



# About a scene pictured on the Bronze Doors of the Supreme Court, already pictured once upon a time on the Shield of Achilles

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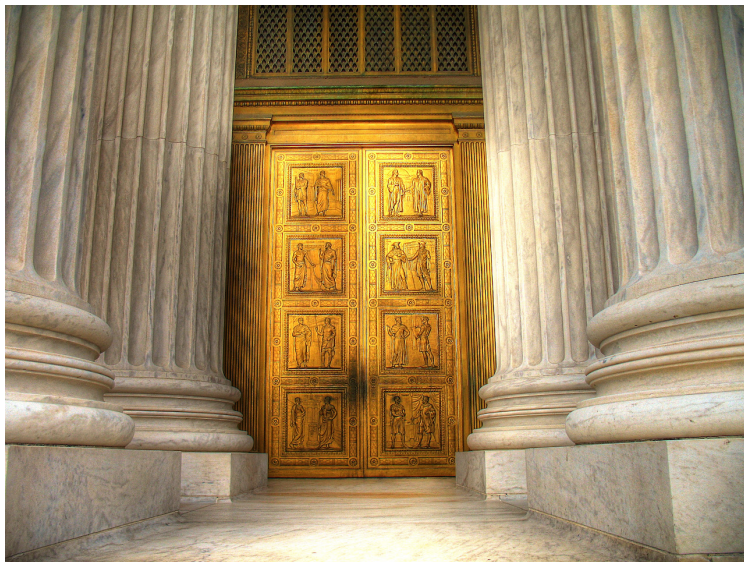
## About a scene pictured on the Bronze Doors of the Supreme Court, already pictured once upon a time on the Shield of Achilles

July 24, 2020 Posted By Gregory Nagy listed under By Gregory Nagy, H24H

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2020.07.24 | By Gregory Nagy

§0. At the very beginning of my Introduction to *The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours*, at [0051](#), where I talk about the “great books” of Greek literature that I will be analyzing, I say that I will also be showing pictures, taken mostly from ancient Greek vase paintings. As I now look back at the pictures in that book, first published online in 2013, I keep thinking of other relevant pictures I could have shown—but which I had already had a chance to show in another book of mine, *Homer the Classic*, first published online in 2009. In this essay, I highlight the relevance of one such picture. It is a scene of litigation between two heroes, pictured on the Bronze Doors of the Supreme Court. And this scene, which is part of set of eight scenes picturing the Rule of Law as it evolved through the ages, was inspired by a scene described in the Homeric *Iliad*. That Homeric scene, as we will see, was all about an all-powerful idea: *human life is priceless*. That is, you cannot put a price on human life. Such an idea, endangered once again in our own time, is at stake already in the world of Achilles.



Monumental Bronze Doors, with eight relief panels depicting the evolution of the rule of law. Designed by Cass Gilbert and John Donnelly, Sr.; sculpted by John Donnelly, Jr. Installed 1935. Supreme Court of the United States, Washington, DC. [Image](#) via Flickr, under a [CC BY-NC 2.0](#) license.

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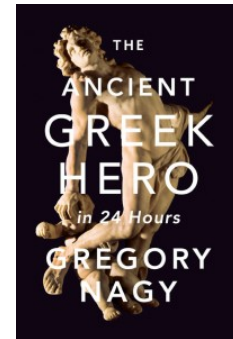
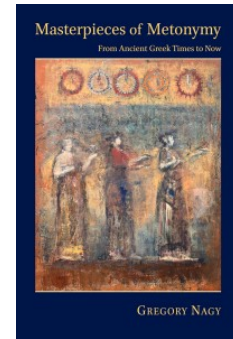
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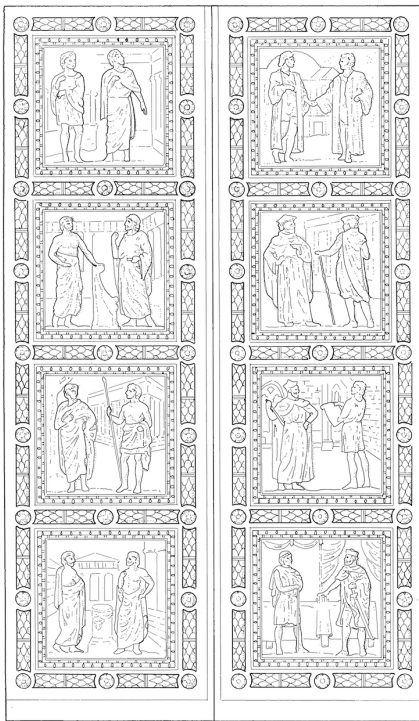
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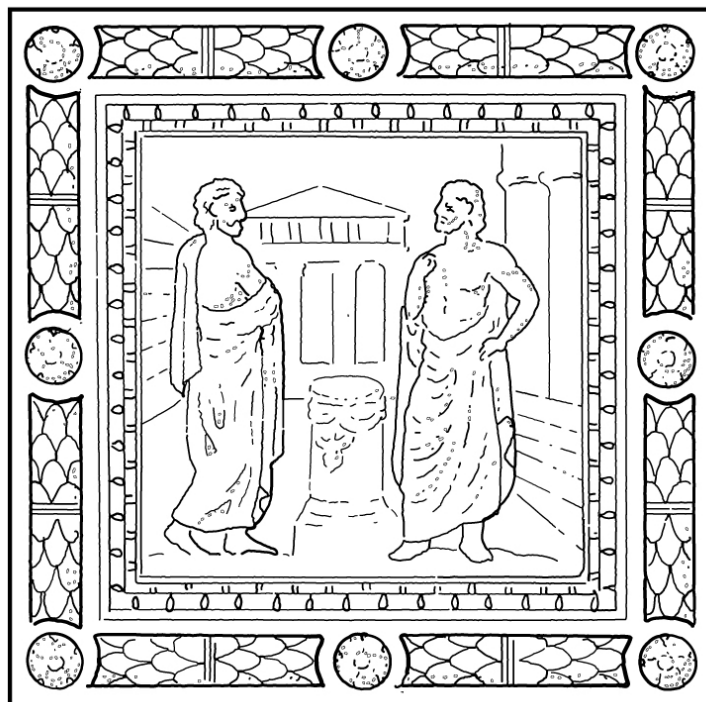
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Bronze Doors of the Supreme Court, line drawing by Valerie Woelfel.



Bronze Doors of the Supreme Court: detail, two ancient Greek heroes, engaging in a legal dispute.

§1. Unlike the scene pictured on the Bronze Doors of the Supreme Court, the corresponding scene in the *Iliad* is a picture created by way of the verbal arts, not the visual arts. It is part of a set of pictures known to classicists as the Shield of Achilles.

§2. On the bronze surface of the hero's shield, as described at lines 478–609 of Rhapsody 18 in the Homeric *Iliad*, the divine artisan Hephaistos had pictured, by way of his perfect metalwork, an entire cosmos that can be seen as the world of Achilles—or, to say it another way, the god had pictured the world as seen by the prime hero of the *Iliad*. But there is still another way to say it: the verbal art of the Homeric *Iliad* claims to be creating a set of pictures that are simultaneously being created by the visual art of the

god. Classicists use the term *ecphrasis* to describe such a verbal re-creation of a visual creation that can only be imagined.

§3. Within the set of pictures included in the visualized world that is the Shield of Achilles, the scene that inspired the scene sculpted into the Bronze Doors of the Supreme Court can be found at lines 497–501 of *Iliad* 18:

1497 λαοὶ δ' εἰν ἀγορῆ ἔσαν ἀθροοί· ἔνθα δὲ νεῖκος  
1498 ὠρώρει, δύο δ' ἄνδρες ἐνείκον εἵνεκα ποιῆς  
1499 ἀνδρὸς ἀποφθιμένου· ὁ μὲν εὔχετο πάντ' ἀποδοῦναι  
1500 δῆμῳ πιφαύσκων, ὃ δ' ἀναίνετο μηδὲν ἐλέσθαι·  
1501 ἄμφω δ' ἰέσθην ἐπὶ ἴστορι πεῖραρ ἐλέσθαι.

The people were gathered together in assembly, and there a dispute had arisen, and two men were disputing about the blood-price for a man who had died. The one made a claim to pay back in full, making a public declaration to the district, but the other was refusing to accept anything. Both were eagerly heading for an arbitrator, to get a limit.

§4. One of these unnamed heroes, the defendant, is claiming the right to offer full payment to compensate for the death of a man, while the other unnamed hero, the plaintiff, refuses to accept any payment at all (my translation follows the interpretation of Leonard Muellner 1976:100–106). The plaintiff and the defendant who are pictured in this scene can readily be identified as Achilles and Agamemnon, as I have pointed out in *Homer the Classic* (2§175). This scene can thus be seen as a “re-play,” in a timeless way, of the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon at the very beginning of the *Iliad*. But who is ‘the man who had died’?

§5. In *The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours* (§§77), I argue that ‘the man who had died’ in this timeless scene is none other than the hero Achilles himself:

If the defendant stands for Agamemnon, and if the plaintiff stands for Achilles, then maybe the life that cannot be paid for is the life of Achilles. After all, what matters more for Achilles than all the wealth he could possibly imagine is his own life. All the riches of Troy and Delphi put together would be inadequate as payment for this life. Here is how Achilles expresses his love for his own life (*Iliad* 9.401–409):

1401 οὐ γὰρ ἐμοὶ ψυχῆς ἀντάξιον οὐδ' ὅσα φασίιν  
1402 Ἴλιον ἐκτῆσθαι εὖ ναιόμενον πτολιέθρον  
1403 τὸ πρὶν ἐπ' εἰρήνης, πρὶν ἐλθεῖν υἷας Ἀχαιῶν,  
1404 οὐδ' ὅσα λάϊνος οὐδὸς ἀφήτορος ἐντὸς ἔεργει  
1405 Φοῖβου Ἀπόλλωνος Πυθοῖ ἐνὶ πετρῆεσσι.  
1406 ληϊστοὶ μὲν γὰρ τε βόες καὶ ἴφια μῆλα,  
1407 κτητοὶ δὲ τρίποδες τε καὶ ἵππων ξανθὰ κάρηνα,  
1408 ἀνδρὸς δὲ ψυχὴ πάλιν ἐλθεῖν οὔτε λείσπη  
1409 οὐθ' ἐλετή, ἐπεὶ ἄρ κεν ἀμείψεται ἔρκος ὀδόντων.

My life [*psūkhē*] is worth more to me than all the wealth that was once possessed, so they say, by that well-situated citadel of Ilion, back when it was still at peace, before the coming of the Achaeans, or than all the treasure that is stored inside when you enter the stone threshold of the one who shoots, Phoebus Apollo, at rocky Pytho [= Delphi]. Cattle and sheep can be rustled in a raid, and a man can acquire both tripods and horses with their golden manes if he wants them, but a man's life [*psūkhē*] can never come back—it cannot be rustled in a raid and thus taken back—once it has passed through the barriers of his teeth.

§6. I often tell people who are reading the Homeric *Iliad* for the first time: don't assume that Achilles, as he faces his own death, will happily die for the sake of achieving the glory that comes with the poetry that will celebrate him forever. He is willing to die, yes, but he dies hard. And he dies hard because he so loves to be alive. He so loves his own life; he so loves life.

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