

## THE ANCIENT OLYMPICS

The ancient Greeks loved sport, and the **Olympics** were the biggest sporting event in their calendar. They were one of the Panhellenic Games of ancient Greece, a series of athletic competitions among representatives of **city-states**. Let's see the main characteristics:

- The Olympic Games began over 2,700 years ago, in the **776 BC** at the **stadion**, a race over about 190 metres (the word *stadium* is derived from this event).
- They were held at the Panhellenic religious sanctuary of **Olympia**, a small town in southwest Greece (that is not near Mount Olympus).
- Every **4 years** ("Olympiad" became a unit of time in historical chronologies), about **50,000** people went to the Stadium from all over the Greek world to watch and to take part.



→ This is the stadium at Olympia. It was built during the 4th century BC, and it was the largest of its kind at the time. It could seat 50,000 spectators!



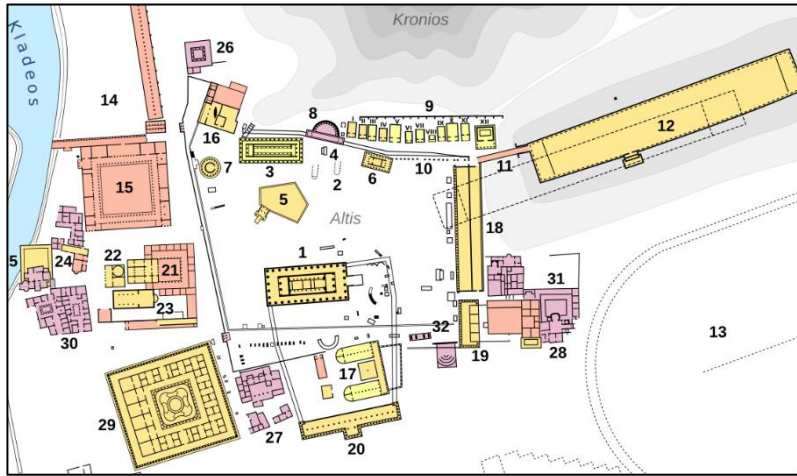
The **exedra** was the judges' stand, located on the south bank of the Stadium. →



→ The **palaestra** at Olympia was the "wrestling ground" (or grounds) where *wrestling* was taught and performed for training purposes (i.e. "wrestling-school"). Two other martial arts were taught there: Greek *boxing* and Greek *pankration* ("any method"), which was free-style, or hand-to-hand, including grappling, kicking, punching, or any unarmed method.

- The Olympics were held in honour of **Zeus**, king of the gods, who were all living permanently on the top of Mount Olympus (that is not in Olympia town area).
- The **statue** of Zeus, made of gold and ivory, was 13 m tall and was placed on a throne in the temple. The statue became one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.
- As Olympics were as much a **religious festival** as an athletic event, they featured religious celebrations and, on the middle day of the games, 100 oxen would be **sacrificed** to Zeus.
- Uninhabited throughout the year, when the games were held, the site became over congested. There were no permanent living structures for spectators, who, rich or poor, made do with **tents**.





Site plan of the Olympia panhellenic sanctuary

Key: 1. Temple of Zeus 2. Altar of Zeus 3. Temple of Hera 4. Altar of Hera 5. Pelopeion 6. Metroon 7. Philippeion 8. Nymphaeum 9. Treasuries 10. Zanes statues 11. Krypte i.e. entrance to the stadium 12. Stadium 13. Hippodrome (exact location uncertain) 14. Gymnasium 15. Palaestra 16. Prytaneum 17. Bouleuterion 18. Echo Stoa 19. SE building 20. South Stoa 21. Theokoleon 22. Heroon 23. Workshop of Pheidias 24. Greek Baths 25. Kladeos Baths 26. Kronios Baths 27. South baths 28. East baths 29. Leonidaion 30. Roman inn 31. Villa of Nero 32. Roman triumphal arc.

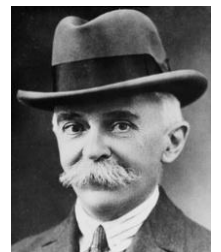
- The Olympics were so important that, during the games period, wars among city-states were interrupted to let visitors and participants travel safely. *Three runners* were sent to the participant cities at each set of games to announce the beginning of the truce. In fact, it seems the **truce** only mandated safe passage for visitors, it did not stop all wars in Greece or even at Olympia!



- After the Roman conquest of Greece the Olympics continued, but the event declined in popularity. The last games were held under the emperor **Theodosius I** in 393, and the Olympics were banned also due to religious reasons: Romans were Christians, and decreed that all pagan cults and practices be eliminated.

## THE MODERN OLYMPICS

- Artistic expression was a major part of the games. Sculptors, poets, painters and other artisans would come to the games to display their works in what became an artistic competition. Poets would be commissioned to write poems in praise of the Olympic victors, etc.
- **Pierre de Coubertin** was a French educator and historian, co-founder of the International Olympic Committee (IOC). Known as the father of the modern Olympic Games, he wanted to fully imitate the ancient Olympics in every way. Included in his vision, was an artistic competition modeled on the ancient Olympics and held every four years. His desire came to fruition at the **first modern Olympics, held in Athens in 1896.**



## ANCIENT VS MODERN OLYMPICS

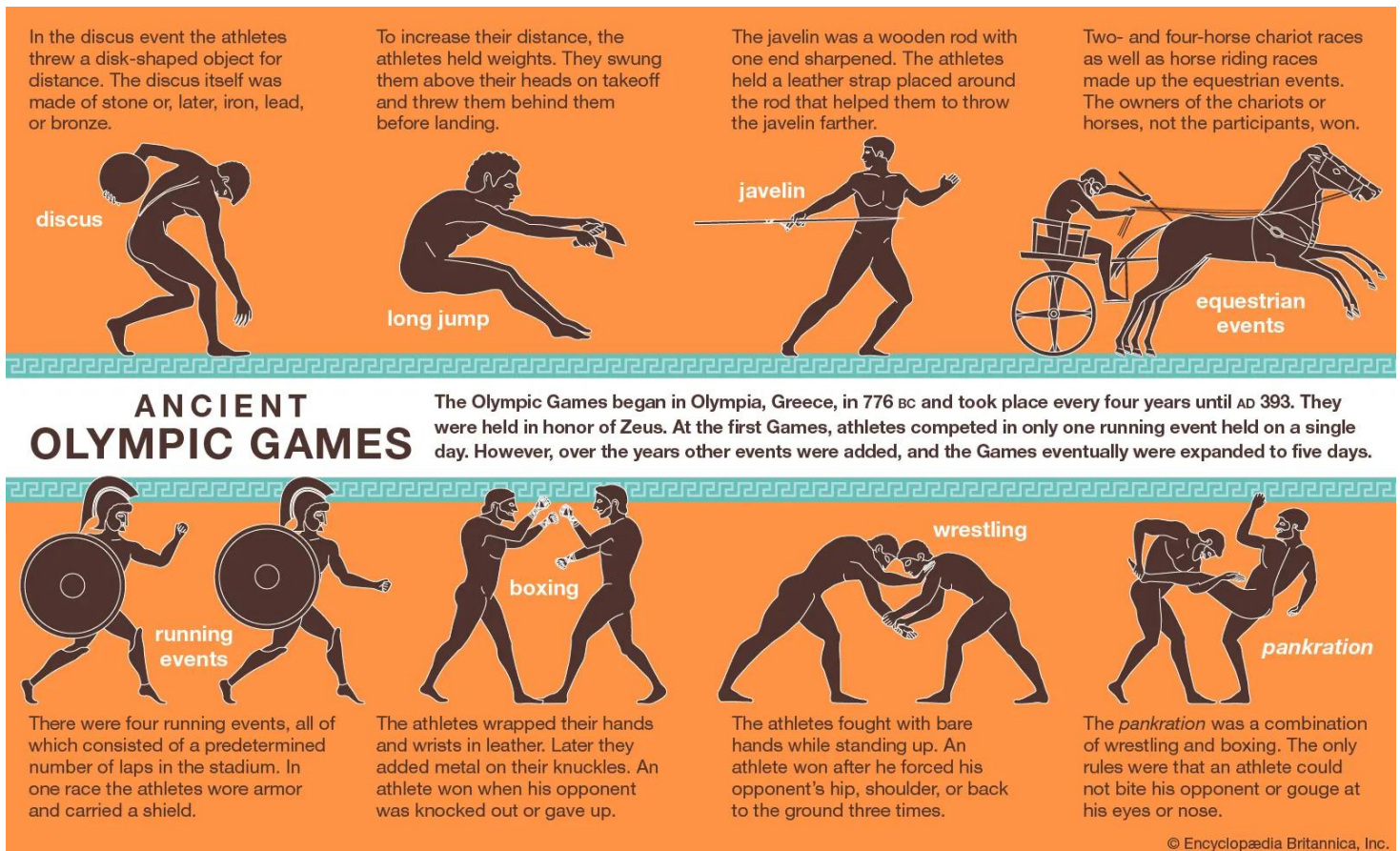
There are some differences between ancient and modern Olympics:

- There were no gold, silver and bronze medals and winners were given a **wreath of leaves** and a **hero's welcome** back home.
- In the ancient Olympics 100 oxen were sacrificed to Zeus and there were no mascots. **Olympic mascots** are fictional characters who represent the cultural heritage of the location where the modern Olympic Games are taking place. They are often an animal native to the area or human figures. The first official Olympic mascot appeared in the **1972 Summer Olympics** in Munich, and was a rainbow-colored dog named Waldi.





- In the past, Olympics were **always held at Olympia** (Greece), rather than moving across different locations, like in the modern Olympic Games.
- The original Olympics had **fewer events** than the modern games! Look at the image:



- **Pentathlon** was a multigame event including: a race the length of the stadium (about 183 meters), the long jump, the discus throw, the javelin throw, and a wrestling match between the two athletes who performed best in the previous four events. This Greek pentathlon was adapted for modern track-and-field competition by setting the sprint distance at 200 meters and by substituting a 1,500-meter run for the wrestling match. The event was included in the Olympic Games from 1912 through 1924.
- The **chariot races** saw the first woman to win an Olympic event, as the winner was the trainer that funded the team rather than those controlling the chariot (who could only be male). This is why the Spartan princess Cynisca was the first female Olympic victor. In fact, only freeborn Greek men were allowed to participate! Women could be only the chariot owners and just maidens could view the competitions: **married women were excluded** from the stadium and they had to remain on the south side of the river. They were barred on penalty of death from the Sanctuary of Zeus on the days of the athletic competition for the men (presumably because their husbands would not be too pleased with them looking at the nude male athletes).
- The **first time that women participated** in Olympic Games was in 1900 in Paris, during the second modern Olympics. However, in ancient Greece there were other kinds of sporting events for women, (such as the **Heraean Games**). In fact, while the idea of a sporting event for women were not considered taboo, it was the idea of the women competing at the same level, manner and event as the men which posed difficulties. The celebration of the Heraia at Olympia was the most renowned athletic festival in which women could compete to showcase their athletic abilities as well as gain respect and honour as an athlete – and even so, this celebration excluded the married women.

# THE HERAIA

- The Heraean ancient Greek Games took place just after the traditional Olympics at around **776 BC** and was held every four years at the **Olympia** stadium. The event was organized and supervised by a committee of sixteen women from the city of Elis, who were also responsible for weaving a peplos for Hera and arranging choral dances.
- The **Heraia**, named in honour of the Greek goddess **Hera**, were considered a puberty or pre-nuptial initiation rite of passage into adulthood for females.



- The Heraia didn't include combat sports, which of course were a big part of the men's games: the unmarried young women competed in a **footrace** similar to the one performed by males at the Olympics, but one-sixth shorter. However, women didn't compete naked as men; instead, they wore the **chitons**, kinds of short robes worn with one breast exposed.
- Women were not all of the same age. The first to run were the youngest; after them, came the next in age, and the last to run were the oldest of the maidens.
- To the winning maidens they gave **crowns of olive leaves** and a portion of the cow sacrificed to Hera: the Greeks believed that the winners would be endowed with strength by eating the meat of the animal sacrifices.
- Winners were also given the ability to dedicate portraits and statues to Hera, and they would memorialize their feats of athleticism by **inscribing their names** on the columns of Hera's temple.

Both of the male and female **games were discontinued in 393 AD** when the Roman emperor Theodosius banned the Panhellenic games and other religious festivals that were celebrated in ancient Greece.

## THE LEGEND OF CYNISCA (THE ATHLETICISM OF SPARTAN WOMAN)

- Spartan women weren't forced to wear long dresses, a custom common across most of Greece. This quality of Spartan female fashion was thought to be emblematic of the freedom, strength, and agility Spartan women were known for.
- Spartan society held firm to the belief that athletic women give birth to strong children. Thus, Spartan women were allowed to ride horses and travel as they pleased, as well as hunt and wear short robes.
- One might speculate that most of the Heraean Games' participants were Spartan women.



- **Cynisca**, the daughter of Archidamus II, King of Sparta, was the first female winner in the history of the men's Olympic games as she won the four-horse chariot races in 396 and 392 BC. In fact, Cynisca was the owner of the chariot that won the race at those Olympic Games. She was honoured by having a bronze statue of her, her chariot, and her horses displayed in the Temple of Zeus at Olympia.