

## THE DATE OF PHIDIAS' ZEUS

One of the most interesting questions from Phidias' career is undoubtedly that of dating the creation of the big statue in gold and ivory of Zeus, made for the temple of Zeus in Olympia.<sup>1</sup> As the other chryselephantine giant of Phidias, Athena Parthenos, was finished in 438 B.C.<sup>2</sup>, the question arises whether Zeus was executed before or after this date.

This question has already been the subject of long discussion which arose because of ambiguous statements about Phidias' life and controversial sources dealing with his death.<sup>3</sup> Besides, authentic copies of Zeus do not exist except on the Elean coins.<sup>4</sup> Zeus is represented in a common sitting pose, with a sceptre in the left hand and a small statue of Nike in the right. Details are not visible and it is hard to determine with the help of these coins an accurate date for the statue.

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<sup>1</sup> Of the many ancient writers who mention Phidias' Zeus, Pausanias alone (V, 11) described it in detail. See also Strabo, VIII 353—4; Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* XXXIV 54, XXXVI 18; Dio Chrysostom, *Or.* XII, 10, 9 and others.

<sup>2</sup> There are opinions that Athena Parthenos was finished much later, at the same time as the last works on the Parthenon. This statement was defended particularly because of bills for the gold and ivory for the Parthenon from the years 434/3 (Recently Schweitzer, *JdI* 55, 1940, p. 179). However the import of ivory does not prove Phidias' presence in Athens in these years and it may have been used for other purposes. The mention of Phidias in *Protagoras*, 3, and the dating of this work of Plato in years 433—431 B.C. again is not a definitive proof. The events in the story take place about 431 B.C. but Plato wrote it much later and probably took the names of Phidias and Polycleitos only as the examples of good sculptors. It is possible that he, who invented an Atlantis, did not pay much attention to the exact years when Phidias was in Athens. There are also other anachronisms in *Protagoras* (*Oeuvres de Platon, Traduction nouvelle avec des notices et des notes par E. Chambry, Classiques Garnier, Paris 1939*, p. 97—8).

<sup>3</sup> Plutarch, *Pericles* 31; Scholiast on Aristophan, *Peace* 605; J. Nicole, *Le procès de Phidias dans les Chroniques d'Apollodore*, Genève 1910. For résumé of these sources, see G. Richter, *The sculpture and sculptors of the Greeks*, New Haven 1930, 221—4.

<sup>4</sup> About the Elean coin issues in the time of Hadrian, where are represented the figure and especially the head of Phidias' Zeus, J. Liegle, *Der Zeus des Phidias*, Berlin 1952, pp. 17 ff. On the possible but not probable copies of Zeus' head Ch. Picard, *Manuel d'archéologie grecque* II, 1, Paris 1939, pp. 362—368, with the literature.

In recent times due to new research, especially by German scholars, the opinion has been brought forward that Phidias worked on Zeus after Athena and finished it somewhere between 436 and 425 B.C.<sup>5</sup> For the moment one can regard this theory as the more correct, and it is also the most probable when one looks at other aspects of this problem.

Phidias' earliest work was probably a group in Delphi glorifying the victory of Marathon in which he represented Miltiades, Athena, Apollo and ten heroes of Athens. This work can be roughly dated between 465 and 460 B.C.<sup>6</sup> If Zeus was created before Athena Parthenos and the Parthenon it could have been only in the years 455—450 B.C.,<sup>7</sup> and it is difficult to imagine that Phidias got a commission to make the monumental chryselephantine statue of Zeus immediately after his work in Delphi and two other Athenas dated soon after this group.<sup>8</sup> Especially at a time when Elis was an enemy of Athens and Phidias as an almost unknown sculptor would certainly not be warmly welcomed. On the other hand it is possible that Athena Promachos was made before 456 B.C.<sup>9</sup> and that Phidias would have had some experience in gigantic sculpture.

However when considering the possibility of these dates for the statue of Zeus it should be kept in mind that the statue of Zeus was probably planned at the same time as the temple in Olympia and should therefore be in keeping with the temple in all details. Yet there is a great disparity between the temple and the statue in the realisation of the monuments, in the luxury of materials and in the unity of style, a thing which the Greeks usually pursued in the whole and in details. The temple was built in limestone with limited use of marble and with very

<sup>5</sup> Schweitzer, p. 190; E. Langlotz, *Phidiasprobleme*, Frankfurt a/M 1947, p. 105; Liegle, p. 466 ff.; A. Mallwitz — W. Schiering, *Die Werkstatt des Phidias in Olympia*, DaI Bd. V, Berlin 1964, p. 272. Cf. B. Gavella, *Fidija*, Novi Sad 1962, p. 60 ff.

<sup>6</sup> Paus. X 10, 1. It is generally accepted to date this monument after the battle of Erymedon 468 B.C. where Cimon found the means to erect a monument to his father's glory (C. Robert, *Pausanias als Schriftsteller*, 306). On the other hand P. de la Coste Messelière (*Au Musée de Delphes*, Paris 1936, p. 447) proposes for the group in Delphi a date after the return of Cimon in Athens in 457 B.C. Indeed, this could explain better certain similarities between the frieze of Sypnian treasury in Delphi and the Parthenon frieze (Collignon M., *Le Parthénon*, Paris 1914, p. 188). In the case of the proximity of time between two friezes, it could happen that Phidias, staying in Delphi for some time, made already there some sketches for the future famous frieze on the temple of Athena Parthenos.

<sup>7</sup> Picard, p. 342 ff.

<sup>8</sup> Paus. VII 27, 2; IX 4, 1. These are only attributions to Phidias. See H. Lechat, *Phidias*, Paris 1924, p. 79.

<sup>9</sup> G. Richter, *Three critical periods in Greek sculpture*, Oxford 1951, p. 9.

few sculptures in comparison with the Parthenon, so the whole temple, in spite of its colossal size, makes a contrast to the Zeus in gold and ivory who threatens, as Strabo said, to overthrow the whole temple if he rises.<sup>10</sup>

On the other hand the master of Olympia, successful author of the metopes and pediments of the temple, was undoubtedly one of the most important sculptors in the first half of the V century B.C.<sup>11</sup> and it is logical to suppose that just this person would be invited to make the representation of the divinity himself. At that time, about 460 B.C., this master was much more esteemed and better known than Phidias who was only in the beginning of his career and had still much to learn. If one supposes that the few sculptures and the type of material used for the building of the temple indicate the saving of money for the statue of Zeus, then the Eleans had in mind a chryselephantine statue as early as 465 B.C. when nobody had heard of Phidias. It may be that the master of the pediments at Olympia disappeared before finishing the Zeus but if this was a case one can hardly believe that an unknown Phidias was appointed ad hoc to make this precious statue. If there had been a competition for the acroteria of the temple<sup>12</sup> which were to present decorative elements, it would also have included the most important object in the temple. However if Phidias had succeeded in such a competition the written sources would mention it, particularly as it was in the beginning of his career. If no competition took place, it means that only the best sculptor of that time could have been invited to complete this most famous work of the classical world and before the Parthenon sculptures Phidias was not this man.<sup>13</sup>

During this period, after 456 B.C., Phidias was probably in Athens dreaming of an Athena more perfect and more brilliant than his Athena Promachos.<sup>14</sup> It is also possible that at this time

<sup>10</sup> Strabo, VIII 353.

<sup>11</sup> J. Charbonneau, *La sculpture grecque archaïque*, Genève 1964, p. 108.

<sup>12</sup> In the course of the German excavations in Olympia, on 21st December 1875, was found a statue of victory attributed to the sculptor Paeonios by Pausanias (V, 26, 1). The triangular pedestal bears the inscription that „... Paeonios of Mende has executed (the statue) and won the prize for the acroteria of the temple". (J. G. Frazer *Pausanias's description of Greece*, III, London 1898, pp. 643 ff. with literature).

<sup>13</sup> One must remember the story of the Amazons made for the temple of Artemis in Ephesus where first place was won in competition by Polycleitos and not by Phidias (Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* XXXIV, 53). This competition is dated about 440 B.C. (J. Charbonneau, *La sculpture grecque classique*, Genève 1964, p. 146). If Zeus was already at this time in existence in Olympia, the author of the seventh wonder of the world would surely won this competition.

<sup>14</sup> Possibly Athena Promachos was smaller in height than Athena Parthenos. Picard (*Manuel* pp. 339, 374) proposes 9. 14 m. for Athena Promachos including the base and 12 m. for Athena Parthenos without base.

he began to discuss with Pericles the ideas for a new temple of Athena Parthenos. In the same time Pericles proposed the restoration of the Greek temples ruined by the Persians, thinking first of all of the burnt temples of the Athenian Acropolis.<sup>15</sup> When one thinks of the grandiose composition of this temple, its magnificence and importance for all Greeks, as well as of Pericles' idea to make Athens the political and cultural centre of the entire Hellenic world, it is very possible to imagine also



Fig. 1. Phidias (?). Head of Centaur, Parthenon (after Langlotz, Phidiasprobleme, Taf. 1)

in the heads of Pericles and Phidias, these two talented Athenians, the conception of a big and brilliant statue of Athena in gold and ivory. It was something which had not appeared before in the Greek world, something which would outshine all artistic works created up to this time, in artistic value, richness and

<sup>15</sup> Plutarch, *Pericles* 17. Also see M. Collignon, p. 41.

brilliance, something which all Hellens could regard as their guiding star, which alone could stand out with sufficient dignity to lead all Greek cities. Anyway it seems more logical that a big chryselephantine statue was invented in Athens than the supposition that it was the result of consultations among Elean citizens deliberating the decoration of their temple. Pericles also would hardly be reconciled to the thought that the Olympian god would be greater in size than the Athenian one. It would be easy to



Fig. 2. Phidias (?), Head of Centaur, Parthenon  
(after Langlotz, Phidiasprobleme, Taf. 1)

make Athena bigger if Zeus already existed,<sup>16</sup> but in fact Athena was smaller and so it is reasonable to suppose that it was made first.

The Eleans probably heard for the first time of large chryselephantine statues after Athena was made in Athens. The

<sup>16</sup> Athena corresponded perfectly to the temple in proportions and the height could easily be added to if necessary. Picard, 362 proposes 10 m. for Zeus. G. Lippold (*Die Griechische Plastik*, Munich 1950, pp. 143, 146) gives the same total height for both statues, about 12 m., but Zeus was sitting and its absolute height was really much bigger, at least for one third.

rumours about this magnificent statue, this miracle in sculpture, began to travel round the Hellenic world together with the name of Phidias, so it was only about 440 B.C. that they could speak with him of a new and gigantic divinity in gold and ivory for their main temple in Olympia.<sup>17</sup>

It is possible that Zeus was a response on the part of the Peloponnesians to the attempts of Athens to become through its art head of Greece.<sup>18</sup> They could not permit the existence of a chryselephantine giant only in Athens. It was necessary to create another famous sculpture which would balance the glory of Athenian art and power. For this they chose Phidias because in this moment Phidias could be surpassed only by Phidias himself. The Eleans began also to collect the money in the whole Greece for the new sculpture<sup>19</sup>, trying perhaps to prove that Zeus and Olympia had a larger meaning for the Greeks than Athens.

Phidias could have left the work on the Parthenon in 437/6 B.C. having finished the pediments, leaving only the south side of the frieze to be done. The monotony of the composition on the south side, as mentioned by Lippold, seems to indicate the possible absence of Phidias at that time.<sup>20</sup> In fact, if one wishes to copy or paint the remains of the Parthenon frieze in the British museum, it is easy to find interesting motifs among the horsemen riding left, from the northern side of the frieze. Different attitudes of horses, horsemen's bodies, heads en face, from back and profile and many different shapes of hats, all give a dynamic motion in each section. On the contrary it is difficult to find anything of interest on the south side. Horses are more alike in action, the horsemen follow similar movement patterns, they are all bare headed and, in spite of slight alterations in the position of heads, they have in the repetition of composition something in common with the older, more archaic reliefs.

At this time Phidias was weary of the many Athenas, made for different cities in Greece, which were becoming a monotonous leit motif in his opus and on the other hand he was tired of the incessant lowing of cows and of the noisy gallop of the famous

<sup>17</sup> Liegle, p. 467 mentioned 444 B.C. for the first rumours about the creation of Athena Parthenos. One can suppose that the Eleans proposed to Phidias to work on Zeus only after 440 B.C. Zeus was artistically more attractive for Phidias as a motif than Athena made already many times before. The Parthenon sculptures would not represent such a uniquely successful artistic complex if Phidias had in mind the statue of Zeus soon after 444 B.C. B. Schweitzer (*JdI* 53, 1938, p. 1; *JdI* 54, 1939, p. 1; *JdI* 55, 1940, p. 170) proved that Phidias made the drawings for all reliefs of the Parthenon and that the composition is purely his. On that question, also Charbonneau, pp. 88 ff.

<sup>18</sup> On its political background, Liegle, pp. 466—69.

<sup>19</sup> Richter, *Sculpture* . . ., p. 224.

<sup>20</sup> Lippold, p. 151.

Parthenon horses even though they were one of the most famous types of horse which appeared in art. He needed a rest from these motifs: he had become satiated as an artist, he wanted to create something new, more tranquil, more divine. Athena Promachos, made in earlier years, could have developed in him the wish to make another more perfect monumental statue of Athena, but with Athena Parthenos he had exhausted that type. Zeus was a new theme, completely new, something which he had never done before, an opportunity too attractive for him as an artist to be disregarded. Zeus may have been the result of the artist situation but it is possible that Phidias also encouraged the Eleans in their idea, having close to his heart the creation of the new monumental theme. His artistic thoughts were from now on completely occupied by this difficult and divine task. Only such an explanation seems possible for his departure from Athens before the work on the Parthenon was finished.<sup>21</sup>

One can see that Phidias could have begun to work on Zeus in Olympia in 437/6 B.C. but Malwitz and Schiering, in their account of the digging of Phidias' workshop, say that Phidias could not have begun to work on Zeus before 433/2 B.C. because the building of the workshop was not completed before then.<sup>22</sup> However, because of a small ridged jug with Phidias' name found in layer D of Annex I, they do not deny the possibility that Phidias, about 435 B.C. visited Olympia with the purpose, it is said, to finish the other sculptures for Elis.<sup>23</sup> It proves that Phidias was in Olympia before the workshop was completely built. He could easily have begun to work on Zeus before the workshop was finished, because the main room, having the proportions of the temple and finished in 433/2 B.C., was necessary only for the last impression of his creation.<sup>24</sup>

Many events concerning Phidias' life at this time are shrouded in mystery in the written sources; for example the theft of gold in Elis is confused with a similar event said to have occurred in Athens<sup>25</sup> and Phidias' death in prison by the same destiny as Socrates.<sup>26</sup> On the contrary, the story of Pantarces, the Olympic winner of the wrestling match for boys in 436 B.C.<sup>27</sup> does not

<sup>21</sup> Certainly, here one looks at the problem only from a purely artistic point of view and does not treat the subject of Phidias' court process and its historical truth. See also ref. 17.

<sup>22</sup> Mallwitz — Schiering, p. 272.

<sup>23</sup> The jug has the inscription ΦΕΙΔΙΟ : EIMI (Mallwitz-Schiering, p. 169, 1, fig. 45, T. 64). This type can be dated in 440—430 B.C. and belongs to the Attic or Elean products (Ibid. p. 140).

<sup>24</sup> On the proportions of the temple of Zeus, K. Lehmann-Hartleben, *JdI* 1923—24, pp. 37 ff.

<sup>25</sup> Frazer, III, p. 535.

<sup>26</sup> Lechat, p. 77.

<sup>27</sup> Paus. V 11, 3; VI 10, 5.

have the same uncertainty. This story appears several times in the sources, so one can consider it as a true detail in the life of a famous man. It is very possible that Phidias, during his sojourn in Olympia was attracted to this handsome youth who was then proclaimed winner in the wrestling competition. It is also probable that Phidias noticed the boy for the first time after the success which distinguished him for a while from the mass of other boys, this means after 436 B.C. and not before.<sup>28</sup> Pantarces



Fig. 3. I. Meštrović, Srdja Zlopogledja, Belgrade, National Museum  
(photo National Museum)

became the favourite of Phidias and this relationship must have lasted for some time because Phidias represented him at a later date on the base of the statue of Zeus.<sup>29</sup>

Clement of Alexandria says that Phidias wrote the name of Pantarces on the finger of Zeus and adds that it showed who Phidias esteemed more: god or boy.<sup>30</sup> It is possible, as Picard

<sup>28</sup> Lippold, p. 143, r. 1 has an earlier meeting between Phidias and Pantarces in mind, it seems, mentioning the existence of a scaffold around Zeus in 436 B.C.

<sup>29</sup> The base of the statue, where one of the seven youths on the front side has the traits of Pantarces (Paus. V, 11, 3), was probably made later so that the completion of work on Zeus could be dated in 432 B.C.

<sup>30</sup> Clem. Alex. *Protrept.* 53, 4.

thought<sup>31</sup>, that this inscription was invented by Clement. Chronologically it can be admitted and it is impossible to deny completely Picard's statement. On the other hand, if one considers that this inscription actually existed, as many scholars do<sup>32</sup>, the question arises when was this name carved in the ivory? It could only have been done in a moment when the ivory was within reach of Phidias' hand, so that he could easily write the name of his favourite, probably secretly at the place of work and not in the temple. It is not possible to agree with Liegle who thinks that



Fig. 4. I. Meštrović, Miloš Obilić, Belgrade, National Museum  
(photo National Museum)

<sup>31</sup> Picard, p. 348.

<sup>32</sup> Especially Liegle, pp. 288 ff.

the inscription symbolizes the divine nature of Pantarces' success and was carved by Phidias after the wishes of the Eleans.<sup>33</sup> The choice of a finger for the inscription was hardly by chance but it is exaggerated to see in this any connection with the figure of Nike in Zeus' hand. In this case the inscription would be well known and Pausanias would mention it in his description of Zeus.<sup>34</sup> It is more likely that this inscription, if it existed, was the result of Phidias' feeling and a proof of his love for the boy. The finger was chosen, probably, because it concealed the name of the earthly love from the eyes of curious admirers of the divinity.<sup>35</sup>

There are many other reasons which point to the later date for Zeus, but also there remain others which defend the earlier.<sup>36</sup> They do not all enter the frame of this article. Here are dealt with some general remarks and suppositions which seem most logical in solving the problem of this famous statue of Zeus in Olympia and dating its execution between 437 and 432 B.C.<sup>37</sup>

<sup>33</sup> Ibid., pp. 300—306.

<sup>34</sup> Pausanias (V, 11) gives the most detailed description of the image of Zeus and he would mention this inscription especially if it had a religious meaning. About the religion in Pausanias' work, Frazer, I, p. XXV.

<sup>35</sup> Possibly the inscription was discovered in the second century B.C., in time of reparations (Paus. IV, 31, 6).

<sup>36</sup> This small contribution to the question of the date of Zeus does not propose to speak of all opinions, pro and contra this problem, especially those concerning the controversies about the Phidias' death or to repeat all reasons and details which speak for the later date. Complete literature on that question: Frazer, III, pp. 535—6; Richter, *Sculpture*, pp. 218—225; Picard, pp. 346—356.

One of the main reasons for the earlier date of Zeus was the dating of Phidias in Ol. 83 (448 B.C.) by Pliny, *Nat. Hist.* XXXIV, 49. It has been suggested that he did so because Phidias' chef d'œuvre, Zeus in Olympia, was dedicated in this year. However Phidias could have been dated in 448 B.C. also because of „a bronze Athena of such surpassing beauty that the statue took its surname from its beauty” (Pliny, XXXIV, 54). There is general agreement that Pliny spoke here of Athena Lemnia dated with sufficient certainty between 451 and 447 B.C. As an „amateur de l'art” Pliny probably preferred Athena Lemnia, famous for its beauty (On the testimonies of the ancient writers, see Frazer, II, p. 354), to Zeus which was more than a simple artistic master piece.

<sup>37</sup> Mallwitz and Schiering try to prove that Zeus was made still later, between 432 and 425 B.C. So they agree with a number of other scholars defending the same date as Schweitzer, *JdI* 55, 1940, p. 190; Frickenhausen, *JdI*, 1913, p. 341; Lechat, p. 78; Richter, *Sculpture*... p. 225 and others but the earlier of two late dates (437—432 B.C.) seems more probable for many reasons indecisive but significant. The erection of Zeus in the Peloponessos seems to belong more to a period of „cold war” between Athens and Sparta and it was less lightly to be commissioned in the time of real war when money would be taken for the army and the collection of contributions could not proceed through the whole Greece. On Zeus as a symbol of peace, Gavela, p. 62.

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Besides there is another point. If one looks at metope one on the southern side of the Parthenon, still in situ, the finish of the Centaur's head differs from all other heads on the metopes and is believed to be Phidias' own work.<sup>38</sup> The force and the strange energy of expression in the presentation of the Centaur's face in this piece is not known elsewhere in Greek sculpture either contemporary or earlier. This head belongs to all periods of art, as Langlotz says, it is universal.<sup>39</sup> Yet though it represents something unusual and makes, grosso modo, a new and decisive step towards the monumental realism of a very mature Phidias in the Parthenon pediments, it hides still in a certain way an archaic echo in the understanding of the treatment.

By reason of such characteristics this head approaches another era in the history of art, when artists, tired and satiated with academic realism, were looking back to the archaic ideas in art, searching forgotten ways for inspiration. Here one thinks mainly of the European sculpture at the end of the XIX century and of the appearance of Ivan Meštrović as the most striking result of such searchings in two main artistic centres: Paris and Munich. The idea is not to compare these two sculptors, there is neither reason, nor real possibility to do this. The purpose is rather to point to the similarity of results achieved by both artists at one stage of their work. Ivan Meštrović, pupil of new European ideas in art, was developing himself in the only direction possible for him in this time, to express sufficiently his own creative force and capacities in sculpture: towards the monumental and archaic.

Phidias, on the other hand, reached a similar stage in his artistic development on the road to monumental realism, which in his work on the Parthenon represents the summit of the Greek sculpture. It indicates also that in the earlier phase of his artistic development he was only a sculptor of his time, keeping the inherited archaic traditions in sculpture, but he was to abandon them later acquiring a new quality. Perhaps there is something similar in the course of this development to the development of Velasquez, who in his early years, was strongly influenced by the Italian painters, especially Caravaggio, but in spite of this influence he was in these years quite a good artist. However keeping those results as definitive, without aiming farther he would remain only as unus inter multos. Phidias likewise did not stop halfway. He had in him sufficient talent and

<sup>38</sup> Charbonneaux, p. 103. Langlotz, p. 25 thinks that this head is selfportrait of Phidias mentioned by Plutarch, *Pericles*, 37.

<sup>39</sup> Langlotz, *idem*.

force to go to the very end of the artistic aims of this historical period, which Greek art at this time was trying to reach: monumental realism.

For these reasons Zeus of Olympia could belong only to the second phase of Phidias' work which begins approximately with the work on the Parthenon. This gigantic sculpture reached a higher degree than the earliest sculptures of the Parthenon and was perhaps very close to the sculptures of the western pediment. It had the strange force and the strong expression of Phidias' genius and it was even proclaimed as one of the seven wonders of the world. The reason maybe lies in the dimensions in which Zeus was represented and the precious material of which he was made, but also for the perfection of finish, for its strange force and expression, for the representation of a living god.<sup>40</sup> Phidias could reach this degree in his art only after the Parthenon sculpture.

There was a certain magic force in this statue, the product of his last years, when Phidias aimed to reach a universal formula and the highest summits of man's capacity in art. Today, when art is going along different ways, when there are no longer such ideals and such artists, one can almost envy the Greeks for whom it was enough, as Epictet says<sup>41</sup>, to see Zeus in Olympia and to consider themselves happy when dying!

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<sup>40</sup> On the testimony of the ancient writers about the beauty and majesty of Zeus, Liv. XIV, 28; Plutarch, *Aem. Paul.* 28; Quint. *Inst. Orat.* XII, 10, 9; Hyginus, *Fab.* 223; Dio Chrysostom, *Or. XII*, vol. I pp. 220 ff. (ed. Dindorf); Martial VII, 56; Anthol. Palat. Appendix Planudea IV, 81; Cicer. *Or. II*, 8; (Frazer, III, 530—33).

<sup>41</sup> Epictet, *Dissert.* I, 6, 23.