

# THE OLYMPIC GAMES IN ANTIQUITY



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The information we have today about the ancient Olympic Games come mainly from the many descriptions of them in ancient literature, as well as from objects found at archeological digs (statues, vases, coins and tools).



## INTRODUCTION

### OLYMPIA, CRADLE OF THE OLYMPIC GAMES

The Olympic Games as we know them today [see *“The Modern Olympic Games” sheet*] have a long history which goes back to ancient times. Although some elements of these Games were revived “as they were” when the modern Olympic Games were created, others were removed or modified.

Everything started in the Peloponnese, in Greece, some 3,000 years ago. Sports competitions were organised at **Olympia** and were named after their location, hence their name of **“Olympic” Games**. Nobody knows exactly when they began, but the first written mention of them dates back to **776 BC**. It is difficult to know what gave rise to the ancient Games. Numerous versions attempt to explain them. Historically, the Games were created to provide unity to the Hellenic world, which, at that time, was split into city-states which were constantly at war. Mythology is mixed up with history, and the events that happened during this period were often explained as being the consequence of divine intervention.

These Games were held **every four years**. This four-year period acquired the name **“Olympiad”**, and was used as a date system: time was counted in Olympiads, rather than years.

### THE PANHELLENIC GAMES

The Games organised at **Olympia** led to the development of the **Panhellenic Games**. These included:

- The Games at **Olympia** (Olympic Games): every four years
- The Games at **Delphi** (Pythian Games), 582 B.C.: every four years (third year of each Olympiad)
- The Games at the **Isthmus of Corinth** (Isthmian Games), from 580 B.C.: every two years (second and fourth year of each Olympiad)
- The Games at **Nemea** (Nemean Games), from 573 B.C.: every two years (second and fourth year of each Olympiad)

These Games were special because they **brought the Greek world together** (pan = all, hellene = Greek) at a time when Greece was not a single state, but a series of city-states (politically and economically independent communities). From Greece and the colonies (in Italy, North Africa and Asia Minor), people travelled to take part in or attend these Games, inspired by the shared feeling of belonging to the same culture or religion.

The four Panhellenic Games were never held during the same year.

1. Representation of Heracles (Hercules for the Romans) fighting against the lion of Nemea.

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*Unlike the modern Olympic Games, the ancient Games did not change location and the participants did not come from throughout the world.*

### THE SACRED TRUCE

On the occasion of the four Panhellenic Games, a **sacred truce** (*Ekecheiria*) was proclaimed. Messengers (*spondophoro*) went from city to city announcing the date of the competitions. They called for all wars to be halted before, during and after the Games in order to enable the athletes, as well as the spectators, to travel to and from the Games sites in total safety. A climate of peace was considered important during the period of competition.

### GAMES FOR THE GODS

The Panhellenic Games were of major religious significance. Each of the Games was celebrated in honour of a specific god:

- **Zeus**, the king of the gods, at **Olympia** and **Nemea**
- **Apollo**, the god of light and reason, at **Delphi**
- **Poseidon**, the god of the sea and horses, at **Isthmus of Corinth**.

### OVERVIEW OF THE SITE AT OLYMPIA

Of the four Panhellenic Games, those at Olympia were the most important. Olympia was not a town or city, but rather a sanctuary. The site consisted of a **sacred area**, the **Altis**, marked by a boundary wall, and a **secular (non-religious) area**. The sacred area contained the temples, including the one to Zeus, the altars on which sacrifices were made, and the Treasuries, small buildings erected by the city-states in which precious offerings were kept (e.g. vases and statues). The secular area was outside the boundary wall. It contained the training areas and competition sites, plus all the buildings used for the administration of the Games or to welcome important guests. Only the priests and the staff responsible for looking after the sanctuary lived at Olympia. At the time of the competitions, the atmosphere was very different. In addition to the athletes and spectators, merchants of all kinds flocked to the site: the number of people present for the Olympic Games is estimated to have been **over 40,000**.

### OTHER FESTIVALS AND CONTESTS IN GREECE

In addition to the Panhellenic Games, major sports competitions were held in Athens. These were known as the **Panathenian Games**. They were part of the Great Panathenaea, the biggest festival in Athens, which was held every four years in honour of the goddess Athena.

Everywhere in Greece and the colonies, there were numerous **local competitions**, some better known than others. Each city made a point of organising them.

**The status of the Panhellenic Games and the large number of local competitions illustrate the importance of physical exercise and the spirit of competition in Ancient Greek society.**

*The principle of the Truce has been revived for the modern Olympic Games.*

*During sporting contests, it was considered that victory was accorded by the gods. This is the biggest difference with the modern Olympic Games, which are non-religious.*



1. Reconstitution of the site of Olympia (around the 3rd century BC).  
© Toubis



Women were not allowed into the Olympic Games, and could only be admitted as spectators if they were unmarried.

However, this did not mean that they did not practise sport. There is evidence that running contests were held at Olympia and at other antique sites.

## THE ATHLETE

When looking at a sculpture or a scene painted on a vase, it is easy to identify the athlete by his **nakedness**. Indeed, for both training and competitions, athletes were **always nude**, to illustrate the ideal of harmony between the body and the mind. According to this ideal, it was only through training the body that the mind could be developed.

### GYMNASIUM AND PALAESTRA

There was a **gymnasium** and a **palaestra** in every Greek city. These places were where athletes trained and young boys were educated. It was an all-round education, including exercise for the body as well as the mind. Physical education, music, arithmetic, grammar and reading were all part of the programme.

### HYGIENE AND BODY CARE

When they arrived at the gymnasium or palaestra, athletes stripped completely. Without the protection of a layer of clothing, they had to take special care of their skin. To prepare for training, an athlete would cover his body with **olive oil** and then dust it with **fine sand**. The oil and sand combination helped to regulate his body temperature as well as providing protection from the sun and from the stick that the trainer would use to beat him if he didn't perform the exercises correctly!

After training, the athlete would take his **strigil**, a curved instrument, and scrape the sweat, oil and sand off his skin. He then finished cleaning himself with water and a **sponge**.

During competitions, athletes prepared and cleaned themselves in the same way.

### SELECTION OF GAMES' PARTICIPANTS

There were three main criteria for participation in the Games: one had to be **male**, of **Greek origin** and a **free man**. Women, slaves and foreigners were excluded. Most of the athletes came from well-off families. While we cannot really speak of amateurs or professionals as we know them today, only the best were allowed to participate in the Games. Participants trained individually over several months before travelling to Elis, a city close to Olympia, four weeks before the Games to join the other participants. At this point, a final selection was made to determine those who could go to Olympia. The athletes took an oath, as did the judges. They promised to take part in the competitions in an honourable way, abiding by the rules.

1. Strigil and aryballos  
© IOC / Chaman Atelier  
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*The equipment that the athlete needed was extremely simple:*

- an **aryballos**, a kind of small bottle, often terracotta, containing oil
- a **strigil**
- a **sponge**

*All three items were linked to a ring which the athlete hangs on the wall of the Gymnasium or the Palaestra.*

### **A privileged spectator**

*One woman stood out from the crowd. She was the Priestess of Demeter (the goddess of agriculture and fertility). She occupied a seat facing the officials' stand.*

### FAMOUS ATHLETES

If physical exercise was an important part of general education in Antiquity, there were also highly specialised athletes who followed training programmes and participated in many contests.

The names of some of the great champions of Antiquity are still known today. Below are the profiles of a number of them.

The famous wrestler **Milo of Croton**, was a principal figure during the second half of the 7th century BC. He won six times at Olympia, seven times at Delphi, ten times at Isthmus of Corinth and nine times at Nemea! He thus became the most-crowned athlete of Antiquity, earning the title of **periodonikes**. Milo was not only celebrated for his legendary power, he was also known for his insatiable appetite!

**Theogenes of Thassos** won over 1,300 victories in the ancient contests, in boxing and pankration. He became a very important figure in his home town, where a statue to him was erected in the marketplace.

The runner **Leonidas of Rhodes** was a twelve-time winner of the stadium race, the double stadium and the race in armour. He was one of the few athletes victorious in three races on the same day. He even managed to repeat this feat over four Olympiads (from 164-152 BC)!

The pugilist (boxer) **Diagoras of Rhodes** founded a dynasty of athletes. He won in 464 BC and his sons and grandsons also went on to become champions at Olympia.

Considered as heroes and role models, such great athletes were celebrated even after their death. There are examples of tombs decorated with carvings of the wreaths won during the athlete's career. A school was even constructed over the tomb of one of them.

#### **Periodonikes**

*An athlete could be victorious at the 4 sites of the Panhellenic Games. In this case, he was given the title periodonikes, champion of the circuit.*



The stadium was not oval as we know it today, but rectangular. It had a packed earth floor and its boundaries were marked by grassy slopes, on which the spectators sat. The officials (organisers and judges – the Hellanodikai) sat in a stand.

## THE SPORTS ON THE PROGRAMME

The Olympic Games were celebrated for over one thousand years and underwent many changes. At their peak (circa 500 B.C.), they lasted for five days and the sporting contests were a central element.

### WHAT WERE THE GAMES LIKE?

The programme of the Olympic Games consisted of individual sports only, there were no team sports. The competitions took place in the **stadium** and the **hippodrome**.

**First day** The athletes, as well as the judges, took an oath to respect the rules. Contests for trumpet-players and **heralds** followed this ceremony, the winners of which had the honour of making the announcements during the Games. After the sounding of the trumpet, the name of the event, the arrival of the competitors and the names of the winners were announced loudly by these veritable “speakers” of their era.

**Second day** The **equestrian events** took place in the hippodrome. The most popular event was the four-horse chariot race (quadriga). There were also chariot races for young horses and a mounted horse race. It must be noted that the winners were not the jockeys or the charioteers, but rather the owners of the horses. This is how **Kyniska of Sparta**, owner of a stable of horses, became an Olympic champion.

**The pentathlon** took place in the stadium in the afternoon. It consisted of five events: discus, long jump, javelin, running and wrestling.

**The discus throw** was carried out without a run-up and all the athletes used the same discus.

**For the long jump**, stone or metal halteres (weights) were used, of various shapes. The event was probably made up of five consecutive standing jumps, which required harmony of movement and a sense of rhythm. To help with rhythm, a flute player was often present. Such figures are often represented on vases, next to the long-jumpers.

**For the javelin throw**, athletes used a small leather strap which was placed around the shaft in a loop, which allowed them to give the javelin an extra rotation.

1. Representation of the javelin throw  
© IOC / Chaman Atelier  
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1. Representation of the races  
© IOC / Chaman Atelier  
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These three disciplines were only practised as part of the pentathlon. Running and wrestling, on the other hand, were also practised as individual disciplines.

**Third day** This day was considered to be the culminating point of the Games. A great sacrifice took place: one hundred cows were killed in honour of Zeus and other divinities. Their meat was shared amongst the community of Games participants during a feast to which all were invited.

**Fourth day** **The foot races** took place in the stadium. There were several types of race:

**The stadium race** covered one length of the stadium, that is roughly 192m.

**The diaulos**, two lengths or double stadium.

**The dolichos**, a long-distance race (from 7 to 24 laps).

**The race in arms** (in Olympia it was a diaulos), where the athletes wore a helmet and greaves, and carried a shield.

The competitors took their place on a starting line marked out by white limestone slabs. A barrier was lowered to signal the start of the race. The runners ran in a straight line. For the longer races, the runners ran around a marker or a post at each end of the stadium.

The afternoon was dedicated to combat sports: pugilism (boxing), wrestling and pankration. The drawing of lots decided which athletes would compete against each other. Unlike today, there were no weight categories. To signal the end of a fight, one of the contestants could raise a finger: such scenes are sometimes represented on vases.

For boxing, the **pugilists'** hands were protected by long leather thongs. These ancestors of boxing gloves underwent numerous modifications over time. Pieces of metal were added on the knuckles, making the punches much more violent.

**Wrestlers** fought standing up, with bare hands. There were different types of hold. The person who first touched the ground three times was the loser.

**Pankration** was a type of wrestling. All moves were allowed, except for biting, gouging out eyes and putting fingers in the opponent's nose.

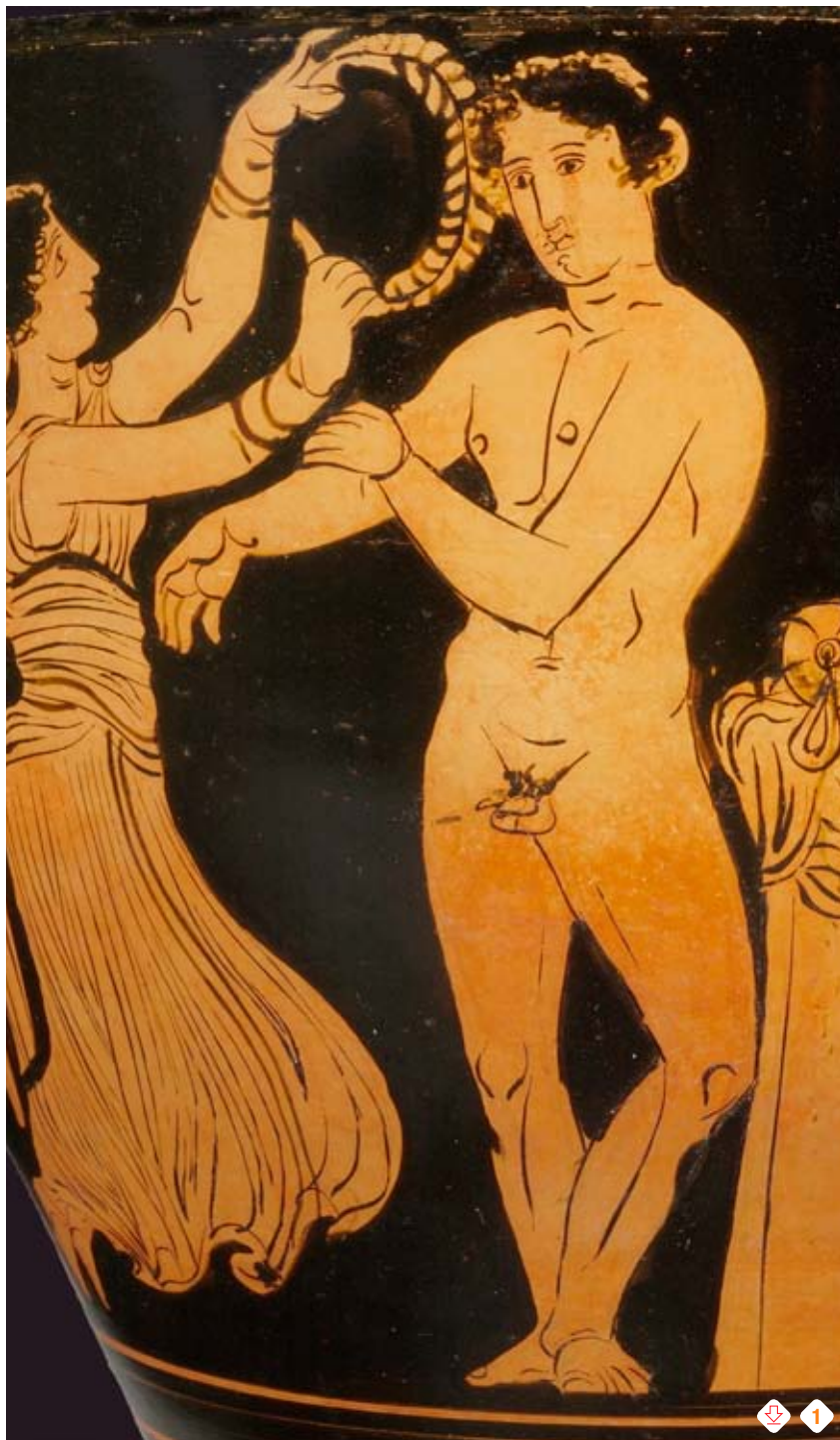
**Fifth and last day** This day was reserved for honouring victorious athletes. They were covered in ribbons and received victory palms in the stadium, before a solemn ceremony in which they were crowned with olive wreaths. Finally, a banquet was given for them, together with the politicians and judges.

#### **CHEATING AND FINES**

When the athletes did not respect the rules, the judge punished them during the race, with a whip. For more serious offences, the athletes had to pay a fine. With this money, statues of Zeus and Elis were erected, and at Olympia, the names of the cheats were inscribed on their base. At Olympia, these statues (**the Zanés**) were placed along the passageway that led to the stadium; at Elis, they were placed in the gymnasium. This reminded the athletes of the example not to follow!

#### **MUSIC AND SINGING**

Music and singing competitions were not on the programme of the Olympic Games. They were a speciality of the Games at Delphi. Well before the appearance of sports competitions, musical competitions were organised in Delphi. These comprised singing accompanied by the cithara (a type of lyre), flute solos or singing with flute accompaniment. Music and singing remained a feature of the Pythian Games even after the integration of sports competitions. Poetry and drama competitions also figured on the programme.



## WINNERS' REWARDS

### CROWNS, RIBBONS AND PALM BRANCHES

At the modern Olympic Games, the first, second and third-placed athletes are rewarded, respectively, by gold, silver and bronze medals. At the Panhellenic Games, there was **only one winner** whose prize was a **wreath or crown of leaves**. At each of the venues, the crowns were made with different types of leaves:

- At **Olympia**, it was a **wild olive leaf** crown
- At **Delphi**, a **laurel** crown
- At **Corinth**, a **pine** crown
- At **Nemea**, a **wild celery** crown

As well as a crown, the winner received a **red woollen ribbon**, the taenia. A famous statue by the sculptor Polyclethus (dating from the second half of the 5th century BC) shows a victor tying the ribbon around his head. Finally, the winner often held a **palm frond**, another sign of his victory.

### NIKE, THE MESSENGER OF THE GODS

The Ancient Greeks considered that it was **the gods** who decided to grant victory to an athlete. Victory was often represented in the form of a winged female character known as **Nike**, which means "victory" in Greek. As the servant or messenger of the Gods, Nike flew down to the chosen person, to bring them their **divine reward** in the form of a wreath or ribbon.

### FAME

Although winners did not receive any financial reward, Olympic champions became important figures in their town or city, where they often took on a political role. The glory of the victorious athlete brought reflected glory to all the inhabitants of his home town. When he returned from the Games, he was given a hero's welcome and received numerous benefits for the rest of his life.

To show that he had become famous, the victor had the right to have a **statue of himself** erected. He could also ask a poet to write **verses** telling of his feats. Because they were proud of him, his fellow citizens sometimes made **coins** with his effigy on them, so as not to forget him and to make him known throughout the Greek world.

1. Nike handing the crown of olive leaves to the winner.  
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Multimédia

**PRIZES IN LOCAL COMPETITIONS**

The prizes awarded in local competitions had a greater **material value**. Amphorae filled with olive oil were often given to the winner. During this period, olive oil was extremely precious and worth a lot of money. Other treasures, such as bronze tripods (big vases with three feet), bronze shields or silver cups were also given as prizes.

**In spite of this difference, the prestige of the Panhellenic Games remained unequalled. The modest crown of leaves was the highest possible reward in the Greek world, as it guaranteed its holder honour and respect from everyone.**



## THE END OF THE GAMES

For over one thousand years, the Greeks, and later the Romans, met at Olympia to celebrate the festival in honour of Zeus and ensure that the Games remained an important event.

We now know that the Games were still being organised in the 4th century AD.

In 393 AD, the Christian emperor Theodosius I forbade the celebration of pagan cults, which included the Games.

Nonetheless, the popularity of sports contests and cultural festivities continued in many Greek-influenced provinces of the Roman empire as late as the 6th century AD.

### OLYMPIA, UNTIL ITS REDISCOVERY IN THE 19TH CENTURY

Following Theodosius' decree, pagan cults began to disappear gradually and the site of Olympia was abandoned. Earthquakes destroyed the edifices and their ruins disappeared gradually under the earth and sand. There are no longer any visible traces of the site. Thanks to the writings of ancient historians, the memory of the Games and their place in the Greek world was not totally forgotten. The Games were known to have existed, but the knowledge of their exact location had been lost.

In 1776, the English traveller Richard Chandler discovered the site of ancient Olympia.

The principal research digs were carried out a hundred years later by German archaeologists.

Today, archaeological digs have allowed us to discover the past glory of the Panhellenic Games and the significance of Olympia.

1. The sanctuary of Olympia nowadays.

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## ACTIVITIES

**Find** the names of the gods mentioned in these factsheets and create an identity sheet for each one. Include a short text, a drawing of the god or goddess and the symbol which allows them to be identified.

**Learn** to interpret a sculpture or a painting on a vase: describe the characters, their clothing, their bodies, postures and facial expressions, and the objects (look at illustrations in books or visit museums).

**Observe** sports scenes shown on vases: guess what the sport is, mime the movements and postures of the athletes in action.

**Read** works by ancient authors, in particular the parts about the Games and the athletes: for example, the odes by the poet Pindar (518-438 BC) or the stories of the writer Pausanias (110-180 AD).

**Return to the past!** You are a spectator at the Olympic Games in Antiquity:

- describe a competition of your choice, in the form of an article or comic strip;
- prepare a portrait of a victorious athlete, imagining that he comes from a town in the Greek colonies.

**Compare** the Ancient Games with the modern Olympic Games [see sheets "The Modern Olympic Games"]. Draw up a list of differences and a list of common features.

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#### Authors

*The Olympic Museum*  
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