



MUSEUM FRIDAY FEATURE

The Goddess Nike

by Benton Kidd, Curator of Ancient Art

Known as Nike to the Greeks (Latin: Victoria), the winged goddess of victory is familiar to many today, but she was far more than another gratuitous, divine beauty. On the contrary, Nike played an integral role in ancient Greek culture, one which prided itself on the spirit of competition. While winning glory and fame is a persistent theme in Greek literature, actual contests of athletics, theater, poetry, art, music, military achievement—and even beauty—fueled the drive in ancient Greeks to achieve and win. One hymn lauds Nike as the one who confers the “mark of sweet renown,” concluding with “...you rule all things, divine goddess.” The widespread veneration of such a goddess is thus not unexpected, but she was not included among the august Olympians. In fact, her origins are likely to be earlier.

In our previous discussion of the god Eros, we had occasion to mention Hesiod’s account of creation, known as the *Theogony*, or the “genesis of the gods.” Perhaps written about 700 BCE, this grand saga in poetry sweeps the reader back to an ancient era in which the Olympian gods engage in an epic battle with the Titans, a truculent race of primeval gods. Hesiod tells us that the battle raged for ten long years, and that the Olympian victory resulted in absolute supremacy over the universe. The Titans were imprisoned in Tartarus, a horrifying black abyss in the Underworld, reserved for punishing the vilest sinners. Some Titans, however, escaped this terrible fate.

When Zeus began marshaling his army, he vowed eternal honor on Olympus to any god who would join him. Among the first to step forward was the Titaness Styx and her four children: Kratos (strength), Bia (force), Zelos (zeal), and Nike. Of these, Nike would

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Figurine of Goddess Nike (or Victoria)

Roman, 1st–3rd c. CE

Bronze

Gift of Mr. Leonard Epstein (62.66.2)



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go on to have the most powerful presence in Greek art and literature. As Zeus promised, she also held an esteemed seat on Olympus, beside the king of the gods himself, and frequently at the side of his favorite daughter, the goddess Athena. Nike usually carried a laurel wreath or a palm branch, both symbols of triumph bestowed upon the victorious.

Following Hesiod's account, Nike has little independent history but her visibility steadily increases, on coins especially. A small temple to "wingless Nike," on the Acropolis of Athens, represented a cult of the goddess as a manifestation of Athena. In his *Guide to Greece*, author Pausanias notes numerous fine images of the goddess throughout the country, as late as the second century CE. She was shown alighting on the hands of colossal gold and ivory statues of Zeus and Athena, in the Temple of Zeus at Olympia, and in the Parthenon of Athens. Also at Olympia, an imposing statue of Nike by the sculptor Paionios commemorated a military victory of the Messenians. But the most recognizable extant image must be the mammoth (9 ft.) victory memorial erected (by whom?) in the sanctuary of the Great Gods on the island of Samothrace, probably in the second century BCE. Perched on the grand Daru Staircase of the Louvre today, this image of the goddess is known the world over. Its original form, however, was apparently somewhat unusual. Since its discovery in 1863, the statue was thought to have carried one of the usual symbols in the upraised hand, or perhaps a trumpet. But the discovery of the right hand in 1950 proved that the goddess was holding nothing, and that the hand was merely raised in a gesture of greeting. ■



Lamp with Goddess Nike
Roman, Early 1st c. CE
From Greece
Pottery
(59.29)

Tetradrachm of Demetrios Poliorketes

Obv: Trumpeting Nike on ship prow

Rev: Poseidon throwing trident

Greek, mint of Pella, ca. 294–293 BCE

Silver

Weinberg Fund (2003.6)

