



Nike, the Mythological Goddess of Sport and Her Reflections on the Present Day

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to examine Nike, known as the mythological goddess of sport, and her reflections on the present. A literature search was carried out. In ancient Greek mythology and religion, Nike was the goddess of victory in all areas, including art, music, war and sport. Nike is the winged goddess of victory, speed, and strength who can race and fly with great speed. Although Nike is one of the oldest ancient Greek goddesses and preceded even the most powerful Olympians, she is barely mentioned in the mythologies. Nevertheless, Nike, mythologized as a Greek goddess in antiquity, was influential throughout history in nations associated with Greek civilization. Nike's counterpart in the Roman Empire is Victoria. Nike is a deity in religious terms, a hero in wars, a symbol of victory in sporting competitions, a female figure in terms of gender, a symbol of the Olympic Games and, more recently, in the sports market as the brand of Nike shoes and all the products it manufactures. Furthermore, Nike's influence goes beyond mythology and manifests itself in various forms of art and architecture. One of the most famous representations of Nike, for example, is the winged Victory of Samothrace. Since the 1896 Olympics, Nike has been at the center of the modern revival of the games and can be seen in one way or another on every medal awarded to the world's most successful female athletes.

Keywords: Antiquity, goddess, nike, olympics, sport

INTRODUCTION

In ancient times, the Olympic Games were a kind of sporting spectacle associated with religious rituals, especially in the Greek civilizations. In ancient times, the Greeks organized various ceremonies in the name of their gods and goddesses. At that time, large-scale sporting festivals were held in places such as Olympia, Pythia, Nemla and Isthmia. Offerings were made and rewards distributed in the name of the gods. At the ceremonies in honor of Apollo in particular, three-legged bronze cauldrons were presented as prizes to the victorious athletes. Sometimes the prizes were crowns made of olive leaves. The literature states that Nike, the goddess of victory, placed a "crown of victory" on the winners of torch races (Şener, 2018; Bıyık & İmamoğlu, 2022; Doğan & İmamoğlu, 2023).

Nike is the goddess of victory in Greek mythology and her counterpart in the Roman Empire was Victoria. Nike was the winged goddess of victory. She was worshipped by athletes who wanted to win. This is still important for athletes today. In Greek mythology and ancient religion, Nike is the goddess of victory in all areas, including art, music, war and sport. In Greek art, she is often seen as an attribute of another deity, depicting Athena, the winged triumphant in flight. In Greek literature, Nike is described both as an attribute and as a servant of the gods Zeus and Athena (Wikipedia, 2024).

Nike, the ancient Greek goddess of victory, had no clearly identifiable personality, no role in myths and no temple cult of her own. As a military and sporting symbol, Nike stood for 'victory'. She was often worshipped together with another god, for example Zeus on Mount Olympus or Athena in Athens. Nike, the symbol of victory, is depicted much more frequently in art. She is usually depicted as a winged young woman in a long white dress, moving quickly, running or flying. The goddess Nike is also depicted in military and sporting contexts. On vases and coins depicting chariots, she is often seen as a charioteer. On vase paintings, she can also be seen holding the crown of victory above her head and hovering next to a victorious athlete. Occasionally she is also depicted sitting next to athletes at the start of a competition that has not yet been decided (Ermiş et al., 2023; KU Leuven, n.d.).

The aim of this study is to examine Nike, known as the mythological goddess of sport, and her reflections on the present.

PROGRESSION

The Olympic Games took place every four years in the sacred temple of Olympia in the western Peloponnese, which was dedicated to the worship of the god Zeus. They were held continuously for almost 1,200 years, from 776 BC to 393 AD, and have left an indelible, albeit mythological, mark on humanity. Although there were no medals and no women at the ancient Olympics, the figure of a woman from ancient Greek mythology has been central to the modern revival of the Games since 1896 and appears in one form or another on almost every medal awarded to women, the world's most successful sportswomen (Howitt-Marshall, 2023).

According to the classical poet Pindar (522-443 BC), the Olympic Games were founded by the divine hero Hercules (Heracles), the son of Zeus, in honor of his father. Another legend attributes its foundation to the legendary King Pelops, who organized the games in a chariot race to commemorate his victory over the King of Pisa, Oenomaus (literally "man of wine"). Religious worship was an essential part of the ancient Games. The event was characterized by elaborate ceremonies and rituals dedicated to the gods, especially Zeus, the king of the Olympians. Participants and spectators offered sacrifices, prayers and processions to honor the gods and seek their approval for the success of the Games. One of the fundamental aspects of the ancient Olympic ethos was the concept of the "agon" or competition. The purpose of the Games was to demonstrate the physical strength and skill of the participating athletes from the various Greek city-states and colonies. The athletes competed in various disciplines such as running, jumping, throwing, wrestling and chariot racing. The winners received olive wreaths

or "kotinos" and enjoyed great honor and recognition in their communities. The ancient Olympics were not only a demonstration of athletic prowess, but also a celebration of the ideal of "kalos kagathos", literally "beautiful virtue", which refers to the harmony of physical and moral virtues and gentlemanly behavior. The games were open to free-born Greek men who met certain criteria, and participants were expected to abide by the rules of fair play, respect and honesty. Cheaters and wrongdoers were severely punished and the Olympic Truce was observed, which temporarily halted hostilities between the Greek city-states during the games (Howitt-Marshall, 2023).

There are two main versions of Nike's lineage:

1) Pallas and Styx: Pallas is the son of the Titan Crius and Eurybia, daughter of Pontus and Gaia (Mother Earth). Styx is the daughter of the Titan Oceanus (Ocean) and is an important river in the underworld.

2) Ares and the unknown: Ares is the god of war.

Nike lives on Mount Olympus with her brothers Zelus (also known as Zelos), Kratos and Bia. You can better understand Nike's nature if you take a closer look at her brothers: Zelus ("enthusiasm, competition") is the personification of rivalry or emulation. He is the son of Styx and the Titaness Pallas and is the constant companion of Zeus. Kratos ("power, supremacy") is the embodiment of power and domination in ancient Greece. Like his other brothers, he is Zeus' constant and watchful companion. Bia ("strength") is the embodiment of power and strength. Bia was famous for having to bind the mighty Titan Prometheus to a rock as a punishment from Zeus. He was condemned to steal fire from the gods and pass it on to the people on earth against Zeus' orders (Gollamudi, 2024).

For the Greeks, the festival of athletics was a way of worshipping the gods through peak physical performance. Zeus, the ruler of the many Greek gods, was honored with the biggest and best of the Games. Nike was there to commemorate the victors. Paionios, the sculptor of Nike's statue, carved her out of a single block of marble and placed her at the top of a 6-meter-high column, as if she were flapping her wings and exploring the world. With one arm stretched into the air, he pressed the tunic of a wild wind to his body while holding a palm leaf in his other hand. An inscription once found on the base of the statue states that this Nike was dedicated to Zeus to commemorate a famous military victory of the Messenians, on whose territory Olympia lay. The statue is said to have been 'made by Paionios of Mendeia, who had also won a competition for the decoration of the temple roof'. The competition, or 'agon', is

described as one of the most important driving forces of ancient Greek civilization. Nike awarded prizes for acting, pottery, sculpture, poetry, lyre playing, the physical beauty of men and women, choral singing and even wool processing, among other things. The pursuit of excellence in all these areas took place in a largely competitive context and was overseen by the great winged goddess herself. Even the political freedoms that the Greeks cherished were to some extent inspired by the Nike concept. At least in the democratic states of Athens, decisions were made on the basis of public debates or verbal arguments. Philosophical concepts were also formulated in a spirit of competition: Socrates believed that truth could only be reached through personal dialog or dialectic between two or more participants with opposing views. The Greek poet Hesiodos put it this way: "There is more than one form of battle, and the best known fact is that there are two. One is praised by all who know it, the other is hated. They are very different in character. Cruel quarrels encourage wars. Even the lazy man is spurred on to work when he sees his neighbor successfully plowing, sowing and taking care of his household. In this way, neighbor competes with neighbor in the race for prosperity. This kind of competition is good for us. The potter competes with the potter, the builder with the builder, the beggar with the beggar, and the poet tries to outdo his fellow poet." Most of the activities Nike was involved in were very male-dominated in ancient Greece. But there was one area of life in which Nike regularly appealed to women. On vases created to celebrate weddings, one often sees Nike holding a festive wreath over the bride's head. Nowadays, one might be tempted to say that the goddess came to the wedding to pat the young woman on the back for "getting the man". But since most marriages in Greece were arranged between the groom and the bride's father, it didn't quite work out that way. It was probably more about Nike's wife being applauded for achieving her first important goal in life. Just as men were believed to find fulfillment in war or sports, politics or creative pursuits, women were believed to find fulfillment in marriage and childbearing. For a woman, at least according to Greek men, this was the place of victory. The next time Nike flies towards a young woman's home, she will be celebrating the birth of a son with her husband. At this point, she will have truly crossed what most Greek men saw as the finish line of their existence. For the Greeks, quality products and performance were achieved through competition. This meant accepting the concept of failure. It was heartbreaking to see people who had 'only' won a silver medal at the last games shedding tears and apologizing for letting their country down - you came second, didn't you? But their reaction was very much in the spirit of the first Olympics: If they didn't come first, they lost. There were no prizes for second and third place (S. Blundell, n.d.).



Figure 1. Nike statue in London (S. Blundell, n.d.)



Figure 2. Goddess Nike (S. Blundell, n.d.)

1896 Olympic Games and the Beginning of the Tradition of Giving Medals to Athletes

The revival of the Olympic Games in 1896 was driven by the desire to revive the spirit and traditions of the ancient Games: the pursuit of healthy competition, noble rivalry and fair play. The basic idea, which goes back to the efforts of the French educator and historian Pierre de Coubertin (1863-1937), who is considered the father of the modern Olympic Games, was to promote international understanding and cooperation in a rapidly changing world. Coubertin saw sport and sporting competitions as a means of bringing people from different nations together across political and cultural boundaries on a common platform: The Olympic Games were seen as an enduring symbol of peace and unity between nations. Coubertin, who came from a French aristocratic family, was also a strong advocate of physical education and believed that sport should be an integral part of the education system. He saw the Olympic Games as an opportunity to promote the importance of physical activity and conditioning, especially at a time when industrialization was rapidly increasing and physical well-being was declining. In

the ancient Olympics, successful athletes were awarded a round or horseshoe-shaped olive wreath made from the branches of wild olive trees that grew in the sacred temple of Olympia. At the first modern Olympic Games in 1896, the winning athletes received a silver medal and an olive branch, while the runners-up received a laurel branch and a bronze or copper medal. Thus began the tradition of athletes receiving medals (Howitt-Marshall, 2023).



Figure 3. 1948 London Olympics medal (Gürsoy, 2015)



Figure 4. Goddess Nike (Greek Reporter, 2024)

Nike is one of the most popular and best-known sports brands in the world. Have you ever wondered what the story behind the company's name is? The name didn't just appear out of nowhere in the United States a few years ago. It comes from the Greek and has been around for thousands of years, as Nike was known as a Greek goddess. Nike, one of the most recognizable brands in the world, was inspired by Nike, the Greek goddess of victory. Since the Olympic Games in Amsterdam in 1928, the image of Nike with a laurel wreath has appeared on the front of the gold, silver and bronze medals. Later, however, the Olympic gold, silver and bronze medals featured Nike, the Greek goddess of victory, as the main motif (Greek Reporter, 2023). Since 1928, the image of Nike, the goddess of victory, has appeared on the gold medals, but the torch relay was not part of the ancient Olympics (Doğan & İmamoğlu, 2023).

Gold, Silver and Bronze Medals

The first medal to be awarded at the modern Olympic Games was designed by the French sculptor Jules-Clément Chaplain (1839-1909), who, together with the French medalist Louis Oscar Roty (1846-1911), was one of the founders of Art Nouveau. The medallion with a diameter of 48 mm shows an impressive image of Zeus with a bushy beard and piercing gaze, holding an orb with a winged female figure in his outstretched hand. The inscription "OΛYMPIA" runs vertically on the left side. On the reverse was a detailed relief of the Acropolis of Athens, an enduring symbol of classical Greece. The winged female figure holding an olive branch and wearing a light, flowing chiton (a simple tunic-like garment) is none other than Nike, the winged goddess of victory, a divine being associated with victory, success and rewarding things. In ancient Greek art, she was usually depicted as a beautiful winged woman, often shown in flight. Her depiction embodied the idea of swift and glorious victory, whether on the battlefield or in artistic, musical or sporting competitions. Nike was even more prominently represented on the medal of the Second Olympiad in Paris in 1900. She took up the entire front of the medal, her arms raised and with laurel branches in both hands. In the background, below the goddess, there is a view of the city of Paris and the monuments of the famous world exhibition. At the Games, the winners were awarded gold-plated silver medals, the runners-up silver medals and the third-place finishers bronze medals. The Paris medal of 1900, designed by the French sculptor and engraver Frédéric-Charles Victor de Vernon (1858-1912), is remarkable because it was the only time that rectangular medals were awarded. The tradition of awarding gold, silver and bronze medals to the top three finishers was first introduced in 1904 at the Third Olympics in St. Louis, Missouri, and is still maintained today. As for Nike, it appeared on the medal fronts of all but four Summer Olympics: 1908 (London), 1912 (Stockholm), 1920 (Antwerp) and 1924 (Paris). Due to the First World War, no Games were held in 1916. For the IX. She returned for the IX Olympics, which took place in Amsterdam in 1928, and remained until the end of the 20th century: a seated goddess dressed in a chiton with a victor's wreath on her right arm and a corn cob in her left hand. In ancient times, a chiton was the name for a foot-long costume. It was also often worn in everyday life. In 2004, Greek jewelry designer Elena Votsi, who won the competition to redesign the Summer Olympics medal for the Athens Games, broke with tradition and chose to depict the goddess flying towards the all-marble Panathenaic Stadium, where the modern Games were first held. The reverse reflects the Greek nature of the Games, depicting the eternal flame burning in Olympia and the opening lines of Pindar's Eighth Olympic Ode, written in 460 BC. Since 2004,

Nike has maintained the same characteristic stance, awarding victory to the best athlete (Howitt-Marshall, 2023).

The design by David Watkins for the gold, silver and bronze medals presented at the major games includes the now familiar image of the goddess Nike, which is very similar to the statue at Olympia. The Paralympic medals designed by Ling Cheung capture the spirit of Nike in a more abstract way, with a small detail of her swirling fabric on one side (taken from the plaster of the Nike statue at Olympia) and a close-up of the feathers. Figure 5 shows one of the most important works from the Hellenistic period, the winged triumphal statue of Nike. Why does Nike have wings? Winged gods were quite unusual in ancient Greece; Eros, the god of love and sex, was another common example. The image of flight embodied by Nike certainly embodies, on some level, the idea of the impermanence of victory. One famous depiction, the headless Nike of Samothrace in the Louvre Museum in Paris, beautifully evokes the immense power of the goddess who dwells among us. The Nike of Samothrace or the Winged Victory is widely recognised as one of the finest pieces of Hellenistic sculpture. It was discovered in Samothrace in 1863 and is now in the Louvre Museum in Paris. It was probably erected by the Rhodians around 203 BC to commemorate a naval battle. Excavations showed that the statue stood on a flagship that was placed on the ground so that it appeared to float. Nike is much less balanced than the earlier version at Olympia and is depicted here as a fast-flying goddess, spinning and flapping her wings restlessly. Any deity who visits us in this dramatic way is almost certain to take off again with the same speed and determination. Nike's wings have another, uplifting meaning. She may not stay long, but as long as she is here, Nike can carry us upwards, into the air. Whether in a race, a sculpture, a poem or a wedding, Nike's spirit lifts us, if only for a moment, above the ordinary (S. Blundell, n.d.).

Nike, the winged goddess of victory

According to the Greek epic of the 8th century BC by Hesiod, Nike was the daughter of the Titan Pallas and the goddess Styx (in another tradition, she was the daughter of Ares, the god of war). She had siblings who embodied other virtues and concepts, such as Zelos (rivalry), Kratos (strength) and Bia (power). Nike was considered a close companion of the main god Zeus and often accompanied him. Her Roman equivalent was Victoria. Nike was an important figure in ancient Greek culture and was worshipped in a variety of contexts, including warfare, sports and competitions. She was believed to bring success and good fortune to those who

worshipped her or sought her favor. Her presence was particularly felt in moments of victory and celebration.

This masterpiece from the early 2nd century BC is a marble statue depicting Nike standing on the prow of a ship with her wings outstretched. In ancient Athens, Nike was worshipped together with the goddess Athena and was called "Athena Nike". There was already a cult for the goddess in the 6th century BC and a small temple was built for her in the southwest corner of the Acropolis around 420 BC (Howitt-Marshall, 2023). Nike: She is considered the ancient Greek goddess who inspired the world's most popular sports brand. Nike is Greek and has been around for thousands of years since Nike became known as the Greek goddess. Nike, one of the most recognized brands in the world, was inspired by Nike, the Greek goddess of victory. Even Nike's iconic logo, the popular "swoosh" (Nike wing), can be traced back to the story of the Greek gods (Greek Reporter, 2023).



Figure 5. A votive monument on the island of Samothrace in the North Aegean (Tourism Diary, 2018)



Figure 6. Nike "swoosh" inspired by the wings of the goddess (Greek Reporter, 2024)

Spirit of Participation

The 1928 Amsterdam Games, officially known as the IX Olympic Games, not only saw the reintroduction of the goddess Nike on the winner's medal, but also a number of important innovations that had a lasting impact on the Olympic movement, including the Olympic flame. These included the Olympic flame, the lighting of the stadium and the development of a new and more accurate method of timing the athletics competitions. Most importantly, the Games marked the debut of women's athletics with events such as the 100m, 800m and high jump. This was a major step forward for gender equality in Olympic competition and was duly celebrated with the re-use of Nike in the medal design. The inclusion of women's athletics in 1928 reflected the progressive spirit of the time and paved the way for further expansion of women's participation in Olympic sports in subsequent editions and was seen as a major victory for women's rights (Howitt-Marshall, 2023; Yazıcı & İmamoğlu, 2023).

Nike Story and Symbol

Nike is depicted in sculptures and paintings as a woman with wings, wearing flowing dresses and holding a wreath and/or palm branch in her outstretched hand. After being given a golden chariot by Zeus, Nike took on the role of the divine charioteer, which is frequently depicted in classical Greek art. Nike flew over the battlefields and rewarded the victors with glory and honor, symbolized by a wreath of laurel leaves. She also appears to be carrying a palm branch, a wreath or the staff of Hermes. In statues and paintings, she is depicted as a winged woman in flowing dresses, with a wreath and/or palm branch in her outstretched hand. She is also often depicted with the staff of Hermes, which represents her role as a messenger of victory. Nike is also depicted raising a trophy or often hovering over the victor of a competition and spreading her wings. Nike is often seen next to Athena, the goddess of wisdom and war, who never has to accept defeat. Unsurprisingly, she is often depicted seated next to Zeus, the King of the Olympians, or even held in his or Athena's open palms. The ancient poet Pausanias says of the statue of Nike in Attica in *Description of Greece* 1.1.3: "In the temple of Zeus at Peiraios in Attica: The statues are of bronze; Zeus has a scepter in his hand and a Nike." For the ancient Greeks, it was quite natural to associate victory with Zeus and Athena. After all, these two mighty gods were not used to losing. Nike fought alongside Zeus in his famous battle against the Titans and helped him triumph over his fearsome opponents. As a result of this epic battle, Zeus took control of Olympus and became the supreme Olympian. According to classical legend, when the young god recruited allies for the Titans' war against the old gods, he brought

his mother Styx, Nike and his siblings Zelos, Kratos and Bia to Zeus, the leader of the rebellion. After Nike was given a golden chariot by Zeus, she was given the role of divine charioteer, a role that is frequently depicted in classical Greek art. All four brothers were appointed guardians to keep watch next to Zeus' throne. After his victory over the Titans, Zeus rewarded Styx by turning him into the Styx, the famous underground river in whose waters the gods swore an oath. In his epic poem *Theogony* (The Birth of the Gods), the Greek poet Hesiodos describes in an astonishing way how Nike and her sisters came to Zeus' aid: "And Styx, daughter of Okeanos (Oceanos), united with Pallas and left Zelos (Imitation) and the slender Nike (Victory) naked at home. She also gave birth to the wonderful children Kratos (Kratus, strength) and Bia (strength). "These had no other home and no other abode than Zeus, no other path than that on which the god led them; but they always lived with Zeus, the thunderer. For Styx, the immortal daughter of Okeanos, had planned it that way the day the Olympian luminary called her. He sent all the immortal gods to the great Olympus and said that he would not take away the rights of any of the gods who fought with him against the Titans, but that each of them should have the office he had previously held among the immortal gods, and declared that he who was deprived of his office and rights was just. Thereupon the immortal Styx and her children came first to Olympus with the mind of their beloved father. Zeus also honored him and gave him great gifts. This is the greatest vow of all, that the gods and her children will always live with her, and as promised, she fulfilled it completely." The statue of Nike in Athens is depicted without wings and is called Nike Apteron (Victory without wings). The Athenians removed her wings to symbolize her permanence in their city; they believed that she would not fly away. For the ancient Greeks, there was nothing better than tasting the sweet fruits of victory, be it in war, love or athletics. This passion continues to this day, and the thrill of victory is one of the most beautiful feelings in the world (Gollamudi, 2024).

Nike's name means "victory" in ancient Greek, which corresponds to her existence as the goddess of victory. Nike is often depicted with various symbols and attributes. As already mentioned, she is often winged to symbolize her strength and agility. Sometimes she is depicted with golden robes and other ornaments, including the staff of Hermes, which is said to give her enormous speed and agility. Nike is often depicted with a palm branch, which is said to symbolize a time of peace after victory. There are many interesting facts about Nike and her connections to the present day. As a symbol of victory in both war and friendly rivalry, Nike is a goddess who easily epitomizes what many are trying to achieve. Nike was an important figure in Greek mythology. She helped the Olympians defeat the Titans in the War of the Titans and

thereafter participated in all the battles and competitions to celebrate the victories. She had a close relationship with both Zeus and Athena. Nike is best known for her association with victory in battle and her close relationship with Zeus and Athena. Nike was generally known for her extremely positive qualities, but because of her title as goddess of victory, she always had an irresistible desire to win. Nike is most often symbolized by the laurel wreath. In ancient times, the laurel wreath was often awarded to the victors of battles and friendly competitions. The Nike brand, a multinational company known for sportswear and sports equipment, was named after the goddess of sport, Nike, in 1971 (Study, n.d.).

CONCLUSION

Nike is one of the oldest ancient Greek goddesses, even before the most powerful Olympians, and yet she is rarely mentioned in the mythologies. In ancient Greek mythology and religion, Nike was the goddess of victory in all areas, including art, music, war and sport. Nike is the winged goddess of victory, speed and strength who can race and fly at great speed. Nike, who became a myth as a Greek goddess in ancient times, has shown her influence on nations associated with Greek civilization throughout history. In the present day, Nike is reflected as a religious deity, a heroine in wars, a symbol of victory in athletic competitions, a female figure in terms of gender, a symbol of the Olympic games and more recently as a brand for Nike shoes and products. Furthermore, Nike's influence extends beyond mythology and manifests itself in various forms of art and architecture. One of the most famous representations of Nike, for example, is the winged Victory of Samothrace. Since the 1896 Olympics, Nike has been at the center of the modern revival of the Games and can be seen in one way or another on almost every medal awarded to the world's most successful female athletes.

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