



FACTSHEET

The Olympic Games of Antiquity

26 September 2022

History

The ancient Olympic Games, as far as we know today, have a long history. It all began in Greece, in the Peloponnese about 3,000 years ago. According to existing historic manuscripts, the first ancient Olympic Games were celebrated in 776 BC in Olympia. They were dedicated to the Greek god Zeus and took place in the same place *every four years*. This four-year period became known as an “*Olympiad*”.

Olympia

Olympia is located in the west of the Peloponnese. Imposing temples, votive monuments and treasures stood alongside the palaestra and gymnasium in a site of unique natural beauty and mystique. From the beginning of the 10th century BC, Olympia was a meeting place for religious and political activities. At the centre rose the majestic temples of Zeus and Hera. The Stadium, which one entered through the Portico of Echo, could hold thousands of spectators. Additional constructions were built in the area until the 4th century BC to serve as premises for training and accommodation.

Mythology

It is difficult to know the exact reasons behind the birth of the Games. Mythology gets mixed up with history and often the events which happened at this time are explained as consequences of the gods' intervention. There are many stories which attempt to explain their origin. According to the oldest myth, the Olympic Games were the invention of Heracles of Ida, one of the Daktylos. According to other myths, the Games were instituted by Zeus himself, in memory of his battle with Kronos. Others attribute the founding of the Games to the demigod Heracles, who organised them in Olympia to honour Zeus, after his victorious expedition against Augias, King of Elis. The

ancient Olympic Games were celebrated in honour of Zeus. They were secular in nature and aimed to demonstrate the physical qualities and evolution of performances accomplished by young men, as well as to make good relations prevail between the Greek cities. According to specialists, the ancient Olympic Games owed their purity and importance to religion.

The Olympic Truce

The tradition of the “Olympic Truce”, or “*Ekecheiria*”, was established in Ancient Greece in the 9th century BC through the signing of a treaty by three kings: Iphitos of Elis, Cleosthenes of Pisa and Lycurgus of Sparta. During this Truce period, the athletes, artists and their families, as well as the ordinary pilgrims, were able to travel in complete safety to participate in or attend the ancient Olympic Games, before returning to their respective countries. Messengers (*spondophores*) went from city to city to announce the date of the competitions. They demanded a halt to fighting before, during and after the Games.

The athlete

There were originally three main criteria for participating in the ancient Olympic Games. The athlete had to be male, of Greek origin and freeborn. Women (exceptions were made for owners of horses), slaves and foreigners were excluded. After the conquest of Greece by Rome in 146 BC, the Romans were able to join the Greek athletes. Women's participation in the ancient Olympic Games is the subject of various debates based on existing information. Some historians say that no woman had the right to be present except for the Priestess of Demeter, goddess of fertility, who took the seat of honour near the altar in the stadium. Others claim that married women did not have the right to compete or attend the Games, though young virgin girls and the Priestess of Demeter could be spectators. For the



ancient Olympic Games, a city selected the best athletes from its gymnasium. The athletes picked then had to train hard for several months. Upon arriving in Olympia when the Truce had been proclaimed, they trained even more to attempt to qualify for the Games. The Olympic Games of Antiquity also had champions. Thanks to their performances, the names of the athletes are still known to us. Here is a profile of some of them:

Astylos of Kroton

Astylos of Kroton in southern Italy won a total of six victory olive wreaths in three Olympiads (488-480 BC) in the stade and the diaulos (twice the stade) events. In the first Olympiad, he ran for Kroton and his compatriots honoured and glorified him. In the two successive Olympiads, however, he took part as a citizen of Syracuse. The people of Kroton punished him by demolishing his statue in their city and converting his house into a prison.

Milon of Kroton

Milon, a pupil of the philosopher Pythagoras, was one of the most famous athletes in Antiquity. He came from the Greek city of Kroton in southern Italy. He was six times Olympic wrestling champion. He first won in 540 BC, in the youth wrestling event, and then five times in men's wrestling. This is a unique achievement even in today's competition context. He also won seven times in the Pythian Games, nine times in the Nemean Games, ten times in the Isthmian Games and innumerable times in small competitions. In the 67th Olympiad (512 BC), in his seventh attempt for the championship, he lost to a younger athlete, Timasitheus. There are many accounts of his achievements.

Kyniska of Sparta

Kyniska, daughter of King Archidamos of Sparta, was the first woman to be listed as an Olympic victor in Antiquity. Her chariot won in the four-horse chariot race in the 96th and 97th Olympiads, (396 BC and 392 BC respectively). In the Olympic Games, it was forbidden for women to be present and Kyniska broke with tradition, since, in the equestrian events, the victory wreath, or kotinos, was won by the owner, not the rider, of the horse.

Melankomas of Karia

Melankomas of Karia was crowned Olympic boxing champion in 49 BC, and was a winner in many other events. He went down in history for the way in which he fought. His movements were light, simple and fascinating. He would defeat his opponents without ever being hit himself, nor ever dealing a blow. He was reputed to fight for two days holding his arms out without ever lowering them. He attained his excellent competitive form through continuous and strenuous exercise.

Leonidas of Rhodes

Leonidas of Rhodes was one of the most famous runners in Antiquity. His was a unique achievement, even by today's standards. For four consecutive Olympiads (164-152 BC), he won three races, - the stade race, the diaulos race and the armour race. He won a total of 12 Olympic victory wreaths. He was acclaimed as a hero by his compatriots.

The sports

The programme of the Games included only individual sports. With the exception of the equestrian events, which took place in the hippodrome, all the competitions were held in the stadium. These are the disciplines on the programme:

Running: This was split into three events:

- *the stade*, the pre-eminent test of speed, was staged along the length of the stadium
- *the diaulos*, which was two lengths of the stadium
- *the dolichos*, which was approximately 20 lengths of the stadium

Wrestling: this was highly valued as a form of military exercise without weapons. It ended only when one of the contestants admitted defeat.

Boxing: the hands of the competitors were protected by long strips of leather. These ancestors of the boxing glove were subject to many modifications. Pieces of metal were even added to the hand joints, thus making the punches more violent.

Pankration: this was a primitive form of martial art combining wrestling and boxing, and was considered to be one of the toughest sports.



The equestrian competitions: these were very spectacular chariot or horse races.

The pentathlon comprised five events: running, long jump, discus, javelin and wrestling.

Boys' events included, among other things, running, wrestling and boxing.

In the beginning, the ancient Olympic Games were held over one day. The number of events increased until the duration of the Games was extended to five days.

Rewards

In the times of the ancient Olympic Games, there was only one winner. The *Olympionic* was immediately rewarded after the competition. A herald announced the name of the winner, then a *Hellanodikos* (judge) placed a palm leaf in his hands, while the spectators applauded him and threw him flowers. They tied a ribbon of red wool, a *taenia*, around his head and hands in the sign of victory. The official prize ceremony took place on the last day of the Games in the raised hall in the Temple of Zeus. In a loud voice, the herald announced the name of the Olympic victor, his father and his city. Then a *Hellanodikos* placed a crown made of an olive branch, the *kotinos*, on the winner's head. Returning to his hometown, the athlete was welcomed as a hero and was given numerous advantages for the rest of his life. To show that he had become famous, the athlete had the right to have his own statue erected, among other things.

The end of the Games

After the conquest of Greece by Rome in 146 BC, a period of decline began which ended with the Games being abolished. In 393 AD, Emperor Theodosius I, who had converted to Christianity, decided to abolish all pagan cults and centres. And thus the ancient Olympic Games were abolished after more than 1,000 years of existence. After the Games were abolished, Olympia suffered acts of vandalism. The site disappeared little by little through earthquakes and floods; it sank into oblivion. In 1766, the site was rediscovered by Englishman Richard Chandler, but it was only in 1875 that archaeological digs were carried out by the Germans (with the approval of the Greek authorities), thus allowing the ruins of Olympia to be

rediscovered. Later, these discoveries contributed to inspiring Pierre de Coubertin, who created the Games of the modern era.

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