



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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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](#)

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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](#)]



Reconstruction of "Throne Room" at Knossos. Image: public domain, [via Wikimedia Commons](#).

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' (νῶροπα 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

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§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 αὐτοὺς δ' εἰσήγον θεῖον δῶμον· οἱ δὲ ἰδόντες |44 θαύμαζον κατὰ δῶμα διοτρεφέος βασιλῆος· |45 ὥς τε γὰρ ἡελίου αἴγλη πέλεν ἢ σελήνης |46 δῶμα καθ' ὕπερφεδες Μενελάου κυδαλίμοιο. |47 αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ τάρησαν ὀρώμενοι ὀφθαλμοῖσιν . . .

|43 They were escorted inside the heavenly [theion] palace. Seeing what they were seeing, |44 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 [aiglē] there, which was like the gleam of the sun or the moon, |46 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 . . .

Odyssey 4.43–47

§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:

|71 "φράζεο, Νεστοριδῆ, τῷ ἐμῷ κεχαρισμένε θυμῷ, |72 χαλκοῦ τε στεροπήν κατὰ δῶματα ἤχηεντα |73 χρυσοῦ τ' ἠλέκτρου τε καὶ ἀργύρου ἢ δ' ἑλέφαντος. |74 Ζηνός που τοιήδε γ' Ὀλυμπίου ἔνδοθεν αὐλή, |75 ὄσσα τάδ' ἄσπετα πολλά· σέβας μ' ἔχει εἰσορόωντα."

|71 "I want you to notice something, son of Nestor, you who are so dear to my heart: |72 notice the flash [steropē] of bronze [khalkos] as its light pervades the echoing hall |73 and also the flash of gold and of electrum and of silver and of ivory. |74 I'm guessing that Zeus, who lives on Olympus, has such a hall inside his palace, |75 and he would have as many indescribable things as are here. A sense of holy awe takes hold of me as I look at these things."

Odyssey 4.71–75

§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 finally the ivory. But the first impression is the bronze, all that bronze. The light that he sees streaming from the bronze envelops everything with its radiance, and it's just like heaven for the young man.

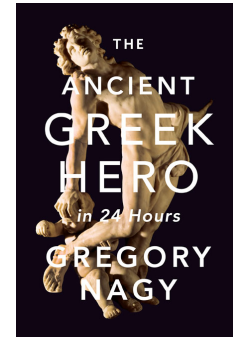
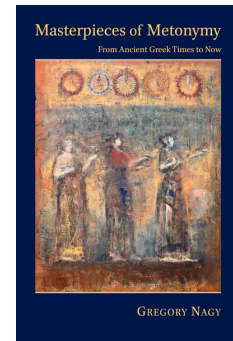
§4. "Thought I'd died and gone to heaven." The colloquial saying that I just quoted, which has become the title of a popular song recorded in 1991 by Bryan Adams, captures the young man's awareness that he has just experienced something celestial. The reduced theology of this kind of imagined heaven 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 (χάλκεον οὐρανόν, 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' (χαλκοβατῆς δῶ, 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 Menelaos, the palace of Alkinoos is heavenly, as we see from a passing reference to the khalkobates dō, 'the palace with floor made of bronze' (χαλκοβατῆς δῶ, 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' (χάλκεον 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:

|84 ὥς τε γὰρ ἡελίου αἴγλη πέλεν ἢ σελήνης |85 δῶμα καθ' ὕπερφεδες μεγαλήτορος Ἀλκινόοιο. |86 χάλκεοι μὲν γὰρ τοῖχοι ἐληλέδατ' ἔνθα καὶ ἔνθα, |87 ἐς μυχόν ἐξ οὐδοῦ, περὶ δὲ θριγκὸς κυάνοιο· |88 χρύσειαι δὲ θύραι πυκνὸν δῶμον ἐντὸς ἔεργον· |89 ἀργύρεοι δὲ σταθμοὶ ἐν χαλκῷ ἔσταναν οὐδῶ, |90 ἀργύρεον δ' ἐφ' ὑπερθύριον, χρυσεὴ δὲ κορώνη.



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|₈₄ There was a gleam [aiglē] there, which was like the gleam of the sun or the moon,
|₈₅ spreading throughout that palace famed for its high ceilings, that home of great-
hearted Alkinoos. |₈₆ There were walls made of bronze [khalkeoi], along either side
|₈₇ stretching all the way from the threshold to the inner chamber, and all around the walls
was a frieze of blue. |₈₈ Doors made of gold closed off the sturdy building on the inside,
|₈₉ and posts made of silver were set in place into the threshold made of bronze [khalkeos
oudos]. |₉₀ Silver was the lintel, and golden was the handle of the door.

Odyssey 7.84–90

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§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* (Διὸς 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 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.^[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 *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.

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:

ἐλθόντα γὰρ ἐπὶ τὸν Ἀχιλλέως τάφον εὔξασθαι θεάσασθαι τὸν ἥρωα τοιοῦτον ὅποιος
προῆλθεν ἐπὶ τὴν μάχην τοῖς δευτέροις ὄπλοις κεκοσμημένος· ὄφθέντος δ' αὐτῷ τοῦ
Ἀχιλλέως τυφλωθῆναι τὸν Ὀμηρον ὑπὸ τῆς τῶν ὄπλων ἀγῆς.

Visiting 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.

Vita 6.46–50

§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:

|₃₆₈ δῦσσο δῶρα θεοῦ, τὰ οἱ Ἥφαιστος κάμε τεύχων. |₃₆₉ κνημῖδας μὲν πρῶτα περὶ
κνήμησιν ἔθηκε |₃₇₀ καλὰς ἀργυρέοισιν ἐπισφυρίοις ἀραρυίας· |₃₇₁ δεύτερον αὖ θώρηκα
περὶ στήθεσσι ἐδυνεν. |₃₇₂ ἀμφὶ δ' ἄρ' ὤμοισιν βάλετο ξίφος ἀργυρόηλον |₃₇₃ χάλκεον·
αὐτὰρ ἔπειτα σάκος μέγα τε στιβαρόν τε |₃₇₄ εἴλετο, τοῦ δ' ἀπάνευθε σέλας γένετ' ἦϋτε
μήνης. |₃₇₅ ὡς δ' ὄτ' ἄν ἐκ πόντοιο σέλας ναύτησι φανήη |₃₇₆ καιομένοιο πυρός, τὸ τε
καίεται ὑπόθ' ὄρεσφι |₃₇₇ σταθμῶ ἐν οἰοπόλῳ· τοῦς δ' οὐκ ἐθέλοντας ἄελλαι |₃₇₈ πόντον ἐπ'
ἰχθυόεντα φίλων ἀπάνευθε φέρουσι· |₃₇₉ ὡς ἀπ' Ἀχιλλῆος σάκεος σέλας αἰθέρ' ἵκανε

|₃₆₈ He [= Achilles] put it [= his armor] on, the gifts of the god, which Hephaistos had made for him with much labor. |₃₆₉ First he put around his legs the shin guards, |₃₇₀ beautiful ones, with silver fastenings at the ankles. |₃₇₁ Next he put around his chest the breastplate, |₃₇₂ and around his shoulders he slung the sword with the nails of silver, |₃₇₃ a sword made of bronze. Next, the Shield [sakos], great and mighty, |₃₇₄ he took, and from it there was a gleam [selas] from afar, as from the moon, |₃₇₅ or as when, at sea, a gleam [selas] to sailors appears |₃₇₆ from a blazing fire, the kind that blazes high in the mountains |₃₇₇ at a solitary station [stathmos], as the sailors are carried unwilling by gusts of wind |₃₇₈ over the fish-swarming sea [pontos], far away from their loved ones. |₃₇₉ 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 tumulus 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 tumulus 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 *khalkeus* '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 tumulus 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:

|₅₉₀ Ἐν δὲ χορὸν ποικίλλε περικλυτὸς ἀμφιγυήεις, |₅₉₁ τῶ ἵκελον οἶόν ποτ' ἐνὶ Κνωσῶ
εὐρείῃ |₅₉₂ Δαίδαλος ἥσκησεν καλλιπλοκάμῳ Ἀριάδῃ.

|₅₉₀ The renowned one [= Hephaistos], the one with the two strong arms, pattern-wove [poikillein]^[7] in it [= the Shield] a khoros.^[8] |₅₉₁ It [= the khoros] was just like the one that, once upon a time in far-ruling Knossos, |₅₉₂ Daedalus made for Ariadne, the one with the beautiful tresses [plokamoi].

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.

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HPC. See Nagy 2009|2010.

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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.

[2] Again, Nagy 2010:336–337.

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

[4] HPC 256–257n13, where I also highlight the pertinent observations of Graziosi 2002:159.

[5] HPC 298–300.

[6] HPC ch. 10.

[7] Also attested at this verse, besides ποικιλλε (poikillein), is the variant ποιησε (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](#)