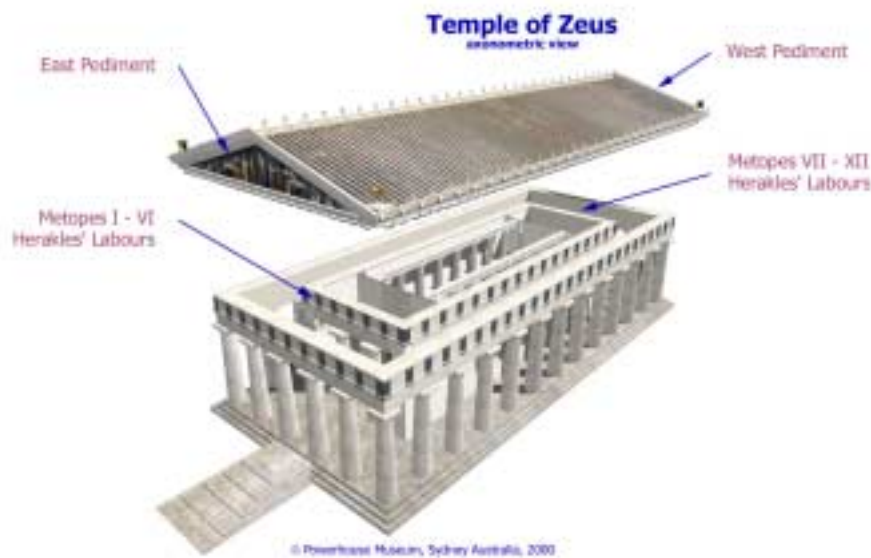




The Pediments of the Temple of Zeus at Olympia



The sculptures on the pediments of the Temple of Zeus at Olympia were carved in Parian marble sometime between 470 and 460 BC. They are some of the most important examples of ancient Greek art to have survived for us today. This essay will describe the actual statues and the myths represented on each pediment, as well as the importance of the sculptural groups in the history of Greek art.

In 374 BC a massive earthquake shook the Temple of Zeus. The pedimental sculptures appear to have fallen down and were damaged. Repairs included replacing three of the old women figures on the west pediment with new statues made of Pentelic marble. It may have been the same incident that prompted the addition of armour to the Pelops figure on the east pediment, to cover the damage marks. The sculptures were put back into the pediments after the building was repaired. Please see the essay on the Temple of Zeus on this website for full details and references for the building's history.



The myths and scenes

The myths depicted on the pediments of the great Temple of Zeus at Olympia are typical of Greek myths generally: the stories are sometimes violent and cruel, involve sexual transgressions and often seem unfair. The moral structure of Greek myths, often hard to detect, is based on the enormous power of the gods. While enormous benefits might flow from their favours, when the moral boundaries are crossed, even by heroes, the consequences are terrible. The Greeks also attempted to explain the vagaries of ordinary life through their myths, extending to their gods some very human flaws, which naturally became amplified on Mt. Olympos.

West Pediment: The Battle of Lapiths and Centaurs

This pediment shows a battle at a wedding. Perithoos, King of the Lapiths in northern Greece, had invited his neighbours, the centaurs, to his wedding. Centaurs were half men-half horse creatures and were notorious for behaving badly when affected by alcohol. In some myths, even the fumes from a wine jar were sufficient to cause them to run amok. The centaurs, wild with drink, had begun to attack the bride, Deidameia, and other guests, intending to rape them. The groom, Perithoos and his great friend Theseus, the hero-king of Athens, led the attack on the centaurs and threw them out.



*Detail of part of the west pediment sculptures: a
Lapith girl fighting a centaur
Statue © Hellenic Ministry of Culture*



Reconstruction drawing of the west pediment sculpture; drawing David Loong © Powerhouse Museum

The tall central figure is Apollo, son of Zeus. As the god of music, light and youth Apollo represented all the virtues of civilisation. He was also closely associated with oracles, the method by which the gods' wishes were most directly made known. Apollo was the god worshipped at the next most important Panhellenic Festival, at Delphi. In all these capacities, he, after Zeus, was the most appropriate god to supervise over a battle between the Lapith Greeks and the savage centaurs on a temple at Olympia. On Apollo's right, under his outstretched arm, is the groom Perithoos, sword overhead, about to smite the centaur grappling with Deidameia. On the other side of Apollo is Theseus with his axe. The long centaur-horse bodies at the side of the heroes punctuate the fighting groups, which are arranged then, on each side, into a pair (centaur and Lapith boy) and a trio (centaur, Lapith woman and Lapith man), watched in horror by two reclining elderly female servants.

Battles like this one symbolised the triumph of Greek civilisation over barbarism, and appeared on every temple built in mainland Greece in the 5th C BC, inspired by the Greek defeat of the Persians at Marathon in 490 BC.

East Pediment: The chariot race between Pelops and Oinomaos

This pediment is above the entrance way to the Temple of Zeus. The apparently quiet scene shows the moment before a crucial chariot race between Pelops and Oinomaos, king of Pisa, overseen by the great god Zeus. Pelops was racing for the hand of Hippodameia, daughter of the king, and had bribed his opponent's charioteer to sabotage the king's chariot, for if Pelops lost the race, he would also lose his life. Oinomaos had received a prophecy that he would be killed by his daughter's husband, which is why, after defeating her suitors in a chariot race, he had them executed. Pelops and Hippodameia, who were in love, had bribed Myrtilos to replace the axle of the king's chariot with one made of wax. In the course of the race, the axle melted and Oinomaos was thrown to his death in the crash.

After the king died, Pelops and Hippodameia refused to pay the bribe, which was either money or the favours of Hippodameia for a night. To get rid of Myrtilos in order to hide their double dishonesty, Pelops threw the charioteer off a cliff into the sea. Before he died, Myrtilos cursed the House of Pelops.



*Detail of Pelops and Hippodameia in their chariot
Bell krater in Naples, from Furtwängler & Reichhold, plate 146*

Pelops, new king of Elis, and Hippodameia had three daughters and three sons. The girls married into the dynasty of Mycenae, Archippe becoming the mother of Eurystheus and Astydameia and Anaxo the grandmothers of Herakles. The curse first affected the two eldest sons of Pelops, Atreus and Thyestes. After Eurystheus died, Atreus, as his cousin, became king of Mycenae, although his younger brother Thyestes also claimed the throne. In revenge, Thyestes began an affair with Atreus' wife Aerope. When Atreus discovered the liaison, he killed Thyestes' five sons. Chopping off their heads, hands and feet, he boiled up the rest and served it to Thyestes at a feast. After the meal had been consumed, Atreus displayed the pieces of the boys to show what he had done. Tormented, Thyestes sought guidance from the oracle at Delphi, who told him to lie with his own daughter Pelopia. She gave birth to a son, Aegisthus, who in due course would take revenge for his brothers.

Atreus had two sons, Agamemnon and Menelaos. Menelaos had won the affections of the most beautiful woman in the world, Helen, daughter of Leda. To avoid bloodshed at her wedding, all her suitors had made a pact that regardless of whom she chose as husband, they would all come to her aid if she needed it. Helen's sister Clytemnestra married Agamemnon, who had become king of Mycenae and the greatest Greek warrior of his time.

Meanwhile, Paris, Prince of the city of Troy, had been confronted by three goddesses, demanding that he choose who was the most beautiful of them. They each tried to bribe him, Athena offering intelligence, beauty and victory in contests, Hera offering all of Asia, and Aphrodite offered Helen's heart. Paris gave Aphrodite the crown and she arranged matters so that Helen fell in love with Paris and ran away with him to Troy. Menelaos called on all her champions to come to his aid to recover her from the enemy, and so began the Trojan War, with the Greek forces under the command of Agamemnon. However, the Greek fleet was unable to sail, as Aphrodite caused the winds to blow against them. Finally, in desperation, Agamemnon believed he had no choice but to sacrifice his own daughter Iphigenia to the goddess to gain favourable winds. Inadvertently continuing the curse of Myrtilos the charioteer,

and against Clytemnestra's protests, Agamemnon went ahead with the sacrifice, the fleet sailed, and ten years of war began.

While Agamemnon was away at Troy, Clytemnestra ruled Mycenae through her lover Aegisthus. He had before this killed his uncle Atreus for revenge and installed his father/grandfather Thyestes on the throne of Mycenae, although he seemed to be unable to stop Agamemnon later deposing Thyestes. Clytemnestra faced the implacable opposition of two of her remaining children, Orestes and Elektra. Matters reached a climax when the victorious Greeks returned from Troy. Consumed by hatred over the death of Iphigenia, faced with the imminent loss of her power once the king returned and the exposure of her own adultery, Clytemnestra conspired with Aegisthus to murder Agamemnon on his first day home.

To avenge his father's death, Orestes killed his mother and her lover Aegisthus. Himself now guilty of a blood crime, Orestes fled Mycenae. The Furies, who took no account of vengeance, turned Orestes mad as punishment. Eventually he arrived at Delphi, where he was purified of his blood-crime, bringing to an end the dreadful cycle of the curse of the charioteer Myrtilos.



Reconstruction drawing of the east pediment sculpture; drawing David Loong © Powerhouse Museum

The central figure here is Zeus, holding his symbol of a thunderbolt. In this reconstruction, which follows the arrangement in the Olympia Museum, Oinomaos stands on Zeus' right (the viewer's left). Pelops, in armour, stands on Zeus' left. While both face towards the god, Zeus should be invisible to them. The woman who stands behind Oinomaos is his wife, Sterope, and the woman behind Pelops must then be Hippodameia. Two servants crouch at the women's feet, in front of the four-horse chariot teams. The long bodies of the horses divide the dominant participants in the story from the subsidiary servants and other figures. On the north side of the pediment (the viewer's right) is an old man, a prophet. His worried expression, emphasised by the hand to the face, is the cue to the viewer to consider the outcome and consequences of the chariot race. Lying in the corner of the pediment behind the prophet is a personification of the river Kladeos, which flows to the west of Olympia. Lying in the other corner is an older figure, personifying the river Alpheios, the sacred river that flows south of Olympia.



The sculptures in Greek art

Monumental sculptures of stone had first been made around 660 BC in Greece, and had been used for many years to decorate temples. Sculptors had been experimenting with scale, techniques of carving and choices of motif throughout this “Archaic Period”. The depiction of emotion remained unusual, so that both free standing statues, and relief carvings showed people and gods with serene expressions, regardless of the struggles in which they were engaged. Indeed, the stories chosen for temples were usually scenes of great activity. To modern eyes, the carving of bodies in the “Archaic Period”, either naked or clothed, seems very stiff and unnaturalistic. After the defeat of the Persian army in 480 BC, there was a change in many aspects of Greek art, literature and, indeed, society. So great was this change that modern scholars use this date as the start of what is called the “Classical Period” of ancient Greece.

It is against this background that the magnificent sculptural decoration of the Temple of Zeus stands out as startlingly different. The figures are carved in what is often referred to as the “Severe Style”. This modern term is used to indicate that although bodies and faces in Greek art in those early years of the “Classical Period” are in a more naturalistic manner, drapery is still very heavy, and gestures and emotions are restrained. However, on the west pediment, where the grimaces of pain on the centaurs’ faces contrasts with the calm expression on the Lapiths, it can be seen that the sculptors have perhaps chosen not to show emotion, rather than being incapable of depicting it. The modern viewer needs to know that ancient Greek heroes, such as the Lapiths in this battle, were thought of as achieving their success without effort, feeling no pain, and rarely suffering grief. Therefore, even in a pitched battle against the forces of barbarism, which is what the centaurs really represent, the Lapiths remain calm and truly heroic.



*Head of Apollo, west pediment,
Temple of Zeus, Olympia
statue © Hellenic Ministry of Culture*

It is the east pediment, which crowned the entrance to the temple, and which contains the figure of Zeus himself, which is the most radical of the two sculptural groups. On this pediment, we do not have a scene of action, neither the chariot race nor the death of Oinomaos. Instead, the moment before the action is depicted, the moment when both Oinomaos and Pelops contemplate their fates, and unknown to them, the complex story of the descendents of Pelops begins. Zeus stands, invisible to the participants in the chariot race, but apparent in his majesty to the viewer. Because the viewer is expected to know the terrible consequences of the contest, the group is charged with tension. What we have here is an attempt to capture emotion within the whole scene, not just mechanically on faces or with individual poses.

The exploration of the physical expression of abstract thought is the core of the greatness of Classical Greek art, and it is here on the Temple of Zeus at Olympia that we see the beginnings.



The spelling of names in this essay has not been consistent. While generally in this website and exhibition words and names have been spelt in Greek, some names are far more familiar in their English or Latin versions. The notable exception is Herakles. Although probably better known by the Latin Hercules, it was felt only fair to restore to him his Greek name.

There are also many variants of myths, either in their entirety or in parts. There are different versions of the stories in the essay in other sources.

Discussion of another possible arrangement of the east pediment can be found in the project documentation, elsewhere on this website.

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To know more about the myths on the Temple of Zeus, the interested reader is directed to two of the greatest pieces of literature ever written:

- Homer *The Iliad*, translated Martin Hammond, Penguin Classics 1987 (The epic poem was composed around 800 BC, and first written down about 750 BC)
- Aeschylus/Aischylos *The Oresteia*, translated Michael Ewans, J. M. Dent, 1995 (Three plays telling the story of Agamemnon, Clytemnestra, Elektra and Orestes)

Many other excellent editions of these works exist, and it is valuable to compare translations

Images

- Palmette Terracotta akroterion from the workshop of Pheidias at Olympia, made around 430 BC, from *Olympia II: Die Baudenkmäler von Olympia*, R. Adler, R. Borrmann, W. Dörpfeld, F. Graeber & P. Graef, 1892/1966, Verlag Adolf M. Hakkert (1966 reprint), Amsterdam, Plate CCXXII no. 3 used with permission from Verlag Adolf M. Hakkert

Axonometric view of the Temple of Zeus in Olympia
model created by University of Melbourne © Powerhouse
Museum, 2000

Detail from the west pediment of the Temple of Zeus
photograph Peter Murphy © Powerhouse Museum, 2000
original sculptures © Hellenic Ministry of Culture

Reconstruction drawing of the west pediment, commissioned for this website.
drawing David Loong © Powerhouse Museum, 2000
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Pelops and Hippodameia in their chariot
Bell krater in Naples (now Naples 2200, Attic red figure, late
Classical, name vase of the Oinomaos Painter)
detail from drawing in *Griechische Vasenmalerei III*,
A. Furtwängler, K. Reichhold & F. Hauser, F. Bruckmann
A. G., Munich 1910/1932; plate 146

Reconstruction drawing of the east pediment, commissioned for this website.
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Head of Apollo, west pediment, Temple of Zeus, Olympia
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