

The Olympic festival

The start of the Olympic festival

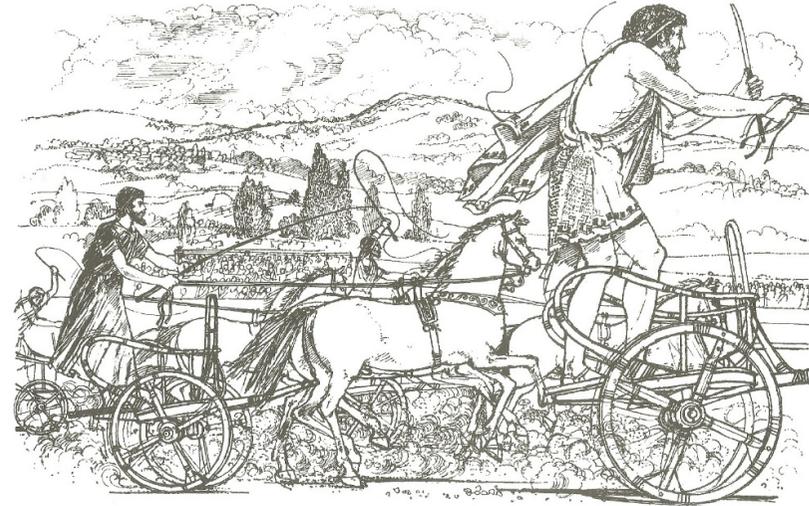
The Olympic festival took its name from a place in southern Greece called Olympia. Olympia was important because it was sacred to the god Zeus. Some stories say that Zeus wrestled his father Kronos at Olympia and started the games there to celebrate his victory. The earliest athletic contest at Olympia was in 776BC and the festival continued there for over a thousand years until AD393. For most of that time it took place every four years just like the modern Olympics.

Participants and spectators

Only men competed in the Olympic games. Women had their own festival in honour of the goddess Hera at which there was just one running race. Only unmarried girls and one priestess were even allowed to watch the events. A woman could win an event if she was the owner of a horse or chariot, but she could not drive or ride and could not collect her prize.

There were no second or third places at Olympia, only winners. The winners received wreaths of olive leaves from Zeus' ancient olive tree, and the honour of winning. Victory at Olympia also brought honour to the winner's city. Back home, his city might give him other rewards such as money, a statue of himself or free dinners for life.

For five days in early August, thousands of people from all over the Greek world flocked to Olympia to watch the contests and to take part in worship of Zeus. Most spectators slept in tents or in the open air. The whole of Olympia was busy with people selling food and drink, merchants, entertainers, fortune-tellers and many others drawn by the large crowds.



The timetable of events

Day 1: the athletes swore an oath to Zeus that they would not cheat; contests for trumpeters; relaxation and sightseeing

Day 2: the chariot races and horse races in the hippodrome; the five events of the pentathlon in the stadium: throwing the discus and javelin, long jump, running and wrestling; parades, victory hymns and feasts

Day 3: great sacrifices to Zeus near his temple; feasts and celebrations

Day 4: running, wrestling and boxing for boys; the running races and fighting events: wrestling, boxing and all-in fighting (pankration); the running race in armour

Day 5: the winning athletes took part in a parade and received their prizes; celebrations and feasts ended the festival.

Not all historians agree on this timetable.