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# Greek Ideal as Hyperreal: Greco-Roman Sculpture and the Athletic Male Body

CHARLES HEIKO STOCKING

**T**WO ROOMS over from the highly frequented Parthenon Frieze in the British Museum stands a Greco-Roman sculpture of an athletic male youth (fig. 1).<sup>1</sup> This sculpture has a museum plaque that gives visitors little information beyond what they might be able to observe for themselves. The plaque simply reads “God or Athlete.” In contrast to the vast amounts of historical information and political debate that surround the famous Parthenon frieze, one might be disappointed not to learn any specific historical or contextual information for this particular sculpture.<sup>2</sup> Yet, the indecisive title of this piece may be taken as a case in point for the complexities involved with the Greek visual legacy of the male body.

On the one hand, the title “God or Athlete”

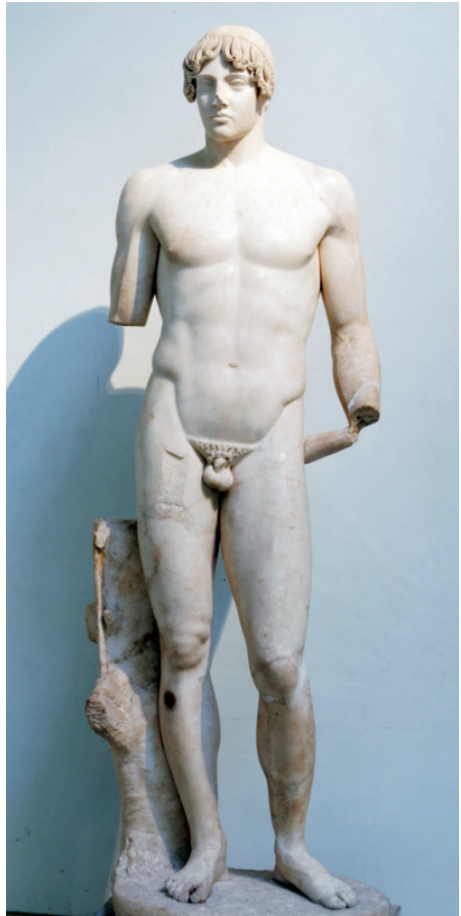


Fig. 1

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perfectly captures a modern concept generally known as the “Greek ideal”—an ambiguous and paradoxical relationship between the physical body and the divine, first popularized by Johann Joachim Winckelmann.<sup>3</sup> In the introduction to his first major work, *Reflections on the Imitation of Greek Works of Painting and Sculpture* (1756), Winckelmann asserted that the Greeks were far superior to modern man in physical strength and beauty, a fact he attributed to their overall physical culture and superior forms of exercise. According to Winckelmann, such superiority was readily observed in sculpture. Thus he explains, “Their bodies received great and manly shape through exercise, which the Greek masters gave to their sculptures.”<sup>4</sup> Indeed, there may be some truth to Winckelmann’s reliance on sculpture as a signifier of actual Greek bodies, since early inscriptions on athletic monuments emphasize that statues reproduced the likeness and size of the victor, especially at the moment of victory.<sup>5</sup> Scholars today have also echoed Winckelmann’s sentiment that Greek athletic sculpture reflects the strictest of ancient training regimens designed to build the body beautiful.<sup>6</sup>

Nevertheless, Winckelmann also recognized how ancient sculpture went beyond any traditional mode of imitation:

These frequent occasions of observing nature caused the Greek artists to go farther. They began to form certain general ideas of beauty, with regard to individual parts as an entire understanding of the body, which ought to uplift itself above nature itself. Their model was in a sense some ideal nature.<sup>7</sup>

Winckelmann asserted that it was from this “ideal nature” that “the Greeks formed their gods and men.”<sup>8</sup> Thus Greek sculpture captured an artistic principle based on dual modes of imitation: “The sensual beauty gave to the artist a beautiful nature; ideal beauty gave sublime processions; from the former he took the human, from the latter the godlike.”<sup>9</sup> For Winckelmann, it is this paradox of Greek sculpture as an imitation that both reflects and exceeds the reality of the phys-

ical body, which made the Greeks themselves inimitable, and therefore, worthy of imitation.<sup>10</sup> Ancient sculpture indicated the superiority of the Greeks, achieved through physical exercise, and it also represented a physical impossibility that could only exist in a mental or divine capacity. This paradox is one that was recognized even in the ancient world and continues to the present. Isocrates, for instance, acknowledged that, “no one can make the nature of his body resemble statues or paintings.”<sup>11</sup> Similar sentiments have also been expressed by current art historians on the physical impossibility of ancient Greek figural representation.<sup>12</sup>

Thus, the title of this fairly unknown sculpture at the British museum, “God or Athlete,” inadvertently gives expression to a long intellectual history on the problematic nature of the imitation of the body in ancient art. However, there is a second, equally problematic level of imitation at work in this sculpture. Beyond the enigmatic title, the plaque for the sculpture states that it is a Roman copy dated to the first century CE of a Greek bronze.<sup>13</sup> For museum visitors, the status of this sculpture as a “copy” makes it far less attractive than “original” works of Greek artists. Unlike the Parthenon Frieze, the well-documented Greek provenance of which has made it the child of a heated cultural custody battle, no one is fighting over this “God or Athlete,” an ambiguous imitation of an unknown Greek bronze. Like the notion of the Greek ideal, the notion that Roman sculpture was somehow inferior may also be attributed to Winckelmann.<sup>14</sup> But despite popular dismissal of Roman “copies,” scholars have more recently demonstrated that the notion of copying in the Roman era does not render Roman sculpture derivative or secondary. Such sculptures have their own “aesthetics of emulation,” inspired by Greek predecessors, but also adapted to specifically Roman contexts.<sup>15</sup> Unfortunately, this sculpture of the “God or Athlete,” like so many others, lacks even a Roman provenance, rendering the sculpture a floating signifier with multiple stratigraphic layers. Is this sculpture a god or an athlete? Roman or Greek? When we

trace the historical levels of representation in this statue, we never reach a bedrock of reference.

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In many respects, this “irreference” of the Greek ideal in Greco-Roman sculpture such as the “God or Athlete” presents us with an ancient corollary to the post-modern experience of the image, which Jean Baudrillard defined as the *hyperreal*, a “generation by models of a real without origin or reality.”<sup>16</sup> Of course, Baudrillard had situated his theory of hyperreality within a very specific historical framework that excluded the ancient world. In his work, *Simulations*, Baudrillard presents three “orders of appearance”: the *Counterfeit* order, which began with the Renaissance, the order of *Production*, that coincided with the industrial revolution, and finally, the order of *Simulation*, which defines our own postmodern world. In the present era of simulation, the “real” ceases to become an object in and of itself. As Baudrillard states, “The very definition of the real becomes: that of which it is possible to give an equivalent reproduction. At the limit of this process of reproducibility, the real is not only what can be reproduced, but that which is always already reproduced.”<sup>17</sup> One might wonder how a postmodern theory of the image could be relevant for viewing ancient sculpture. Looking at Greco-Roman sculpture with “postmodern eyes,” however, can allow one to appreciate a different aesthetic in Roman copies, not an aesthetic of “originality,” but one based on reproduction and seriality. Baudrillard explains seriality as follows: “The relation between them [images in a series] is no longer that of an original to its counterfeit—neither analogy nor reflection—but equivalence, indifference. In a series, objects become undefined simulacra, one of the other.”<sup>18</sup> The very same principle of seriality can be observed in Greco-Roman sculptural arrangements, from the twin bodies of Vespasian and Titus in the Shrine of the Augustales to the Large Herculaneum Woman statues.<sup>19</sup>

Still, this postmodern aesthetic would only render Greco-Roman sculpture equivalent to Baudrillard’s second order of appearance, the order of Production. To these two levels,