



The Olympic Games Programme

The Festival in honour of Zeus *Olympios* was held every four years from 776 BC until around AD 393 in the sanctuary at Olympia in the central west of the Greek Peloponnese. The main sacred day of the Festival took place on the day of a full moon after the summer solstice. The most extensive part of the Festival was the athletic competition called the Olympic Games.

Olympia itself had been a small settlement in the second millennium BC. After a period of abandonment, the site became a rural sanctuary around 1000 BC, with no permanent housing. It is not clear who was first worshipped at Olympia, and it is generally thought to have been Hera, Pelops or Zeus, most likely the latter. In the eighth century BC, major political and social changes were occurring in the Hellenic “states” and Olympia and Delphi, both neutral, rural sanctuaries, developed into pivotal centres. Precisely because they were remote from powerful centres, both with venerable histories, and both dedicated by that stage to important gods, these two sites could be used by all the Greeks for religious, and secular purposes.

We do not know the exact circumstances of the beginning of the athletic competition at Olympia, but we do understand the general history of such competitions in the Hellenic



*Chariot team, driver and warrior, at a funeral
Detail from a large krater, 750-725 BC,
Nicholson Museum 46.41
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world. The tradition of athletic contests is very old in the Greek world, known from the bull-leaping frescoes of Minoan Crete and the famous description of the funeral games of Patrokles in Homer. Although the evidence is not quite as direct for the Mycenaean period in Greece, the importance of chariots is undoubted. The direct link with the military skills of javelin, discus, running and equestrianism cannot be overstated. Athletic contests were also held at funerals to honour the deceased, in a context that was clearly religious. The idea of offering to the gods a dedication of the victory of the best,

most powerful, fleetest and beautiful of men is easy to understand in any age, let alone against the deeply religious and competitive background of early Greek culture.



Herakles and Apollo fighting over a tripod cauldron. This well-known story relates Herakles' attempt to set up his own oracle after a dispute at Delphi detail from amphora Berlin F2159, after Furtwängler & Reichhold, plate 133

Many myths and legends gave alternative versions of the beginnings of athletic contests at Olympia. Founders in these stories include: Zeus after defeating his father Kronos; Herakles for various reasons; Pelops and Hippodameia; and an alliance of Lykurgos of Sparta, Iphitos of Elis and Kleosthenes of Pisa. This probably represents several reorganizations of the contest, or even refoundations at the sanctuary, in the centuries before official record keeping began.

Because of the importance of the Olympic Festival, its four-year cycle became one of the few international time-reckoning systems in the ancient world, although this only applied to intervals of a year or more. In the ancient Greek world different city-states had their own year-calendars. This is the reason heralds were sent throughout the Greek-speaking world in an Olympic year to confirm the date of the Festival according to the various local calendars.

Over time events were added to, and sometimes dropped from, the programme at Olympia. For details of the dates each event began, please see the time-line page on this website. No official programme of events survives from antiquity. The timetable presented here is based on fragmentary references in ancient texts, and modern scholarship (see bibliography). There is little agreement on particulars between these sources, but the programme here must be very close to the ancient one in around 200 BC. Boys' events have not been included as there is no evidence as to when in the programme they took place.



An Olympic Year

Ten months before the Festival the *hellanodikai* were appointed. These were the judges of the Games, citizens of Elis, the city which controlled the Festival throughout most of its history.

*An hellanodikas handing a successful athlete a victor's ribbon
detail from Boston 10.181, after Caskey & Beazley,*



*Pair of fighting Greeks,
detail from a lekythos, 520-500 BC
Nicholson Museum 49.07
With the permission of the Nicholson
Museum, University of Sydney*

About 2 months before the solstice, *spondophoroi* (heralds) were sent out to announce the Festival and the *ekecheiria* (Sacred Truce). This truce allowed competitors and spectators to travel more safely to the Festival, because hostilities in or against Elis were forbidden. People could also travel in areas at war, even through the territory of their own enemies, in order to reach Olympia.

One month beforehand, athletes arrived at Elis to train. There were two state gymnasia and other sports venues in the city of Elis, where the athletes stayed. During this time they were not allowed to follow their own training programmes, but had to work under the guidance of the *hellanodikai*. It is also thought that during this period athletes who were not good enough were weeded out of competition. This may have been achieved through preliminary heats in some events.

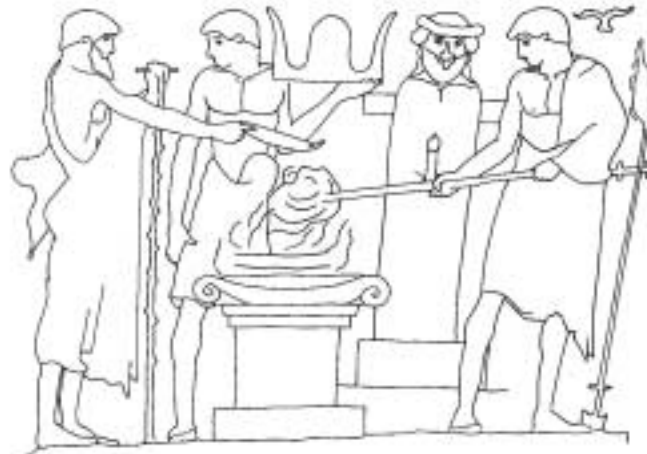
Given the number of competitors, it was probably during this month that qualifications and ages were checked. Competitors had to be male, Greek and free. Although a few well-known competitors stretched the definition of "Greekness" (for instance the Roman emperor Nero), for most of the history of the Games these entry restrictions were maintained.

The *hellanodikai* also ruled on the admission of youngsters to the category of “boy”, which had a minimum age of about 12, and the cut-off for the category of “men”, which was normally around 18. These rulings were also made for the division between horse and colt entries for equestrian events.



*Two wrestlers practising in front of a trainer
detail from amphora Berlin F2159,
after Furtwängler & Reichhold, plate 133*

Two days before the start of the Festival a procession of priests, festival officials, athletes, their trainers, the boy athletes’ guardians, the equestrian competitors and their horses, Elean civic officials, ambassadors and important people from other city-states left Elis to walk the 45 kilometres to Olympia, making a sacrifice at the spring of Piera on the way.



*Scene of men sacrificing meat at an altar in an open-air sanctuary
(indicated by the herm and the goat's skull)
detail from a krater (wine mixing bowl), (Naples 127929)
drawing © F. Reidel, 2000*

It should be stressed that spectators and competitors alike were almost all men. Most women were forbidden to enter the area of the sanctuary, which included the sporting arenas, for the duration of the Festival. The exceptions were unmarried women and the Priestess of Demeter Chamyne (Of the Ground). The Priestess had a special seat in the stadium. The punishment for a married woman found at Olympia during the Festival was death, by being thrown off a nearby cliff into the river, as such a breach was a major religious transgression. Similar restrictions, sometimes against men, applied at many religious festivals.

However, owners of horses were crowned as victors, not the charioteers or jockeys. This allowed women of all ages, and indeed children and even cities, to become Olympic victors. Women had their own, smaller, separate athletic festival in honour of the goddess Hera, held at regular intervals at Olympia, but no details survive today.



*A running girl
Sherd from a cup, 550-520 BC
Nicholson Museum 56.21
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The Five Days of the Festival

Day 1

Oaths were sworn before a statue of Zeus *Horkios* (the Oath-taker). Athletes swore they had undertaken the correct length of training and would not cheat or break the rules of competition. Judges and games officials vowed to judge fairly and without bias. Owners of horses swore that their animals were in the correct age groups. The guardians of the boy athletes, their fathers or trainers, would swear that the boys would compete fairly and no-one would cheat on their behalf. Records of fines, floggings, disallowed victories and statues erected by cheaters show that not everyone kept their vow.

The only non-athletic contests held were for the trumpeters and heralds. These contests took place near the stadium entrance, and after 350 BC when the Echo Stoa was built, in that building because of its acoustics. The winning herald had the right to announce the victors' names, the winning trumpeter the honour of sounding the start.

As normal in religious festivals, people would have carried out official and private sacrifices to the gods, especially but not exclusively to Zeus. They would have prayed

above all for victory. As part of these religious rituals, many athletes probably consulted the oracle of Zeus at the site.

Day 2



*Chariot teams racing towards a victory prize cauldron
detail of a krater (mixing bowl), Berlin 1655,
after Furtwängler & Reichhold plate 121*

Probably the first events at the Olympic Games were the equestrian events. There were four and two horse chariot races, flat races for horses and colts and from time to time mule races. Chariot racing in particular was very dangerous as the teams wheeled around the end of the hippodrome. Unfortunately we have no evidence today of either the track or the elaborate starting system for the horse racing.



*Pentathletes practising in front of a trainer, with a discus on the ground, and branches of olive (the winner's crown) to inspire them
Boetticher, 1886, fig 3.*

After the equestrian events, the crowd of spectators and the judges climbed over the bank to the stadium. The rest of the day was occupied with the pentathlon contest: discus, jump, javelin, running and wrestling. We do not know how the winner was decided, except in the case of someone winning the first three events. In this rare circumstance he was declared the winner without having to run or fight.



*Jumper with halteres, the weights used to increase the standing jump (left)
Discus thrower (right)
Details of a kylix (cup),
Powerhouse Museum 99/117/1
© Powerhouse Museum 2000*



Pelops, the hero of the myth depicted on the pediment of the Temple of Zeus at Olympia, was one of the legendary founders of Games at Olympia. In the myth he successfully challenged Oinomaos, King of Pisa, for the hand of the king's daughter Hippodameia, in a chariot race. His status at the Festival was nearly semi-divine, with a special enclosure around his "tomb" and an elaborate ceremony performed on the evening of the second day. A special black ram was sacrificed in such a way that its blood poured into the ground, and unusually, none of the meat from the animal was consumed.



*Detail of Pelops and Hippodameia in their chariot
Bell krater in Naples, from Furtwängler & Reichhold, plate 146*

Day 3 (full moon)

A sacred procession of all official participants and city-state missions took place on the day of the full moon, to offer sacrifices to Zeus. The ritual began by taking a flame from the eternally burning hearth of Hestia, the goddess of the household. Then the long train of people wound around the altars in the sacred area of the site, the Altis, finally arriving at the Great Altar of Zeus. This was a huge mound made up from the ashes of sacrifices, mixed with the waters of the Alpheios, the river flowing to the south of Olympia. This plaster was then smeared on the outside of the existing mound, gradually increasing its size over the years. The climax of the ceremony was the sacrifice of 100 oxen, provided by the citizens of Elis. In fact, only the thighs were burnt on the altar, with the rest of the meat being distributed amongst the Games participants.



*Cattle being led to sacrifice, with girl at front carrying special ritual basket
Detail from Boston 13.195, after Caskey & Beazley, 1931, pl. IV no. 14*

Day 4

This was a full day of men's events, beginning with the running races. The first race was the oldest event on the Olympic programme, the single lap *stade* or *stadion* race. Traditionally, the winner of this race had the entire Games, and that four-year Olympiad cycle named after him. Two-lap and long distance races followed. All these races, along with the other athletic contests, were conducted in the nude. Apparently the custom began when Orsippos of Megara, running in the 15th Olympiad, 720 BC, lost his loin-cloth. Other sources suggest that the Spartan practise of naked athletics was adopted in a less sensational manner.



*Running man,
Detail from krater Würzburg L160
Reproduced with the permission of Martin-von-
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*Two wrestlers
detail from amphora Berlin F2159,
after Furtwängler & Reichhold, plate 133*

After the runners had cleared the tracks the “heavy events” or combat rounds began. There were no weight divisions, time limits or rounds, though there were rules about illegal moves. Wrestling could be won by throwing the opponent either to his knees or the ground three times. Boxing was considered the most dangerous sport, because of the heavy, stiff leather thonging tied onto fists. There are several stories of competitors dying during boxing

bouts. The final combat event was the pankration. This was a kind of free-for-all fight. The rules are uncertain, and opinion is divided whether gouging and biting were illegal. But it was certainly permitted to dislocate joints, break bones, and strangle.



*Detail of boxer's fist protectors
Boetticher, 1886, fig 11*

The final event on the athletic programme was the *hoplitodromos*, the race in armour. Competitors ran wearing greaves (shin-protectors) and a helmet, carrying a shield. This was the basic equipment of the hoplite soldier in a Greek army, and reveals one of the origins of these sorts of athletic contests.



An athlete with greaves, helmet and shield

Detail from amphora in Louvre, Paris, 470 BC

© Powerhouse Museum 2000

Day 5

During the days of competition, winners were acknowledged by the judges by having red ribbons tied to their arms and legs. The ceremony of crowning all the victors took place on the last day, during a solemn ritual. A boy with both parents still living was regarded as an omen of good luck at religious occasions. Such a boy, at Olympia, cut foliage from the sacred olive tree with a golden sickle. The olive branches were twisted into wreaths. These crowns rested on an elaborate gold and ivory table in the Temple of Hera, wife and sister of Zeus. They were then brought out to an area, probably near either the Altar or Temple of Zeus, by the *hellanodikai*, so that the victors could be crowned one by one.



A victor with ribbons and the olive crown

Detail from an amphora painted by Douris, 490 BC,

© The State Hermitage Museum, St. Petersburg

The final official function was an enormous victory banquet, hosted in the *prytaneion*, the headquarters of the games officials, for the winners. Each city-state mission also hosted feasts, especially lavish if an athlete from their city had won at Olympia.



A reclining victorious youth, wearing an olive crown, holding a large cup of wine, and playing kottabos

interior of kylix (cup), Powerhouse Museum 99/117/1 © Powerhouse Museum 2000

Winning athletes at Olympia could turn their humble olive crown into considerable personal profit, with cash rewards from their home cities and all the privileges that stemmed from international fame. Over time a circuit of contests developed that allowed some men to become full-time athletes. However, the Olympic Games always retained a special place as the pinnacle of achievement. To win at Olympia, an athlete must have pleased the gods so much with his ability and beauty that they allowed him to triumph. In return, the winner gave his victory back to the gods as a dedication. But on earth, among humans, his crown marked him as the best in the world.



*Interior of a cup, showing a variety of athletic contests: clockwise from top – long distance running, sprinting, boxing, wrestling, jumping, javelin and discus, all supervised by trainers, with borders of animals
Berlin F1805 © Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Antikensammlung /bpk, Berlin 2000*



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- Chariot team at funeral detail from the Dipylon Krater, 750-725 BC, Nicholson Museum 46.41
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- Herakles and Apollo detail from side A, Attic red-figure amphora (Berlin F2159), 525 BC, signed by Andokides, attributed to the “Andokides Painter”, found in Vulci, Italy
detail from drawing in Furtwängler & Reichhold; plate 133
- Hellanodikes* with athlete
detail of Attic red-figure *kylix* (cup) interior (Boston 10.181), 460 BC, attributed to the “Euaion Painter”, after Caskey & Beazley; no. 44
- Pair of fighting Greeks detail from *lekythos* (jug), 520-500 BC, Nicholson Museum 49.07
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- Two wrestlers and trainer
detail from side B, Attic red-figure amphora (Berlin F2159), 525 BC, signed by Andokides, attributed to the “Andokides Painter”, found in Vulci, Italy
after a drawing in Furtwängler & Reichhold; plate 133
- Men sacrificing detail from an Attic red-figure *krater* (wine mixing bowl), (Naples 127929), 460 BC, attributed to the “Pan Painter”
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- Running girl sherd from a *skyphos* cup, 550-520 BC, Nicholson Museum 56.21
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- Chariot teams detail of a column *krater* (wine mixing bowl), (Berlin 1655), 575 BC, showing the funeral games of Pelias
after a drawing in Furtwängler & Reichhold; plate 121
- Pentathletes detail from a black-figure vase in the Feoli’ Collection (no further identification provided)
from A. Boetticher, *Olympia, das Fest und seine Staette*, 1886, Verlag von Julius Springer, Berlin; fig. 3
- Jumper with *halteres* and athlete with discus
Two details from the exterior of an Attic red-figure *kylix* (cup), 490-480 BC, attributed to the “Antiphon painter”, Powerhouse Museum 99/117/1 © Powerhouse Museum, 2000

- Pelops and Hippodameia in their chariot
detail from Bell krater (now Naples 2200), Attic red figure, late Classical, name vase of the “Oinomaos Painter”
from drawing in Furtwängler & Reichhold; plate 146
- Cattle being led to sacrifice
detail of Attic red-figure *lekythos* (jug) (Boston 13.195), 530-500 BC, signed by Gales, attributed to the “Gales Painter”
after Caskey & Beazley; no. 14
- Running man
detail under handle of a Chalcidian black-figure *krater* (wine mixing bowl), Würzburg L160, 540 BC, attributed to the “Inscription Painter”
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- Two wrestlers
detail from side B, Attic red-figure amphora (Berlin F2159), 525 BC, signed by Andokides, attributed to the “Andokides Painter”, found in Vulci, Italy
after a drawing in Furtwängler & Reichhold; plate 133
- Detail of boxer’s fist protectors
drawing of a statue in Dresden Museum (no further identification provided)
from A. Boetticher, *Olympia, das Fest und seine Staette*, 1886, Verlag von Julius Springer, Berlin; fig. 11
- Athlete with *hoplite* armour
detail from a red-figure amphora in the Louvre, Paris, 470 BC
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tondo (central decoration on interior of cup) of an Attic red-figure *kylix* (cup), 490-480 BC, attributed to the “Antiphon painter”, Powerhouse Museum 99/117/1
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- Cup with various sports
interior view of an Attic black-figure *kylix* (cup), Berlin F1805, 530-520 BC, signed by Nikosthenes, attributed to “Painter N”
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