

THE CHARIOTEER OF DELPHI

Collected from the writings of Pausanias, Albinia Wherry, Edward T. Cook, and Richard G. Geldard, Ph.D., by the *Rosicrucian Digest* Staff

One of the great prizes of late nineteenth century excavations was the bronze statue of a charioteer found at Delphi. Poise, grace, and dynamism flow from the piece even after more than two millennia, and commentators for over a century have marveled at this vibrant connection with life at Delphi. The *Rosicrucian Digest* has assembled thoughts on this sculpture from various sources as a tribute to this remarkable work of the human spirit.

“A most valuable addition to our knowledge of early Greek sculpture is the Charioteer,” commented Albinia Lucy Cust Wherry in 1896, “. . . a beautiful bronze figure, perfect except for the left arm, which is broken off above the elbow.”¹

“The bronze statue of a charioteer—a masterpiece of early Greek art and in nearly perfect preservation—is one of the finds which have rewarded the French excavations at Delphi,” wrote Edward T. Cook in 1903. “It was unearthed in 1896 The statue seems to have belonged to a chariot-group, and to have been dedicated at Delphi to commemorate a victory in the games.”²

Pausanias, the second-century CE Greek geographer and writer, described the scene: “Nearby is a bronze chariot with a man mounted upon it; race-horses, one on each side, stand beside the chariot, and on the horses are seated boys. They are memorials of Olympic victories won by Hiero, the son of Deinomenes, who was tyrant of Syracuse after his brother Gelo. But the offerings were not sent by Hiero; it was Hiero’s son, Deinomenes, who gave them to the god, Onatas the Aeginetan, who made the chariot, and Calamis, who made the horses on either side and the boys on them.”³



The Charioteer of Delphi. Photo from the Rosicrucian Archives.

In another description of the famed statue, Cook and Wherry comment, “The figure affords an admirable example of the transition work of the time of Calamis. His long Ionic chiton⁴ is arranged in perfectly simple folds curved on the body and arms, but falling perpendicularly from the girdele to his bare muscular feet, while the toes, drawn up, slightly indicate how he preserved his balance during his rapid course.

“His right arm is still extended as when he guided his fiery steed to victory, and his short hair, though confined by a fillet, curls delicately above his small ears, and strays softly down his cheeks. His eyes . . . are composed of colored enamel.”⁵ The charioteer . . . only precedes the best period by a very short time.”⁶

Travelers' Key to Ancient Greece

In more recent times author Richard G. Geldard described the statue in the following manner: "The final room of the [Delphi] museum houses its greatest treasure, the bronze Charioteer, whose grace and poise represent the best of human achievement and spiritual aspiration. There is an interesting legend about the Charioteer, which is often told by guides to the visitors to Delphi:

"It seems that during the 1890s before the start of excavations, when the French were in the process of clearing the town of Kastri off the site of the sanctuary, one matriarch in particular would not leave her little house to relocate to the new town then under construction. Her refusal was holding up the whole relocation project.

"One morning she arrived at the house where the archaeologists were gathered and announced that she was ready to leave her house. When asked why she had so suddenly changed her mind, she reported a dream from the previous night. In her dream a boy who seemed to be trapped beneath the green sea called to her, 'Set me free! Set me free!' The dream frightened her and she thought it was an omen. When the excavations began, the Charioteer was discovered beneath the old woman's house.

"This magnificent bronze was produced in 470 BCE as a monument to a victory in the Pythian Games. The group included four horses and a chariot. A separate group

in front pictured a groom leading a single horse. The intent was to honor the victor and to demonstrate Plato's definition of mastery: control of four horses running in perfect synchrony drawing a chariot.

"This figure depicts the exquisite control under pressure and the human achievement and perfection that were the Greek ideal of human life. The style is early Classical, sometimes referred to as the Severe Style. Still evident is the idealized form of the Archaic Period, which we see in the *kouroi*.

"What is yet to come is the so-called naturalism of the later Classical style and the still later decadence of the Hellenistic. Here is the human being inspired by spiritual attributes pictured in the moment of victory in one of life's most demanding exercises. Surely it is how the Greeks envisioned Apollo arriving at his sanctuary, drawn by four of Poseidon's finest horses."⁷



The Charioteer of Delphi. Photo from the Rosicrucian Archives.

Endnotes

¹ Albinia Lucy Cust Wherry, *Greek Sculpture with Story and Song* (London: J.M. Dent & Co., 1898), 66.

² Edward T. Cook, *A Popular Handbook to the Greek and Roman Antiquities in the British Museum*, (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd, 1903), 116-117.

³ Pausanias, *A Description of Greece* 6.12.1. Translation in W.H.S. Jones, and H.A. Ormerod, *Pausanias' Description of Greece with an English Translation*, (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press). See also Oliver M. Washburn, "The Charioteer of Amphion at Delphi," *American Journal of Archaeology* (Second Series) 12:2 (1908) (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1908), 198-209.

⁴ "The characteristic costume of a charioteer." Cook, *Popular Handbook to Antiquities*, 116.

⁵ Wherry, *Greek Sculpture*, 66, cited in Cook, *Popular Handbook to Antiquities*, 116-117.

⁶ Cook, *Popular Handbook to Antiquities*, 117. This description is of a plaster cast "presented to [The British] Museum in 1898 by the French Minister of Public Instruction."

⁷ Richard G. Geldard, *The Traveler's Key to Ancient Greece* (Wheaton, IL: Quest Books, 2000), 294-295, © 2000, reproduced by permission of Quest Books, the imprint of the Theosophical Publishing House (www.questbooks.net).

