient Greek gods. Their 'sky' or ouranos, as we read in Homeric poetry, is traditionally visualized as 'made of bronze', khalkos (χάλκεος δύο, Iliad 17.425). This ancient Greek expression shows its own special kind of reduced theology: from out of the sky, when it's bright, the gleam of a mighty bronze dome envelops everything on earth. Presiding over this bronze dome is the god Zeus, whose heavenly residence is called the khalkobates dō, 'the palace with floor made of bronze' (χαλκοβατὲς δό, Iliad 1.426; 14.173; 21.438, 505; Odyssey 8.321)—a residence situated high above Mount Olympus (Iliad 1.426; 21.438, 505).

Odysseus is dazzled by the gleam of bronze

§5. The heavenly residence of Menelaos is comparable to the palace of Alkinoos, king of the Phaeacians. This palace is visited in the Odyssey by the father of Telemachus, Odysseus. Like the palace of Alkinoos, the palace of Alkinoos is heavenly, as we see from a passing reference to the khalkobates dō, 'the palace with floor made of bronze' (χαλκοβατὲς δό, Odyssey 13.4).

§6. Already at the start of his visit, Odysseus is awestruck at all the marvels he sees as he approaches the palace (Odyssey 7.133–134) before he even enters the interior by crossing the oudos 'threshold' (7.135). And this threshold is a clear sign for what he will see after he does enter. Once he is inside the place, Odysseus will notice, first and foremost, all the bronze. The bronze will be his first impression, just as the bronze was the first impression for Telemachus. When Odysseus, before he enters the palace, first sees the threshold, it is already described as a khalkos oudos 'bronze threshold' (χάλκεος οὐδόν, 7.83), and this description signals what he will see immediately after he crosses this threshold and enters. Once he is inside the palace, he will see all the bronze:

§7. I note especially the young guest's awestruck reaction to the splendor of the king's palace:

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The palace of Alkinoos is heavenly, as we see from a passing reference to the khalkobates dō, 'the palace with floor made of bronze' (χαλκοβατὲς δό, Odyssey 13.4).

§8. Already at the start of his visit, Odysseus is awestruck at all the marvels he sees as he approaches the palace (Odyssey 7.133–134) before he even enters the interior by crossing the oudos 'threshold' (7.135). And this threshold is a clear sign for what he will see after he does enter. Once he is inside the place, Odysseus will notice, first and foremost, all the bronze. The bronze will be his first impression, just as the bronze was the first impression for Telemachus. When Odysseus, before he enters the palace, first sees the threshold, it is already described as a khalkos oudos 'bronze threshold' (χάλκεος οὐδόν, 7.83), and this description signals what he will see immediately after he crosses this threshold and enters. Once he is inside the palace, he will see all the bronze:
§7. Here too, then, as in the corresponding story about Telemachus, what first captures the attention of Odysseus is in fact all the bronze. Right from the start, he sees the threshold made of bronze. Then, immediately after he steps into the palace, he sees the bronze walls, which extend all the way from the bronze threshold into the inner chamber. So, at first, he only has eyes for the bronze. Only after he sees the bronze does Odysseus see the gold, and, after that, the silver together with the gold.

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.[1] 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 (Δίος θυγάτηρ, 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.[2]

§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 word 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 Therape. 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.[3] 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 Therape 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.

The gleam that blinded Homer

§11. In a set of stories about the life of Homer, we read in some versions that his blinding was a divine punishment for some mistake. According to one version, his mistake was to defame Helen: she then appeared to him in an epiphany and, true goddess that she was, she blinded him (Vita 6.51–57). But I concentrate here on another version, according to which his mistake was to conjure the poetic vision of Achilles wearing the new set of bronze armor that the divine smith Hephaistos had made for him after the original set had been lost, captured by Hector:

\[\text{Visited the tomb of Achilles, he [= Homer] prayed if he could only see the hero just the way the hero was like at the moment of entering the field of battle while wearing his second set of armor. The hero then appeared to him, and, as soon as Homer looked at the hero, he was blinded by the gleam of the armor.}\]
§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:

1368 δόστε δύρα θεοί, τό ὁ Ηηριστός κόμε τευχόν. 1369 κνημίδας μὲν πράτα περὶ κνήμην ἔθηκεν 1370 καλὰς ἄργυρεισιν ἐπισφυρίς 1371 δεύτερον αὖ θύρηκα περὶ στήβεσιν ἔδυνεν. 1372 ἀμφὶ δ’ ἀρ’ ὁμοιον βόλετο ἔθρον ἄργυροδὸλον 1373 χάλκεον· αὐτὸ ἐπέστε σάκος μὲν τα στιβαρὸν τε 1374 ἐλέετο, τοῦ δ’ ἀπάνευθε σάλας γένετ’ ἥπετε μήν. 1375 ὡς δ’ ἄρ’ ἄν ἐκ πόντου σάλας ναυτὶς φανή 1376 καιομένου πυρός, τὸ τε καλεῖ ὑφθ’ ὄρεσι 1377 σταθμῷ ὑπὸ ωσόπολοι τοὺς δ’ ὦκ ἔθελον τοὺς ἀλλαὶ 1378 πάντον ἐπ’ ἱευδέντα φίλων ἀπάνευθε φέρουσαν. 1379 ὡς ἂν Ἀχιλλῆς σάκος σάλας αἰθέρ’ ἴκανε

1368 He [= Achilles] put it [= his armor] on, the gifts of the god, which Hephaistos had made for him with much labor. 1369 First he put around his legs the shin guards,

1370 beautiful ones, with silver fastenings at the ankles. 1371 Next he put around his chest the breastplate, 1372 and around his shoulders he slung the sword with the nails of silver, 1373 a sword made of bronze. Next, the Shield [sakos], great and mighty, 1374 he took, and from it there was a gleam [selas] from afar, as from the moon, 1375 or as when, at sea, a gleam [selas] to sailors appears 1376 from a blazing fire, the kind that blazes high in the mountains 1377 at a solitary station [stathmos], as the sailors are carried unwilling by gusts of wind 1378 over the fish-swarming sea [pontos], far away from their loved ones.

1379 So also did the gleam [selas] from the Shield [sakos] of Achilles reach all the way up to the aether.

Iliad 19.368–379

§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 khaikos ‘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:

1590 ἵνα δὲ χορὸν ποίηλήσε διηρκεύτως ἀμφιγνυσεῖς. 1591 τῷ ἱκέλων οἷν ποτ’ ἐνὶ Κνωσῷ εὐρέσ. 1592 Δαιδάλος ἤξησεν καλλιπλοκάμῳ ἀριάδνῇ.

1590 The renowned one [= Hephaistos], the one with the two strong arms, pattern-wove [poikilein] 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].

Iliad 18.590–592
§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 (poikilléin), 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