



A Haircut for Achilles and a Model for Greeks in the Post-Heroic Era

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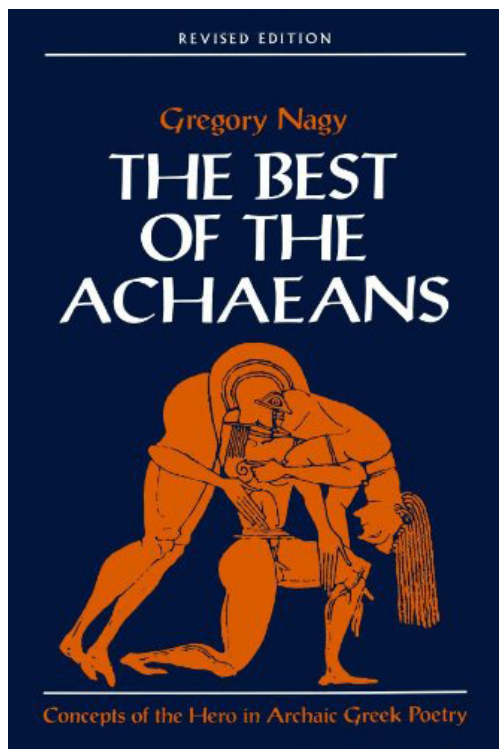
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A Haircut for Achilles and a Model for Greeks in the Post-Heroic Era

April 24, 2015 By Gregory Nagy listed under [By Gregory Nagy, H24H](#)

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§1. In Scroll 24 of the *Odyssey*, we read the words of a dialogue that is taking place in Hades between the 'ghost' or *psūkhē* of Agamemnon and the 'ghost' or *psūkhē* of Achilles. I quote here the lines where the ghost of Agamemnon is describing in his own words the funeral that the [...]



§1. In Scroll 24 of the *Odyssey*, we read the words of a dialogue that is taking place in Hades between the 'ghost' or *psūkhē* of Agamemnon and the 'ghost' or *psūkhē* of Achilles. I quote here the lines where the ghost of Agamemnon is describing in his own words the funeral that the Achaeans arranged once upon a time for the dead body of Achilles. I draw attention right away to the wording I just used a second ago in referring to the hero whom we know as Achilles. I did not say Achilles but the dead body of Achilles, since the language of Homeric poetry insists on equating the identity of a hero with the body of the hero, even if this body belongs to a hero who is already dead. That is why, in the wording of Agamemnon directed at Achilles, as we are about to see in the lines that I will now quote, this dead body of Achilles is 'you'. In other words, this dead body is somehow the same thing as the hero Achilles to whom the ghost of Agamemnon is speaking. Here, then, are the relevant lines, spoken by Agamemnon to the 'you' that is the dead body of Achilles:

143 αὐτὰρ ἐπεὶ σ' ἐπὶ νῆας ἐνεΐκαμεν ἐκ πολέμοιο, 144 κάπθεμεν ἐν λεχέεσσι, καθήραντες
χρῶα καλὸν 145 ὕδατι τε λιαρῶ καὶ ἀλείφατι· πολλὰ δὲ σ' ἀμφὶ 146 δάκρυα θερμὰ χέον
Δαναοὶ κείροντό τε χαιτάς.

143 When we carried you to the ships, out of the zone of battle, 144 we put you into a space for lying down, and we purified your beautiful skin 145 with warm water and with oil. Many a tear, over you, 146 the Danaans [= Achaeans] poured out, hot tears, and they cut their hair.

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I focus here on one detail: the Achaeans, as heroic ancestors of the people we know as the Greeks of historical times, are cutting their hair as they lament the death of the hero Achilles.

§2. As I argued in [H24H](#) 14§26A, this ritual gesture of cutting the hair signals a symbolic transition from long-haired Achaeans to short-haired Greeks, corresponding to a transition from the heroic age to a post-heroic-age.

§3. There was a missing piece, however, in my argumentation as I had presented it in [H24H](#) 14§26A. The fact is, I had not mentioned the passage that I have just now cited from Scroll 24 of the Odyssey. Instead, I had concentrated on another text that refers to this ritual act of cutting the hair in lamenting the death of Achilles. The text comes from the [Hērōikos](#) of Philostratus, dated to the early third century CE. Commenting on the post-heroic era that follows the death of Achilles, the character known as the Ampelourgos says in this text: οὐδὲ κομᾶν ἔτι μετὰ τὸν Ἀχιλλεῖα καλὸν ἡγούμενοι 'no longer could they [= the Achaeans] consider it a beautiful thing to grow their hair long, once Achilles was gone' (Philostratus *Hērōikos* 51.13).

§4. I went on to say in [H24H](#) 14§26A:

The wording connotes an aetiology, as if the death of Achilles were the single reason that explains why adult men of the post-heroic age no longer wore their hair long—except for such notable counter-examples as the Spartans.

I will return later on to the historical fact that Spartan adult men wore their hair long. But for now, I concentrate on the idea of wearing your hair long as a pre-adult. In the first printing of [H24H](#), I referred at 14§26A to line drawings at 13§19 showing the statues of two young men who originated from Argos, Kleobis and Biton—forgetting that these line drawings do not actually appear in the printed version but only in the online version of [H24H](#). In the second printing of [H24H](#), this ghost reference has been eliminated, while the online version retains the illustration that features the line drawings. In any case, my purpose in referring to the statues of Kleobis and Biton was to show how these statues illustrate perfectly the fact that pre-adult Greek males customarily wore their hair long.

§5. Following up on my point about the wearing of long hair as a distinctive sign of pre-adult status, I went on to say in [H24H](#) 14§26A:

Even in the *Iliad*, the long hair of Achilles ostentatiously signals his pre-adult status, as we can see from the scene describing the funeral of Patroklos, where Achilles cuts off his long blond hair as he stands at the funeral pyre of his best friend (23.141). It is at this same place where the tumulus to be shared by Patroklos and Achilles will be built when the time comes for the funeral of Achilles himself (23.126). In this Homeric scene, as Achilles is standing on the heights of the promontory that will become the setting for the tumulus that houses his own body, he wistfully looks out over the seas of the outer Hellespont, fixing his gaze toward the far west, in the direction of his native land of Thessaly, and longing for the river Sperkheios that flows through that distant land: it was to the waters of that river, which he will never live to see again, that he had hoped to sacrifice his long hair after he came of age and was ready to cut it (23.142–153). But now Achilles cuts off his long hair prematurely and unseasonally as he stands there at the Asiatic promontory that will become the setting for the tumulus that houses his body (23.141).

At this point I cite an analysis of this Homeric passage in my book *Homer the Preclassic* (2009 [online](#) | 2010 [print](#), II§85). In terms of this analysis, the visualization of Achilles as he stands on a promontory and looks toward his homeland in Thessaly corresponds to an Athenian version of the myths surrounding such a promontory. In other words, the positioning of Achilles here reflects an Athenian appropriation of the Trojan landscape in the historical context of relatively later phases in the evolution of Homeric poetry.

§6. Following up on this analysis, I will now argue that such an Athenian phase of Homeric transmission is relevant to the picturing of Achilles at the moment when he cuts his own hair as he laments the death of his comrade Patroklos (23.141).

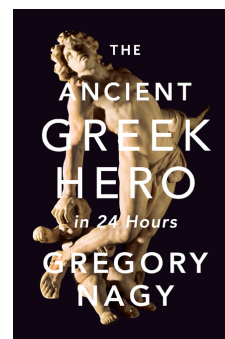
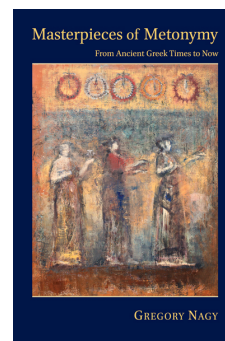
§7. In [H24H](#) 14§26A, commenting on this ritual act performed by Achilles himself in the *Iliad*, I had this to say: "And now the Achaean comrades of Achilles follow his example and likewise cut off their hair (23.135–136)." I should have added that, in the actual narrative, these comrades are cutting off their hair even before Achilles is shown in the act of cutting off his own hair (23.141).

§8. As I will now argue, however, the act of Achilles in cutting off his long hair is still to be seen retrospectively as the primary example to be followed. Achilles is the leader, not a follower, in performing this act for the Achaeans.

§9. I can say it even more strongly: when he cuts his own hair in *Iliad* 23.141, Achilles is acting as a model for the ritual performed in *Odyssey* 24.43–46 by the Achaeans when they cut their hair in lamenting his death.

§10. What we see at work here is a mentality that pictures Achilles as a cult hero who is worshipped by his own people. Just as gods are worshipped as models, so also are cult heroes, and Achilles is a prime example.

§11. I explore such a mentality in a new book, *Masterpieces of Metonymy* (2015, 3§14), where I show that the worship of divinities operates on a logic of do as I do. Divinities can show you how to worship them by



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acting as models for the act of worshipping. Here is my formulation of this logic, which applies not only to divinities but also to cult heroes:

This logic, as I have called it, is an example of a theological way of thinking that is well known to researchers in comparative religion. On the basis of comparative studies centering on the interactions of myth and ritual in a wide variety of cultures, I can formulate in the following words such a theological construct: A divinity in the world of myth can be seen as the prototypical performer of the rituals that mortals perform to worship that divinity.[1] This way, a divinity can be seen as a prototypical performer of worship or sacrifice or prayer, so that human performers of worship or sacrifice or prayer may follow the lead of the divinity, do as I do.[2]

In H24H 8§61, I show an example where the model is not a divinity but a cult hero, and that hero is Achilles himself. The example is a painting on the Münster Hydria, featuring Achilles as a prototypical participant in his own hero cult by way of participating in the athletic event of charioteering as an apobatēs. In this event, an athlete armed as a warrior leaps off the platform of a racing chariot driven by the charioteer, and then, after running alongside the chariot, he leaps back on. So also in the painting, we see Achilles himself running like an apobatēs alongside a racing chariot. Through his prototypical participation as an apobatic athlete, Achilles shows the way for future athletes to participate in this athletic event at the seasonally recurring festival of the Panathenaia for all time to come.



§12. And in H24H 8§62, I offer a parallel analysis of the Funeral Games for Patroklos in Iliad 23. Here Achilles is shown as a prototypical participant in his own hero cult by way of participating in the hero cult of his other self, Patroklos. Here too he shows the way for future athletes to participate in his own hero cult by way of participating in the kinds of athletic events we see described in Iliad 23, especially in the chariot race. In this case, however, Achilles does not himself participate in the athletic events of the Funeral Games for Patroklos: rather, it is the other surviving Achaean heroes of the Iliad who serve as prototypical participants in the athletic events, while Achilles himself simply presides over these events as if he were already dead, having already achieved the status of the cult hero who will be buried in the tumulus to be shared with his other self, Patroklos.

§13. Similarly in Iliad 23.141, where Achilles cuts his own hair in lamenting the death of his other self, Patroklos, he is showing the way for the Achaeans to lament his own death when the time comes. Once he is dead, Achilles is actually pictured as a beautiful corpse—un beau mort. A most radiant example is the celebrated painting on the handle of the François Vase. We see pictured here the mighty Ajax struggling to carry away from battle the larger-than-life corpse of Achilles. The enormity of the body, draped over the shoulder of Ajax, causes even this mighty hero to buckle under the weight. And, from the head of Achilles, we see the luxuriant strands of his long hair cascading down from his lifeless head. The illustration on the cover of my 1979 book, [The Best of the Achaeans](#), is based on this exquisite painting.

§14. So, the cutting of the hair of Achilles in Iliad 23.141 prefigures not the appearance of the hero himself in death, when he is shown with long hair, but rather the appearance of the Achaeans who will lament this death by cutting their own hair. The ritual act of Achilles is a model for the ritual act of the Achaeans.

§15. In H24H 14§26A, I analyze the passage in the Hērōikos of Philostratus concerning the moment when the Achaeans cut their hair as they lament the death of Achilles:

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[N]ow that Achilles is dead, adult males of the future will be wearing their hair short, no longer long. It is as if all the 'sons of the Achaeans' were now ready to shift from pre-adult to adult status—now that Achilles is dead and buried. So, now, the huies Akhaiōn, 'sons of the Achaeans', as the Achaean warriors are regularly called in the Iliad (1.162 and so on) have reached a post-heroic maturity that inaugurates a post-heroic age.

Here is where I follow up with the formulation I already quoted H24H 14§26A, and I quote it again here:

The wording connotes an aetiology, as if the death of Achilles were the single reason that explains why adult men of the post-heroic age no longer wore their hair long—except for such notable counter-examples as the Spartans.

I will now argue that the Spartan counter-example is relevant to the Homeric passages where we saw the heroic prototypes of the Achaeans in the act of cutting off their hair. At Odyssey 24.43–46, we saw all the Achaeans cutting off their hair as they lamented the death of Achilles himself. And at Iliad 23.138–151 we saw the men of Achilles performing the same ritual act as they lamented the death of Patroklos, which prefigures the death of Achilles. More than that, we saw Achilles himself cutting off his own hair at Iliad 23.141.

§16. I argue that these Homeric examples, which I have already interpreted as Athenian in orientation, validate the traditions of Argos and invalidate the traditions of Sparta. Such a pattern of validation and invalidation makes sense, since Athenian traditions tended to favor Argos over Sparta. And the fact is, it was a tradition for Spartan male adults to wear their hair long as opposed to Argive male adults, who wore their hair short. This distinction was aetiologicalized in the myths and rituals of the two cities, which were engaged in many years of fighting over a disputed territory known as the Thyreatis. The story is told most vividly by Herodotus 1.82.7.

§17. And, as I note in H24H 23§46, Plato's Socrates refers to the part of the story that tells how the men of Argos refused to wear their hair long until they got a rematch with the long-haired men of Sparta who had defeated them and had won as their prize the territory of the Thyreatis (Plato [Phaedo](#) 89c). So also, says Socrates, the followers of Socrates should cut their hair in lamenting his death only if they are ready to fight once again for the argument that the psūkhē or 'soul' is immortal.

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Notes

[1] I offer a prototype of this formulation in my 1996 book, [Poetry as Performance](#) (p. 57). A definitive work on the figuring of divinities as model worshippers is Patton 2009. A pioneer in the study of such figuring is Simon 1953.

[2] Again I cite especially Patton 2009.

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