

Ancient Olympics

Held once every four years in the precinct of Zeus at Olympia, the Olympic Games were the pre-eminent athletic festival in antiquity. The games were held at the first full moon after the summer solstice, roughly mid-July, between the 11th-16th of the month. The Olympics developed from a local religious festival that honored Zeus, the king of the Greek gods. In time a *stadion*, a sprint of about 200m, was added to the ritual

celebrations. By the 5th century BCE, competitors came from throughout the Greek world to participate in **chariot and horse races**, the **pentathlon**, men's **footraces**, the **race in full armor**, **wrestling**, **boxing**, and the **pankration** (a savage fusion of boxing and wrestling – think naked ultimate fighting) (at right). As Greeks from throughout the Hellenic world came to participate in the festival, a strict code developed to regulate the games: during the games a general truce of three-months was observed, all Greeks could participate in the games (except women and slaves), and athletes had to train for at least one month in Olympia before being allowed to compete in the Games.



While the only official prize for victory was a crown of wild olive (at left) and the privilege of erecting a statue of himself in the temple precinct at Olympia, victorious athletes were often rewarded with a lifetime pension by their native cities, immortalized in statuary and poetry, and even worshipped as gods for their exploits.

The festival eventually stretched to five days and included a sacrifice of a hecatomb – the immolation of 100 bulls - on the Great Altar of Zeus. Because of their association with pagan cult, the Emperor Theodosius II decreed that the Games be abolished in 393 CE. Recently-discovered archaeological evidence, however, indicates that the Games continued in a more subdued form for another hundred years before a succession of earthquakes and floods destroyed the sanctuary. The Olympics lay dormant until the 19th century when Greece, having emerged from centuries of domination from the Ottoman Empire, celebrated its freedom with several national Olympic festivals. In 1896, the modern international Olympics were held in Athens and the Olympic ideal was reborn. Interestingly, the premier event of the modern Olympics, the marathon, was not part of the ancient Olympics. It was included in the 1896 Olympics to commemorate the herald Phidippides who ran a long distance to report the Greek victory over the Persians at the Battle of Marathon in 490 BCE. This victory preserved Greece's freedom from Persian tyranny and contributed to the formation of a Greek identity that transcended national boundaries. The race was chosen to symbolize the liberty and fraternity of the new Olympians and the states they represented.

For further information, see <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/Olympics/> and <http://www.fhw.gr/projects/olympics/classical/>



Horserace



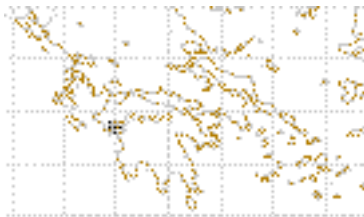
Footrace



Pentathlon



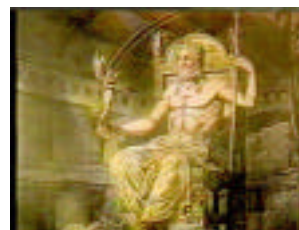
Pankration



Location of Olympia in Elis



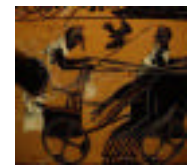
Temple of Zeus



Phidias's Statue of Zeus, a wonder of the Ancient World



Temple Precinct at Olympia



Chariot racing