Nike, Goddess of Victory: Symbol of Ancient Greek Identity

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Nike’s Religious Presence in Greece
The Greek goddess Nike has traditionally been ignored as a significant goddess in Classical studies. The Greeks valued the ideas of honor and excellence, called *timé* and *areté*. The heroes in Greek mythology demonstrated these two ideas in their actions and were punished when they went against these traits. Because they heard these stories again and again and were taught to emulate their heroes, the Greeks cherished those who were able to accomplish *timé* and *areté* in their lifetime. To do so made a Greek the closest he could become during his mortal existence to a godly existence.

As goddess of victory, Nike was, in a way, the patron goddess of anyone who managed to accomplish *timé* and *areté* in their duties. These aspects were the epitome of Greek existence. Nike was also present in the worship of several other major gods of Ancient Greece, and therefore had some very important religious associations that help prove her place as a highly important goddess, and one that the Greeks kept in mind during all of their activities and pursuits—thereby becoming a symbol of the Greeks’ aspirations, beliefs, and sense of self.

Appearance in the Archaeological Record

Earliest known depiction of Nike, found at Delos, a sanctuary dedicated to the god Apollo, and dating to 550 BC. Original statue on left and drawn restoration on right.

Nike incense burner from Archaic Period (6th cen. BC) on left, and Temple of Athena-Nike on Athenian Acropolis on right, which temple was built over an Archaic period altar dedicated to Nike.

Depictions of Nike showing her association with other gods (besides Athena and Apollo as shown above). On left, a Nike relief from Ephesus, a site sacred to Artemis. On right, painting from an Attic vase showing Nike driving Zeus’ chariot during the battle with the Giants (or Gigantomachy).

The Realm of Victory
Nike’s importance in the Greek world has largely been ignored or understated in Classical archaeology. Common thought is that the goddess is merely a handmaiden to Athena, and was never important in her own right as a goddess involved in Ancient Greek religion.

However, I would argue that Nike’s presence in context with gods other than Athena at times prior to Nike’s known associations with Athena (as the figure from Apollo’s sanctuary at Delos), as well as her persistence throughout Greek myth as a bringer of victory in many contexts (as in the Attic vase paintings shown) proves her independence and importance.

Influence of Alexander the Great
Alexander the Great, an influential and expansive conqueror who ruled Greece in the 300s BC, set up an altar of thanks to the goddess Nike during an important religious festival called the Niketeria in Athens. He also refurbished Didyma, a site sacred to Apollo where a relief that I believe to depict Nike survives (no other research on the frieze at Didyma exists at this time). Because of Alexander’s influence, I believe that all Greeks must also have worshiped Nike as an important goddess and would have worshiped her regularly and always been desirous to gain her blessing of victory.