

431-421 BCE – Priestess of Athena Nike

The High Priestess of Athena Nike was one of the leaders of the cult of Athena, which also has the High Priestess of Poseidon-Erechtheus and the High Priestess of Athena Polias, in Athens.

Figure 1: Athena, the Goddess of wisdom, handicraft and war. (Image from: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Athena>).

The Athena Nike office was established or perhaps revived in the middle of the 5th century in Athens (Hurwit J.M. 1999, p.50). The Priestess of Athena Nike, like the High-Priestess of Poseidon-Erechtheus, would serve for life (Hurwit J.M. 1999, p.50). However, the Priestess of Athena Nike was chosen from a lot of athenian women no matter who was in their *oikos* and how much wealth they had (Hurwit J.M. 1999, p.50). They were not chosen specifically from one ancient aristocratic family; this was called democracy's priestess (Hurwit J.M. 1999, p.50). A candidate chosen to be a priestess, from the whole population of the polis, needed to have an appropriate religious name, or some sort of religious connection to be selected. This is due to the priesthood representing the divine (Attic Inscriptions Online. 2016, IGI3 1330).

Figure 2: Goddess Nike of Strength and Victory. (Image from; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nike_%28mythology%29)

The Temple of Athena Nike was finally completed in 420 BCE during the peace of Nicias ([Wikipedia.org, Temple of Athena Nike](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Temple_of_Athena_Nike)). Here both the Goddess Athena and the Goddess Nike were worshiped. It is very clear that the first known Priestess of Athena Nike was Myrrhine (Hurwit J.M. 1999, p.50). The first priestess of Athena Nike is known due to her funerary monument that honors her as the Priestess of Athena Nike and that she died in the late 5th century (Connelly J.B. 2007, p.227). The mention of her father, Kallimachos, suggests that Myrrhine was qualified for the priestess by ancestry (Attic inscriptions online. 2016, IGI3 1330).

Figure 3: Temple of Athena Nike. (Image from; https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Temple_of_Athena_Nike)

Myrrhine, like the priestesses after her, would have been given a contract which stated that she was given a yearly salary of 50 drakhmai, as well as, the legs and the skin of the animals sacrificed at public festivals (Hurwit J.M. 1999, p.50). This decree to pay the priestess is dated to either 424 or 423 BCE. There was a large time leap of over a decade between the decree about the temple of Athena Nike and the establishment of the priesthood (Attic Inscriptions Online, 2013, IG I3 36). There is an idea that the works within the decree had only then been implemented with a new priestess or that she was appointed immediately and there was some sort of issue about timing or even financial strains created by the Peloponnesian War (Attic Inscriptions Online, 2013, IG I3 36).

As the priestess was given money, Myrrhine had more freedom than most women in Athens at the time. The priestess's responsibilities included the daily maintenance and activities of the cult under her charge and could be expected to be at the temple on a regular basis (Hurwit J.M. 1999, p.50). There is a fragmented speech by Lykourgos that gives an insight to the powers of the priestess. "It has been laid down by decree that the priestess also must add her seal to the register". The priestess' seal demonstrates some level of authority with the administration of the spoils (Connelly J.B. 2007, p.217).