



The Olympic Games in Ancient Greece

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Origins of the modern Olympic Games, in Olympia, Greece, 8th century BC.

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Introduction

OLYMPIA, CRADLE OF THE OLYMPIC GAMES

The Olympic Games as we know them today [see sheets "The Modern Olympic Games"] have a long history which goes back to ancient times.

Everything started in the Peloponnese, in Greece, some 3 000 years ago.

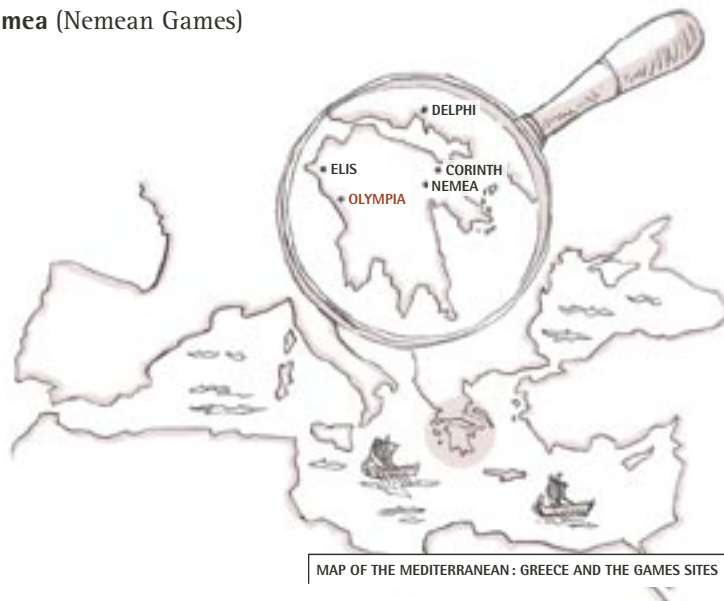
Sports competitions were organised at **Olympia** and were named after their location, hence their name of **Olympic Games**. Nobody knows exactly when they began, but the first written mention of the competitions is dated to **776 BC**.

These Games were held at the same place **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**, which also included :

- The Games at **Delphi** (Pythian Games)
- The Games at **Corinth** (Isthmian Games)
- The Games at **Nemea** (Nemean Games)



MAP OF THE MEDITERRANEAN : GREECE AND THE GAMES SITES

These Games were special because they **brought the Greek world together** 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.

It should be noted that the four Panhellenic Games were never held during the same year.

It is difficult to know exactly what gave rise to these Games. Mythology is mixed up with history, and events which happened at the time were often explained as the consequences of divine intervention. This was the case for the Panhellenic Games, for which there are numerous stories attempting to explain their origin.

THE SACRED TRUCE

On the occasion of the four Panhellenic Games, a **sacred truce** was proclaimed. Messengers (*spondorophoroi*) 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 of reason, at **Delphi**
- **Poseidon**, the god of the sea and of horses, at **Corinth**

OVERVIEW OF THE SITE AT OLYMPIA

Of the four Panhellenic Games, those at Olympia were the most important and were regarded as a special event throughout the Greek world.

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 sporting structures of the **gymnasium**, **palaestra**, **stadium** and **hippodrome**, plus all the buildings used for the administration of the Games and 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**.

FESTIVALS AND CONTESTS ELSEWHERE 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 athlete

A number of objects made by the Ancient Greeks have survived until today. Archaeological excavations have uncovered sculptures, vases, coins and tools. These objects give us a good idea about how people lived at the time. We can use them to find out more about the athletes and the competitions they participated in.



SCENE SHOWING HERCULES WRESTLING THE NEMEAN LION.
HERCULES WAS CONSIDERED TO BE THE IDEAL ATHLETE.

NAKEDNESS

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**. Their bodies, shaped by exercise, were used as models by sculptors and painters who drew inspiration for their works directly from the athletes and their movements whilst practising sport.

The beauty of the naked body was considered to reflect **internal beauty** and to illustrate the **harmonious balance between body and mind**. Practising sport helped to develop and attain this harmony.

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.

Depending on the sports practised, the training took place in one or the other building.

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 the events, 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 cared for their skin in the same way.



AN ARYBALLOS

The equipment that the athlete needed was extremely simple:

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

These were held together by a ring which the athlete attached to the wall of the gymnasium or palaestra.



A SPONGE

A STRIGIL

PARTICIPATION IN THE GAMES

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.

To begin with, the athletes were not professionals. Though they were mostly from rich families, some of the athletes also came from more modest sections of the population. Over time, the situation changed, and most of the athletes became professionals. After Greece was conquered by Rome in 146 BC, Romans were allowed to join the Greek athletes. Later, participation was also extended to athletes of foreign origin, after the granting of Roman citizenship to all the inhabitants of the provinces during the 248th Olympiad (213 AD).

For the Olympic Games, a city selected the best athletes from its gymnasium. The athletes chosen still had to train hard for several months. Once the sacred truce had been proclaimed and the date of the Games announced, the athletes and their trainers left for Olympia. The journey could be long and difficult. When they arrived in Elis, near Olympia, the athletes trained for one month at the city's gymnasium, the last stage of qualifying for the Games. Those who were finally selected went to Olympia and took an oath, as did the judges. They promised to take part in the competitions in an honourable way, abiding by the rules.

GAMES FOR WOMEN

Although women were not allowed into the Olympic Games, they still practised sport. At Olympia, **young girls** had their own Games, the **Heraia**, in honour of the goddess **Hera**, the wife of Zeus.

These competitions were held every four years and consisted of running races only.



CHEATING AND FINES

Some athletes did not always respect their oath and tried to win by unauthorised means. This kind of cheating was punished and the dishonest athletes had to pay fines. With this money, statues of Zeus were erected, known as **the Zanes**. Each of these statues were placed along the passageway that led to the stadium, with the name of the cheat inscribed on its base. To get to the competition site, the athletes had to walk past all the statues. This reminded them of the example not to follow!

FAMOUS ATHLETES

In the history of the modern Games, great champions are headline news. They are admired and respected: they are real heroes.

The Games of Antiquity also had their champions. Thanks to their performances, the names of these famous athletes are still known today.

Below are the profiles of some of them.

The fabulous wrestler **Milo of Croton**, several times Olympic champion in a career spanning 26 years. Milo was a true hero and enjoyed many other victories in competitions outside Olympia. Famous for his legendary power, he was also known for his great appetite!

The extraordinary **Leonidas of Rhodes**, four-time Olympic running champion, was considered the equal of a god by his fellow countrymen.

There was also the boxer **Melankomas of Caria** (Asia Minor), who was famous not only for his magnificent body, but also for his unusual fighting technique. Melankomas did not strike his opponents but instead wore them out by skilfully dodging their blows!

After they died, the great champions had special honours bestowed upon them. So that their victories at the Games were never forgotten, their **tombs were decorated** with a gravestone on which images of the wreaths won during their careers were carved.



Sports on the programme

In the ancient world, the Olympic Games were a reference point. The sports on the programme in Olympia were often taken up with slight variations at other Panhellenic sites or, with further minor variations, in local competitions. It is the Olympic programme that is presented here.

The programme of the Games comprised only **individual sports** – team sports were not included. No water sports figured on the programme either.

WHAT WERE THE GAMES LIKE?

The opening of the Games was marked by animal sacrifices on the altar of Zeus. The competitions, which eventually lasted for some five days, took place in the **stadium** and the **hippodrome**.

The stadium was made of hard-packed earth and was **rectangular in shape**. There were **no terraces** and the spectators sat on the banks, except for the officials (organisers and judges, the Hellanodiktes) who were provided with a stand.

Free men, slaves and young girls were able to watch the Games. Only **married women** were excluded from the crowd of spectators.

The Games ended with banquets organised in honour of the winner and with sacrifices in honour of Zeus.

FEATURES OF THE SPORTS

With the exception of the equestrian sports, which were staged in the hippodrome, all the competitions were held in the stadium.

FOOT RACES

There were different types of race:

- The *stade* or *stadion*, which consisted of one length of the stadium
- The *diaulos*, two lengths or double stadium
- The *dolichos*, a long-distance race (from 7 to 24 laps)
- The armed race (in Olympia it was a *diaulos*), where the athletes wore a helmet and greaves, and carried a shield

The competitors took their place at a starting line marked out by white limestone slabs. They ran in a **straight line** and not around the stadium as they do today.

DISCUS THROWING

The discus was made of stone or metal.

A famous statue by the sculptor Myron represents an athlete about to throw a discus. This sculpture is called **Discobolus** (circa 40 BC). The original was destroyed, but there are many copies dating from Roman times. For example, one of them is on show at the Termes Museum in Rome.

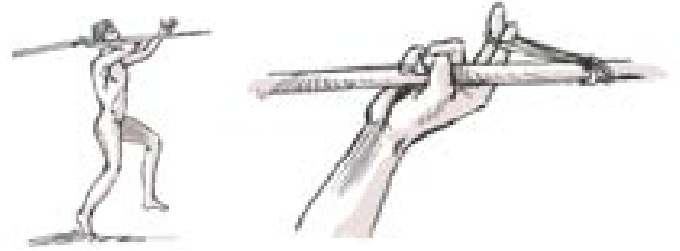
A PRIVILEGED SPECTATOR

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.



JAVELIN THROWING

A leather strap was fixed to the shaft of the javelin to form a **loop**. When throwing, the athlete inserted his index and second fingers into the loop, which allowed him to increase the distance the javelin travelled.

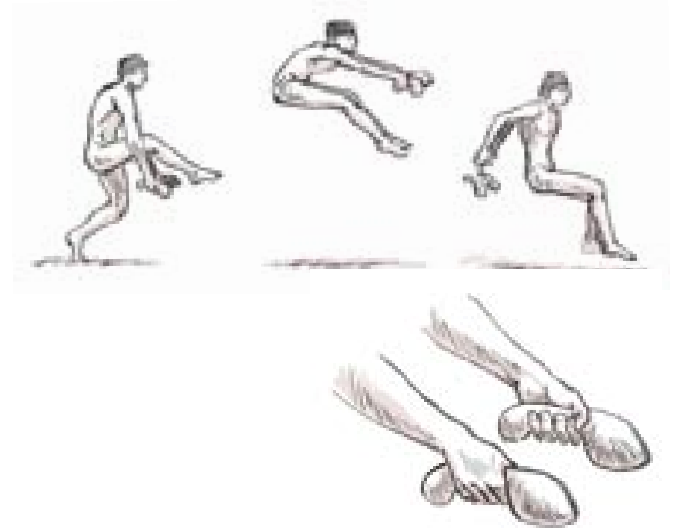


LONG JUMP

The athlete used **weights**. With his feet together and without a run-up, the athlete jumped, throwing his arms forward. In the air, arms and legs were almost parallel. Before landing, the athlete swung his arms backwards, dropping the weights at the same time. This movement propelled his legs forward and extended the distance of the jump.

The use of weights meant that the athletes' movements had to be co-ordinated. Flute music accompanied the event in order to aid the participants in this respect.

The weights were made of stone or metal and their shape varied.



COMBAT SPORTS

There are several hypotheses concerning the place where wrestling, pugilism and pankration events took place. Some researchers think that these competitions took place in the Altis, in front of the altar of Zeus. Others believe they took place in the stadium.

The **drawing of lots** decided which athletes would compete against each other. Unlike today, there were no weight categories.



> Wrestling

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

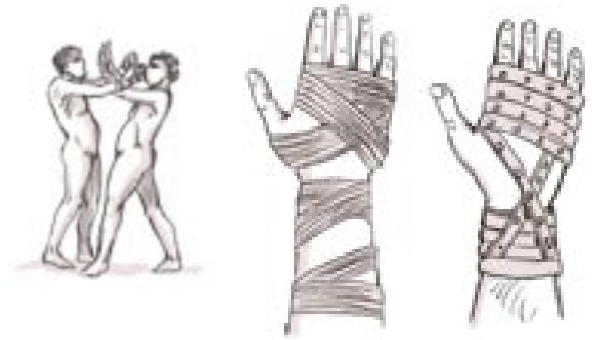


> Pankration

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

> Boxing

The fighters' 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.



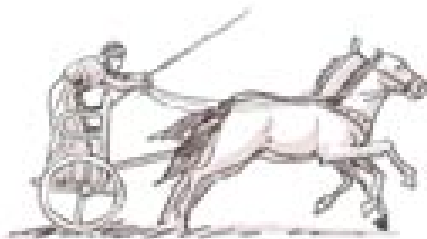
PENTATHLON

The pentathlon comprised five events: running, jumping, discus throwing, javelin throwing and wrestling. The athlete who took part in this competition was called a **pentathlos**. It was the most all-round sport, and the body of the pentathlos was considered to be the most perfect.

EQUESTRIAN EVENTS

Chariot racing and **horse riding** took place in the **hippodrome**.

Chariot races were spectacular and particularly popular with the public. There were **quadriga** races, where the chariots were pulled by four horses, and **biga** races, where the chariots were pulled by two horses. The drivers were called **charioteers**. Unlike the athletes, the charioteers were not naked but instead wore long tunics.



In the horse races, the **jockeys** were naked. They rode bare-back (without a saddle) and did not wear spurs.



Thanks to the equestrian events, women participated indirectly in the Games! As **owners**, they could race their horses, driven or ridden by male charioteers or jockeys.

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.



A DOUBLE FLUTE PLAYER / A LYRE PLAYER

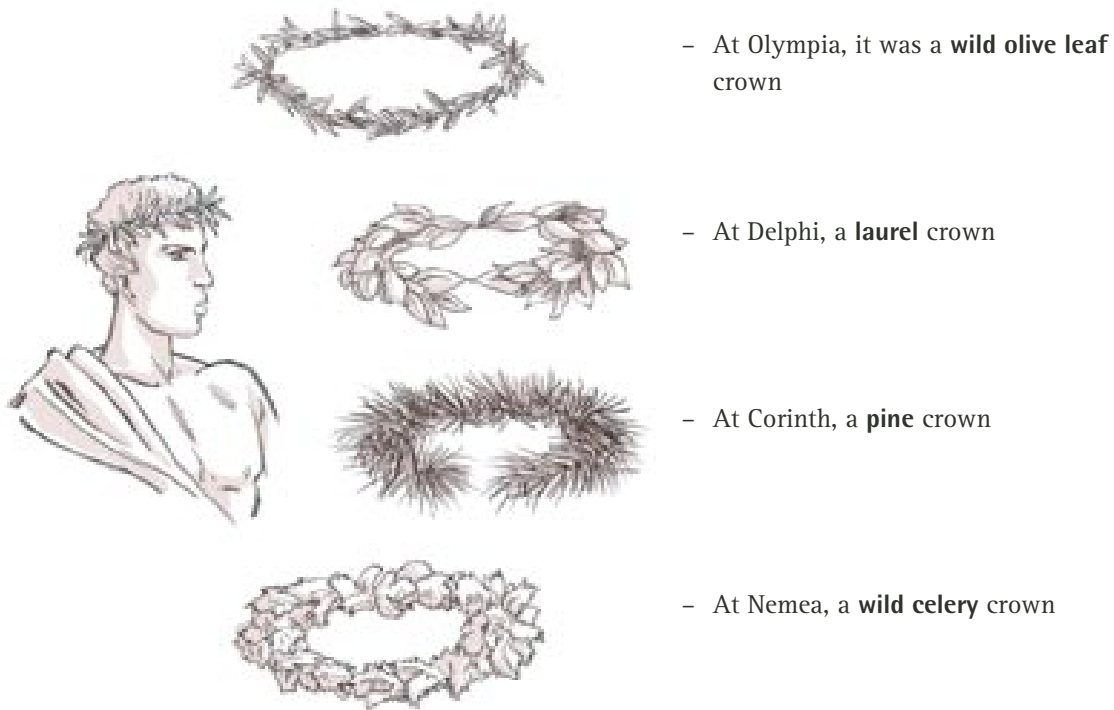


Prizes

CROWNS, RIBBONS AND PALM FRONDS

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 :



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. The statue is called **Diadumenos** and there is a bronze copy of it at the entrance to the Olympic Museum in Lausanne.

Finally, the winner often held a **palm frond**, another symbol of victory.

OVERALL VICTOR

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

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 crown or ribbon.



NIKE PRESENTING THE RIBBON TO THE VICTOR

FAME

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.

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, 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

A PROGRESSIVE DECLINE

Throughout their history, the Olympic Games grew hugely in importance. Originating as simple running competitions, they became a major sports event. However, the quality of the competitions and the ethical values of the participants were not always of the highest standard. These phenomena would become obvious after the conquest of Greece by Rome, in 146 BC, when a period of “decline” started, which would eventually lead to the end of the Games.

There are several reasons for the Games’ disappearance :

- **The professionalism of the athletes**
The Games became a contest between professionals, whose principal motivation was to collect victories by participating a great number of competitions not only in the Panhellenic Games, but in local contests as well.
- **The presence of Romans amongst the Greek athletes**
The Romans were advocates of sport as a show. They sought above all to satisfy the spectators. The spirit of competition, of measuring oneself against others in a climate of excellence, was of no interest to them. The essential ideal of the Games was threatened.
- **The paganism of the Games**
Believing in several gods was a particularity of the religions in Antiquity. The Games were no exception, as they were dedicated to pagan divinities. The birth of Christianity, with its belief in a single God, and the conversion of emperors to this new religion meant that pagan Games could no longer be tolerated.

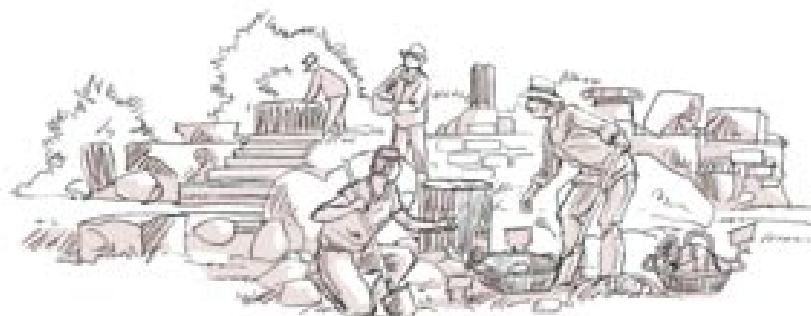
It was the emperor Theodosius I, a convert to Christianity, who decided to abolish the Olympic Games in 393 AD, after **more than 1 000 years of existence** ! The other Panhellenic Games, organised in Delphi, Corinth and Nemea, disappeared at the same time.

THE DESTRUCTION OF THE SITE AND ITS REDISCOVERY IN THE 19TH CENTURY

After the abolition of the Games, Olympia became prey to acts of vandalism. Fires and earthquakes also had their effect and over time destroyed the buildings. Little by little, the site disappeared under several metres of earth and vanished from memory.

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 the 18th century, research work started, and in the 19th century, archaeological digs finally revealed the ruins of Olympia. Today, the exploration of these ruins allows the visitor to appreciate the importance of Olympia and to imagine the past glory of the Panhellenic Games.



Explore a little further...

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, positions and facial expressions, and the objects (look at illustrations in books or visit museums).

Recognise, then observe, sports scenes shown on vases : copy 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 the same town or village as you

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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