

# THE PHEIDIAN ZEUS AT OLYMPIA

(PLATES 53–54)

OVER the many years that I have known and admired William Dinsmoor I have often gone to him for help in architectural problems. So he knows that I could not contribute anything worthy of this collection of articles in his honor in the field of architecture. But his Greek temples had cult statues inside them, and especially the Pheidian Zeus at Olympia has often aroused his interest. So it may not be inopportune to discuss this famous statue once again. Inevitably I must repeat some familiar facts before adding new evidence.

As is well known, for our visualization of this statue there is little concrete evidence. No marble or bronze copy, large or small, has survived. But being world-famous, and having been preserved until late antiquity,<sup>1</sup> it was often mentioned by ancient authors,<sup>2</sup> most of whom, however, only expatiated on its beauty. Fortunately we have the detailed account by Pausanias (V, 11, 1-9), who, in addition to describing the ornaments on drapery, throne, footstool, base, screens, etc., supplies several specific facts: *καθέζεται μὲν δὴ ὁ θεὸς ἐν θρόνῳ χρυσοῦ πεποιημένος καὶ ἐλέφαντος· στέφανος δὲ ἐπίκειται οἱ τῇ κεφαλῇ μεμμημένος ἐλαίας κλώνας. ἐν μὲν δὴ τῇ δεξιᾷ φέρει Νίκην ἐξ ἐλέφαντος καὶ ταύτην καὶ χρυσοῦ, ταινίαν τε ἔχουσιν καὶ ἐπὶ τῇ κεφαλῇ στέφανον· τῇ δὲ ἀριστερᾷ τοῦ θεοῦ χειρὶ ἔνεστι σκῆπτρον μετὰ τοῖς πᾶσι ἡνθισμένον, ὁ δὲ ὄρνις ὁ ἐπὶ τῷ σκῆπτρῳ καθήμενός ἐστιν ὁ αἰετός. χρυσοῦ δὲ καὶ τὰ ὑποδήματα τῷ θεῷ καὶ ἱμάτιον ὡσαύτως ἐστί.*

We learn, therefore, that the statue was made of gold and ivory, that Zeus was represented seated on a throne, and that he wore a mantle (no chiton is mentioned) and sandals; also that on his head was a wreath imitating olive shoots, and that in his right hand he held a Nike, in his left a scepter which was surmounted by an eagle; and that the Nike was also of gold and ivory, had a stephane on her head, and held a fillet.

From this description there have been identified—more or less confidently—as copies of Pheidias' statue the representations on a series of coins of the Roman period, minted between A.D. 98 and 198, i.e. in the time of Hadrian, Commodus, Septimius

<sup>1</sup> According to the Byzantine historian Georgius Cedrenus, *Historiarum Compendium*, 322C, Vol. I, p. 564 (*Corpus Scriptorum Historiae Byzantinae*, Vol. 34) the statue was taken to Constantinople and placed in the palace of Lausus, which was destroyed by fire in A.D. 475; according to another hypothesis it was destroyed during the fire which burned down the temple in A.D. 426.

<sup>2</sup> For an extensive list of references, see Lippold, Pauly-Wissowa, *R.E.*, XIX, 2, *s.v.* Pheidias, col. 1920.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Weil, *Zeitschrift für Numismatik*, XXIX, 1912, pp. 362 ff., pl. X; Seltman, *The Temple Coins of Olympia*, 1921, pl. III; Lacroix, *Les reproductions des statues sur les monnaies grecques*, 1949, pl. XXII, 5, 6, 7, 9; Liegle, *Der Zeus des Phidias*, 1952, on pls. III and XIX; etc.

Severus, Caracalla, and Geta.<sup>3</sup> The best known are, for the statue, the coin in the Museo Archeologico in Florence, and, for the head, the coin in the Cabinet des Médailles in Paris, both reproduced in most of our books on Greek sculpture. To these has recently been added a better preserved specimen with Zeus's head, now in the Münzkabinett of Berlin.<sup>4</sup> Its style suggested that the date of the Pheidian Zeus (about which there had long been uncertainty) was to be placed in the third quarter of the fifth century; and this date has now been definitely established by the recent finds at Olympia.<sup>5</sup>

To the representations on coins with Zeus seated on a throne, holding Nike and scepter, can be added a number on engraved gems, which show the same general composition. In addition to those in London, Paris, and Berlin, cited in the catalogues of those collections by H. B. Walters, Chabouillet, and Furtwängler,<sup>6</sup> I can show here two little-known examples in the Biblioteca Apostolica of the Vatican<sup>7</sup> and in the numismatic section of the National Museum in Athens<sup>8</sup> (Pl. 53, c, d).

Properly to evaluate these representations on coins and gems one must, however, remember a salient characteristic of Greek art, namely, the constant repetition of a given type—with endless little variations. Evidently once a type had been created it became the property of all artists, and was repeated again and again, though never exactly. That is, each artist made his contribution within the framework of an accepted type. The phenomenon is particularly clear in the archaic period when, for instance, the kouros type was constantly repeated in a steady evolution, and yet, though all show the same basic composition, no two kouroi are exactly the same. This characteristic may be said to have persisted through the classical period and even to some extent in the Hellenistic, until finally in the Roman age the exact copying of Greek originals was introduced.

So when, after the completion of the Athena Parthenos, Pheidias was commissioned to make the cult statue in the temple of Zeus at Olympia, there already existed an established type of a seated Zeus which he could use. We find echoes of

<sup>3</sup> Liegle, *op. cit.*, pl. XXV.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Kunze, *Gnomon*, XXVII, 1955, pp. 222 f., and XXVIII, 1956, pp. 318 ff.; also *Neue Deutsche Ausgrabungen im Mittelmeer*, 1959, pp. 278 ff., especially pp. 291, 294 f. A definitive publication is in preparation.

<sup>5</sup> Walters, *Catalogue of Engraved Gems and Cameos . . . in the British Museum*, 1926, nos. 1251, 1252; Chabouillet, *Catalogue général et raisonné des camées et pierres gravées de la Bibliothèque Impériale*, 1861, nos. 1421, 1422; Furtwängler, *Beschreibung der geschnittenen Steine im Antiquarium* (Berlin), 1896, nos. 2355, 7138-7141.

<sup>6</sup> It belonged to the Borgia Collection of Velletri, which in part passed to the National Museum of Naples, in part to the S. Congregazione di Propaganda, and later, in 1902, to the Vatican. Cf. La Grelle, *Saggio storico*, in C. Serafini, *Medaglie*. I owe this information and permission to publish to Michelini Tocci, curator of the collection of engraved gems in the Vatican Library.

<sup>7</sup> Gift of D. Tsivanopoulos. Cf. Svoronos, *Journal International d'Archéologie Numismatique*, XVII, 1915, pl. VI, no. 39.

this early composition on coins of Arcadia and on the very coinage of Olympia, minted during the first half and middle of the fifth century B.C. (Pl. 53, a, b).<sup>9</sup>

Bearing these facts in mind, it may be asked can we be sure that the representations on the coins and gems above cited really reproduce the Pheidian statue, simply because they show the god seated and holding a Nike and scepter. There were, after all, coins with similar representations reproducing statues elsewhere, e.g. in Megara, Argos, Aegira, and Athens, all with Nike and scepter.<sup>10</sup> And on numerous engraved gems of the Roman period we find Zeus seated on a throne holding various attributes, including scepter and Nike (or an eagle, or a thunderbolt, or a globe). As examples among many I can here show three unpublished specimens—one in the Vatican Library with Zeus holding scepter and thunderbolt and being crowned by two Nikai (Pl. 53, e); another, also in the Vatican, holding a scepter and a staff (?) and accompanied by a sphinx (Pl. 53, f);<sup>11</sup> and a third in the National Museum of the Terme in Rome, holding scepter and globe (Pl. 53, g).<sup>12</sup> And the same general type—with scepter and Nike—was adopted for the Roman Jupiter; see, for example, the red jasper ringstone in New York where he appears with Spes and Fortuna on either side (Pl. 53, h).<sup>13</sup>

Some prudent authorities have, therefore, thought that the identity of the Pheidian statue with the Zeus represented on the coins above mentioned, even though they bear the inscription ΗΑΕΙΩΝ, was not proven;<sup>14</sup> for they could refer to some other statue, for instance that erected by Hadrian in the Olympieion of Athens;<sup>15</sup> that is, they could have been inspired by Pheidias' statue, without being reproductions of it.

As a contribution to this question I can add a new piece of evidence. It consists of a little carnelian ringstone, 20 by 16 mm., of the Roman period, in the Cabinet des Médailles, no. 1421a. It was acquired after the appearance in 1858 of Chabouillet's catalogue of the engraved gems and cameos in that collection and is here published for the first time with the kind permission of the authorities of the Bibliothèque

<sup>9</sup> Cf., e.g., Babelon, *Traité*, I, 2, pp. 843 ff., pl. XXXVIII, nos. 8ff.; Regling, *Die Münze als Kunstwerk*, pl. XIV, 317, 318; *B.M.C., Peloponnese*, p. 59, pl. X, 11, 12; also now the comprehensive series of Arcadian coins from ca. 490 B.C. on given by R. T. Williams in *The Confederate Coinage of the Arcadians in the Fifth Century B.C. (Numismatic Notes and Monographs, No. 155)*. I owe to Mr. Kenneth Jenkins the casts from which Plate 53, a and b were made.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. Imhoof-Blumer and P. Gardner, *Numismatic Commentary on Pausanias* (new edition by Al. N. Oikonomides, 1964), pls. A, III; K, XXV, XXVI; Q, XVII, BB, IV.

<sup>11</sup> From the Borgia Collection. Again I owe to Mr. Michelini Tocci permission to publish and help in procuring the necessary impressions and photographs.

<sup>12</sup> In the Numismatic Section, no. 104568. Chalcedony. I owe permission to publish to Dr. Panvini Rosati, the curator of that department.

<sup>13</sup> Cf. Richter, *Catalogue of Engraved Gems, Greek Etruscan and Roman, Metropolitan Museum of Art*, 1956, no. 252.

<sup>14</sup> Cf., e.g., Guidi, *Africa Italiana*, I, 1927, pp. 21ff.; M. Santangelo, *Boll. d'Arte*, I, 1948, pp. 1ff., à propos of a terracotta statuette from Falerii. On the general question see also Rizzo, "Conosciamo noi Fidia?," *Dedalo*, VII, 1926-1927, pp. 273ff.

<sup>15</sup> Perhaps reproduced in a wall-painting found at Eleusis. Cf. Philios, 'Εφ. 'Αρχ., 1888, pl. V; Collignon, *Histoire de la sculpture grecque*, I, pp. 528f., fig. 269.

Nationale (Pl. 54). Zeus there appears, as he does on the Hadrianic coins, sitting on his throne holding a Nike and a scepter, and with a mantle draped round his legs and back but leaving the front of his torso bare. So far it presents nothing new. But what gives this gem a special importance is the fact that Zeus is shown sitting in his temple, indicated by two columns and a gabled roof, and that the large size of the statue is indicated by making the head reach way up to the ridge of the roof. This unusual feature immediately brings to mind Strabo's comment regarding the Pheidian statue: "It was so large that, although the temple was very large, the artist is thought to have missed the proper symmetry, for he showed Zeus seated but almost touching the roof with his head, thus making the impression that if Zeus arose and stood erect he would unroof the temple," *τηλικούτον τὸ μέγεθος, ὡς καίπερ μεγίστου ὄντος τοῦ νεώ, δοκεῖν ἀστοχήσασαι τῆς συμμετρίας τὸν τεχνίτην, καθήμενον ποιήσαντα, ἀπτόμενον δὲ σχεδόν τι τῆ κορυφῇ τῆς ὀροφῆς, ὥστ' ἔμφασιν ποιεῖν, ἐὰν ὀρθὸς γένηται διαναστάς, ἀποστεγάσειν τὸν νεών* (VIII, 3, 30, ed. H. L. Jones).

In the numerous representations on coins and gems of statues in their temples—e.g., of Asklepios at Epidauros, of Hygieia at Epidauros, of Hermes at Patras, of Artemis at Tanagra, and of Apollo at Delphi—the statue is always shown in its appropriate size, sometimes reaching up to the lower beam of the pediment but never beyond.<sup>16</sup> The same applies to such representations on engraved gems, e.g. Plate 53, i, showing Dionysos standing in his temple, on a red jasper Roman ringstone in Athens.<sup>17</sup> There must have been a special reason for the exceptional stress on the large size of the statue on the Paris gem, and this reason obviously was the colossal size of the Zeus at Olympia.<sup>18</sup>

Also in some other respects the representation on the Paris gem closely corresponds with Pausanias' description of the Pheidian statue. The finial of the scepter is in the shape of an eagle, a feature which rarely appears on other coins or gems. The Nike holds a taenia and wears a stephane. Zeus's wreath has come out rather thick, for it consists of a fillet, wound spirally, but at the top there seem perhaps to be indicated Pausanias' olive shoots in the shape of pointed leaves (difficult to make out).

There are, it is true, also discrepancies. On the gem there is no footstool and no base, evidently because the curving surface of the stone did not provide the necessary space. Naturally also, as on the other gems and the coins, the elaborate decorations on the throne and himation had to be omitted by the gem-engraver, who had to

<sup>16</sup> Cf. Imhoof-Blumer and P. Gardner, *op. cit.*, pl. L, no. V; pl. L, no. VI; pl. R, no. IV; pl. X, no. III; pl. X, nos. XXIV, XXV.

<sup>17</sup> Inv. 895. 13 by 15 mm. Svoronos, *Journal International d'Archéologie Numismatique*, XV, 1910, no. 130.

<sup>18</sup> On the colossal size of the Zeus see also Pausanias, V, 11, 9: "I know that the height and breadth of the Olympic Zeus have been measured and recorded . . . but even the records fall far short of the impression made of the size of the statue." Cf. also Dinsmoor, *The Architecture of Ancient Greece*, p. 153: "The temple had not been planned for so colossal a statue."

reduce a statue, computed to have been seven times life size, to the height of two centimeters. Furthermore, the columns of the temple are provided with bases, whereas in the Doric temple of Zeus at Olympia there were of course no bases on the columns. But this applies also to other representations of Doric temples on Roman coins and gems, for instance of the temple at Delphi.<sup>19</sup> In the Roman period it was so usual to add bases to columns that the artists provided them even when they were not present in the originals. One cannot imagine the gem-engraver going to Olympia to make a sketch of the temple of Zeus. He will have made his representation with the help of current descriptions, without autopsy.

It is noteworthy that on the Paris gem, which apparently is a specially faithful reproduction of the Olympian statue, an eagle appears at the foot of the throne. No eagle is shown on the Florence coin, nor on the other coins associated with the statue. But on the gems the eagle is regularly present. As a constant companion of Zeus he is of course an appropriate addition, and one may ask "Was he included by Pheidias in his statue?"

Interesting additions are furthermore the three stars and the segment of the moon right and left of the columns. They were also appropriate attributes of the god of the sky and of the universe. Perhaps they were added to the gem to recall the figures of the Sun and the Moon which, according to Pausanias, formed part of the decorations on the pedestal supporting the statue.

All in all, therefore, the new evidence supplied by the Paris gem gives the welcome confirmation that the representations on the coins of Elis and on some gems—which most of us have associated with Pheidias' statue—really represent it, though naturally in an abbreviated form.

In conclusion I want to mention one more feature on these representations of the statue of Zeus, which seems to me to have considerable importance, but which perhaps has not been sufficiently stressed. Zeus holds the Nike, which must have been of considerable size, on his outstretched right hand. No support is indicated. As in the Athena Parthenos, the Nike of Zeus was made of gold and ivory. Does this not affect the old question of whether the Nike on the outstretched hand of the Athena Parthenos had a support in the original by Pheidias?<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> Cf. Imhoof-Blumer and P. Gardner, *op. cit.*, pl. X, nos. XXIV, XXV.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. my article "Was there a vertical support under the Nike in the Athena Parthenos?" in *Scritti in onore de Aristide Calderini e Roberto Paribeni*, III, 1956, pp. 147 ff., and the references there cited, to which may now be added G. P. Stevens, *Hesperia*, XXX, 1961, pp. 2ff., and Schuchhardt, "Die Athena Parthenos," *Antike Plastik*, Lieferung II, 1963, pp. 31ff.

N.B. The photographs for Plates 53, c-f, i and 54, a, were made from the impressions of the gems, enlarged, by J. Felbermeyer; those for Plate 53, g, h, and Plate 54, b, were made respectively by Oscar Savio in Rome and by the photographers of the Metropolitan Museum of Art and of the Bibliothèque Nationale.



a. Coin of Arcadia.  
London, British  
Museum.



b. Coin of Arcadia.  
London, British  
Museum.



c. Gem. Vatican, Bib-  
lioteca Apostolica.



d. Gem. Athens, National  
Museum.



e. Gem. Vatican, Bib-  
lioteca Apostolica.



f. Gem. Vatican, Bibli-  
oteca Apostolica.



g. Gem. Rome,  
Museo Nazionale  
della Terme.



h. Gem. New York,  
Metropolitan  
Museum of Art.



i. Gem. Athens, National  
Museum.



a. and b. Ringstone with Engraved Carnelian. Paris, Bibliothèque Nationale, Cabinet des Médailles, No. 1421a.