*IG* i³ 35, 36 and the Origins of the Democratic Priestess of Athena Nike

In the fifth century B.C., the Athenian demos passed a number of decrees concerning the priestess of Athena Nike, located on the Athenian Acropolis. One stele records two such decrees. The decree inscribed on one face, *IG* i³ 35, orders that the sanctuary be gated and a temple and altar built, names the project’s architect, and dictates the stipend and share of the sacrifice that the priestess is to receive. Most notably, this priestess is now to be chosen by lot from all Athenian women, a decidedly democratic process. To this decree is added an amendment concerning the drawing up a schedule for the contract. The date of this decree is contested, with most scholars dating it to the 440’s B.C. (e.g., Meiggs and Lewis 1988, no. 44; Lougovaya-Ast 2006), or the 420’s (e.g. Mattingly 1982, 2007). The decree inscribed on the other face of the stele, *IG* i³ 36, is securely dated to 424/3, and orders payment of the priestess's stipend (Meiggs and Lewis 1988, no. 71).

The sanctuary of Athena Nike had priestesses before the state passed these decrees. Epigraphic and archaeological evidence makes clear that the precinct of Athena Nike had an altar, and likely a statue and modest temple, by at least the sixth century B.C., if not earlier (*IG* i3 596; Mark 1993, pp. 20-30, 66-67). As was the case with the priestess of Athena Polias and a number of other Archaic priesthoods, the priestess of the sixth-century sanctuary was likely drawn from a *genos*, or clan, whose name is now lost to history. If so, the following question arises: how did the state come to control the choice of priestess?

It is unlikely that the state had either the power or the authority to take the position from any *genos*. The religious norms and ancestral customs of Athens would have forbidden it, and there is no single surviving instance in which the state ever deprived a *genos* of its priesthood. The most likely scenario is that the *genos* died out. With the ancestral authority over the Athena Nike precinct now gone, the demos voted to assume the responsibility itself, in order to preserve one of the most important sanctuaries in Athens. A number of historical considerations may account for the extinction of the *genos*, most notably the series of horrific plagues that struck Athens between 430 and 426 B.C. This assumption of state control over the priestess of Athena Nike serves as a model for state action in other instances in which sanctuaries and rituals were in danger of falling into oblivion in the fifth century B.C., and exemplifies the state’s gradual assumption of religious authority during this period.

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