

Introduction

The **Nike of Paionios**, erected at Olympia in the Peloponnese ca. 420 B.C., stands as a pinnacle in a long line of victory figures beginning in the 6th c. The original of the Olympia statue is slightly over life-size and stood on a 12 m. high triangular pier. The Wilcox cast is obviously much reduced in scale, and the missing portions of the figure and its drapery have been restored to suggest its original appearance. Olympia Archaeological Museum. Parian marble. H. 1.96 m. (6 ft 1 in). The inscription on the base reads: "The Messenians and Naupactians dedicated this to Olympian Zeus, a tithe from the spoils of war. Paionios of Mende made this, and was the winner [in the competition] to make the akroteria for the temple." The reference to the Naupactians and "the war" probably refers to the role of the Naupactians (a town on the Corinth Gulf) in the battle of Pylos-Sphacteria (425 B.C.), at which the Athenians captured 200 Spartans.

Historical Background

Paionios was a sculptor from Mende, a small town in northern Greece; his career belongs to the high classical phase of Greek art. From the middle of the 5th c. on, the construction of the Parthenon and Akropolis buildings in Athens drew sculptors from all over the Greek world - but

apparently not Paionios. Thus, the Olympia Nike is important precisely because it shows us a non-Attic (Athenian) style of the last quarter of the 5th c. by an undoubted master sculptor. It has been suggested, however, that Paionios might have been the sculptor of the frieze found in the Temple of Apollo at Bassae, south of Olympia; this sculpture is also dated in the last quarter of the 5th c. B.C.

Iconography and Style

The flying figure is shown leaning forward as if in motion and just slightly off-balance, to suggest the transition between full flight and landing. Directly beneath her feet, at the top of the pier, an eagle - symbol of Zeus and his power - is shown in flight (its wings are now missing). The Nike too had wings extended in flight; we can still see how they rose from her shoulders. To emphasize further the illusion of flight, Paionios carved a thin mantle billowing behind the figure - a display of the stonemason's great skill. She wears a long garment (*peplos*) pinned at both shoulders; one of these pins has come undone, and the drapery slips and reveals her left breast. Similarly, the windswept appearance of the cloth over the torso and legs reveals rather than conceals the female torso, including the abdomen. Between and behind the legs, the thin cloth outlines and reveals the body

underneath. Unfortunately, the head is battered and the face has sheared off. In its original location, in front of the southeast corner of the temple of Zeus at Olympia (ca. 460 B.C.), the Nike must have been striking: the figure of the goddess of victory was silhouetted against the sky and temple facade, alighting on top of the supporting pier.



Preserved pier at Olympia for the Nike of Paionios.



The surviving statue, without the restorations of the Wilcox cast.

Select Bibliography

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cast (reduced scale):

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