



ANCIENT OLYMPIC GAMES

TRYING TO WIN FAME AND ACCLAIM AT THE ANCIENT OLYMPICS, GREECE, FROM 776 BCE

There were four athletic contests in Ancient Greece, called panhellenic games: Nemean Games, Isthmian Games, Pythian Games and the Olympic Games. The latter were the most famous (so that years were counted in Olympiad, the period of four years between Games). The first-ever Olympic Games is thought to have been held at Olympia in 776 BCE; they only lasted one day and consisted of one competition, the stadion race, a foot race of about 190 meters (620 feet). Later, more events were added and the duration of the Games was established as five days (the last one for the awards ceremony). Some of the most popular competitions were fights, chariot races and races in armour, but there were no team competitions or ball games. Although women could compete in other festivals, the Games were reserved for men, and only those of Greek origin.

Prytaneion

Next to the Temple of Hera was the Prytaneion, where the priests and magistrates lived. Inside was an ever-burning fire, in honour of Hestia, the goddess of hearth and home. The prime function of the priests was overseeing the religious aspect of Olympia; no sacrifice, ceremony, or swearing-in of judges or contestants could be held unless at least one of the Prytaneis was present.

The Sanctuary of Olympia

The Sanctuary is the name given to the site of the Olympic Games. It was under the control of the city-state of Elis and contained temples of Hera and Zeus and a famous statue of Zeus, one of the famed Wonders of the Ancient World. To the east, tracks for pedestrian runners and chariots were located and west housed a building to accommodate the athletes and the arena, a space where wrestlers could train.

Wreath and glory

In most of the Games performers usually compete nude, which was not considered unusual. In the Temple of Zeus, winners received a prize of a laurel wreath and the glory of the public.



How do we know this?

It is believed that the ancient Olympic Games actually first took place before 776 BCE, but this is the date of the first written record of them. We know that a cook named Coroebus won the only event - a footrace - and became the first Olympic champion. There are original sources that provide details about the events and competitors, and a number of books have been written about the ancient Olympic Games. One of the most useful when writing this article was Nigel Spivey's *The Ancient Olympics*.



"In the race for hoplites,
men raced wearing armour
and carrying shields"

Public

The Games were only held every four years and attracted spectators from all over the Greek-speaking world and even beyond. Historical records suggest women weren't even allowed to spectate.

Treasures

The buildings located at the foot of Mount Kronos housed offerings.

Stadium

This was where the footraces were held. For the first Olympic events it is thought that there was only one athletic event - a short sprint from one end of the stadium to the other - but as time passed more events were added that we still recognise today.

Disciplines

Some events can still be found in the modern Games, such as running, wrestling, javelin, discus and long jump. Chariot racing was also an event, but the toughest event might have been the race for hoplites, where men raced wearing armour and carrying shields.

Temple of Zeus

The Olympic Games were part of a religious festival in honour of Zeus, the 'father of the gods.' Inside the temple was the statue of Zeus, built by Phidias, the architect of the Parthenon. Distinguished visitors were housed in pavilions located around the Temple of Zeus.