



What Pausanias saw when he looked up at the pediments of the temple of Zeus in Olympia

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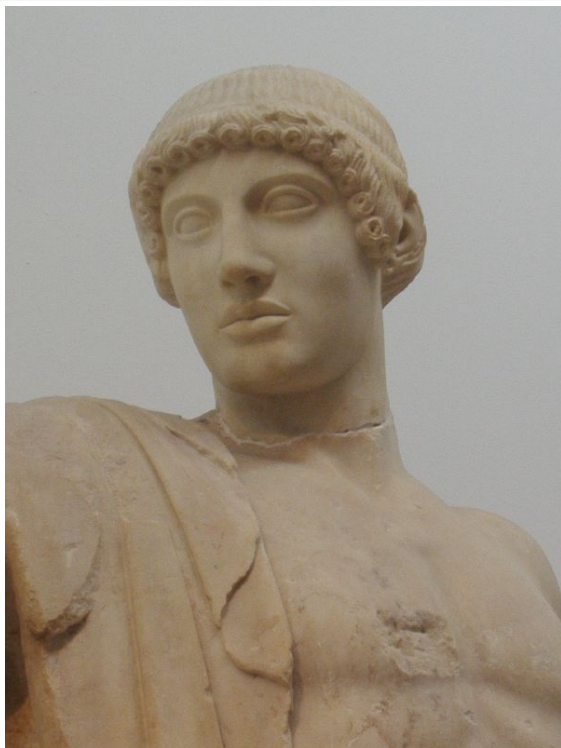
What Pausanias saw when he looked up at the pediments of the temple of Zeus in Olympia

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2019.03.22, rewritten 2019.04.17 | [By Gregory Nagy](#)

§0. I have by now lost count of how many times in my life I have visited the Museum at Olympia. And I cannot keep track of knowing what different things I remembered to view, or forgot to view, each time I was there. But there is one thing I know for sure as I look back on it all: each and every time I have visited that museum, I have never missed the chance of viewing the surviving fragments of the spectacular sculptures that had once upon a time adorned the east and the west pediments of the temple. In the second century of our era, the traveler Pausanias had viewed those same sculptures—and he saw them in all their unfragmented glory as he looked up at them from down below at ground zero. There they were, looming over him from on high, framed within the east and the west pediments of the lofty temple. I highlight here one of the many details he saw as he looked up to view those marvels of classical sculpture. It is the head of a male figure sculpted into the center of the west pediment.



Head of "Apollo" from Olympia, west pediment of the temple of Zeus. [Image](#) via Flickr, under a [CC BY-NC 2.0](#) license.

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The figure of "Apollo" from the west pediment of the Temple of Zeus in Olympia. Modern plaster cast of the original in the Olympia Museum. [Image](#) via Wikimedia Commons.

§1. This sculpted male figure, in its entirety, is exceptionally well preserved. Nowadays, the general opinion of archaeologists and other classicists is that we see here a representation of the god Apollo. In this essay, I contrast this opinion with what Pausanias himself said that he saw.

§2. Pausanias wrote down the names of the main figures of myth that he saw sculpted, in their unfragmented reality, into the east and the west pediments of the temple of Zeus in Olympia. And, according to our traveler, the male figure sculpted into the center of the west pediment is to be identified as Peirithoös, a hero who is conventionally paired with the hero Theseus in Greek myths. In my essay here, my aim is not to verify the identification made by Pausanias. He may well be wrong. Rather, my aim is simply to defend in general the knowledgeability of Pausanias in his interpretations of the myths represented on the pediments of the temple.

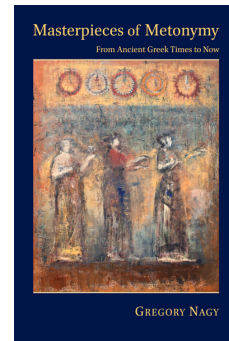
§3. I begin with my own retranslation of the relevant Greek text where Pausanias describes what is represented in the sculptures of both the east and the west pediments:

{5.10.6} As for the pediments: in the front [= east] pediment there is the yet-to-happen chariot race between Pelops and Oinomaos, and preparation for the running [of the race] is being made by both. A sculpture [agalma] of Zeus has been made [pe-poiēmenon] at the middle of the pediment; on the right of Zeus is Oinomaos with a helmet on his head, and, next to him, is Sterope his wife, who was one of the daughters of Atlas. Myrtilos is there also, the charioteer of Oinomaos, and he is sitting in front of the horses, which are four in number. Behind him are two men. They have no names, but they too must be under orders from Oinomaos to attend to the horses.

{5.10.7} At the very edge is situated Kladeos, the river which, in other ways also, gets the most honors [timai]—after the Alpheios—from the people of Elis. On the left of Zeus are Pelops, then Hippodameia, then the charioteer [hēniokhos] of Pelops, then the horses, and then two men, who are apparently grooms of Pelops. Then the pediment narrows again, and in this part of it is made [pe-poiētai] the Alpheios. The name of the man who was-the-chariot-driver [hēniokhein] for Pelops is, according to the narrative [logos] of the people of Troizen, Sphairos, but the guide [ex-hēgētēs] at Olympia was saying that he was Killas.

{5.10.8} The sculptures in the front [= east] pediment are by Paionios, who came from Mende in Thrace; those in the back [= west] pediment are by Alkamenes, a contemporary of Pheidias, ranking next after him for skill [sophiā] in the making [poiēsis] of statues [agalmata]. What he [= Alkamenes] had on the pediment is the fight [makhē] between the Lapithai and the Centaurs at the wedding of Peirithoös. In the center of the pediment is Peirithoös. Next to him on one side is Eurytion [the Centaur], who has seized [harpazein] the wife of Peirithoös, and then there is Kaineus [= one of the Lapithai], who is coming up to help Peirithoös, and, on the other side is Theseus defending himself against the Centaurs with an axe [pelekus]. One Centaur has just seized [harpazein] a girl [parthenos], another a boy [pais] in-the-prime-of-youth [hōraios]. Alkamenes, I think, made [poiēin] these things this way because he had learned from the verses [epē] of Homer that Peirithoös was a son of Zeus, and because he knew that Theseus was the fourth [inclusive] generation removed from Pelops.

§4. We see at the end of the paragraph at 5.10.7 here just how careful Pausanias tries to be when he speaks about a relatively peripheral figure such as the chariot-driver of Pelops, who is X according to some



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sources known to our traveler while he is Y according to another source, described as the local 'guide' or *ex-hēgētēs*.

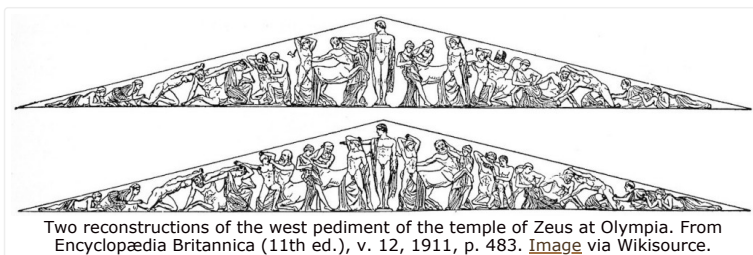
§5. I think we can expect Pausanias to take even greater care when he identifies some of the central characters in the myth that he sees being narrated in the sculptures adorning the two pediments. For example, I think that Pausanias speaks with certainty when he says at 5.10.6 that the bearded hero to the right of Zeus, who is at the center of the east pediment, must be Oinomaos, and that the beardless figure to the god's left must be Pelops. And it seems clear to me that Pausanias, in speaking of these figures to the right and to the left of Zeus, is referring to the perspective of the figures themselves, not of the viewers. Thus I disagree with James Frazer (1898 III 508) when he says that Pausanias spoke of right and left here from the perspective of the viewer, not of the statue of Zeus that is facing the viewer. In fact, Pausanias consistently speaks of right and left from the perspective of whatever statue he is observing (Fowler 1898:365).

§6. In this connection, I cite a most helpful article by Judith Barringer (2005) about the statues that adorn the temple of Zeus; as we can see from her analysis (pp. 219–220), there is confusion today about which one of the two heroes Oinomaos and Pelops stands to the right and to the left of Zeus. Such confusion, I think, comes not from Pausanias but from the many different views expressed by archaeologists and other classicists in their attempts to reconstruct the fragments of the sculptures in correlation with how they read or misread Pausanias. At the time when Barringer published her article (2005), she counted over 70 different reconstructions published over the previous century.

§7. Things get even more confused when we move from the east to the west pediment as described by Pausanias in 5.10.8, even though our traveler is quite clear, I think, about an important point that he is making. In this case, he identifies the hero Peirithoös as the central character who figures in the sculptural ensemble of the west pediment. What Pausanias sees being narrated here is a myth about a primordial Fight between heroes known as the Lapithai on one side and, on the other side, bestial half-humans called Centaurs. These Beasts, according to the version of the myth as known to Pausanias, disrupted a feast held in celebration of the wedding of Peirithoös, king of the Lapithai. Invited to the feast, the Centaurs got drunk and then tried to rape the women and the boys attending the feast. So, where is the confusion here? Despite the clarity of Pausanias in identifying the central figure of this myth as Peirithoös himself, most archaeologists and other classicists are ready to dismiss the testimony of our traveler and proceed to identify the central figure as the god Apollo—even though we can find no direct textual evidence that would indicate the involvement of Apollo in any known version of the myth.

§8. By contrast, there is ample textual evidence for a foregrounding of the hero Peirithoös, king of the Lapithai, as a central figure in a myth about a Fight between the Lapithai and the Centaurs on the occasion of a feast that celebrated the wedding of this hero. A most telling Homeric passage that refers to this myth is *Iliad* 1.262–268. As we see there at line 263, Peirithoös is the very first of five Lapithai that are highlighted by name as heroes who fought the Centaurs; then, at line 265, there is mention of a sixth hero who took part in the Fight against the Beasts: he is Theseus of Athens, who is not one of the Lapithai but is in any case the closest of friends to Peirithoös. Another relevant Homeric passage is *Odyssey* 21.295–304, with details about Peirithoös as king of the Lapithai and about a leader of the Centaurs by the name of Eurytion. Still another relevant Homeric passage is *Iliad* 2.738–746, where it is said at line 741 that Zeus was the father of the hero Peirithoös, and that this hero married a heroine named Hippodameia and fathered the hero Polypoites, whose great accomplishment was to drive the Centaurs out of their native habitat of Mount Pelion; thus Polypoites ultimately avenged the outrage committed by the Beasts at the wedding of his father and mother. At line 247 of this Homeric passage in *Iliad* 2, we also learn that the name of the heroine whom Peirithoös married and who gave birth to Polypoites was Hippodameia—which is also the name of the heroine of an earlier time, (inclusively) four generations earlier, who had been wooed and ultimately married by Pelops in the myth as retold in the east pediment.

§9. For a stark illustration of the inconsistencies that impede the many different published attempts to piece together the surviving fragments of the statues once built into the west pediment, I compare here two of the main variations that we see in attempted reconstructions:



§10. That said, I must add that Pausanias may still be wrong, and that the central figure of the west pediment may well be Apollo. (For bibliography on arguments both for and against the interpretation given by Pausanias, I cite Barringer 2005:216n10.) But my point is that Pausanias, on the basis of what he knew about a version of the myth centering on a fight between Centaurs and humans, shows a valuable understanding of what is being represented in the myth—an understanding that is more valuable than many of the interpretations offered by experts today. A notable exception, in my opinion, to what I just said about most of today's current interpretations of the west pediment is the work of Hilda Westervelt

(2009), who analyzes various early versions of myths about Centaurs that Pausanias had no way of knowing in his own era, some 600 years after the sculpting of the west pediment. In a posting for 2019.04.19, I will offer some comments supporting the interpretation of Westervelt.

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Coda:

This essay is dedicated to fellow travelers who visited with me the site and the museum of Olympia on March 19, 2019: Danial Adkison and Christopher Broshears; Hudson Aton together with Lynne and John Neefe; William Betson; Annabel Betz; Adriano Borsa; Charis Garman; John Glazer and Jai Glazer; Emma Hansen; Janusz Juda and Patrice Dabrowski; Anastasios Karameros; Evangelos Katsarelis; Huntington Lambert and Kelly Lambert; Chenai Mangachena; Amey Moot; Anne O'Neil and Mariko O'Neil together with Midoriko Nakajima and Martin O'Neil; Olga Psychoyos; Janet Roen; Maria Romero; Carol Rumens; Hyeon-Jae Seo; Bradford Stephens and Anne Stephens; William Theodore and Judith Fradkin; Laan Yeung; Mary Yntema.

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