

The original Olympics began as a small regional festival in the 11th century, which was dedicated to the God Zeus. But the origins of the town itself are Mycenaean's who worshipped the Goddess Rhea, sister of Cronus and father of Zeus. If you know your Mythology you may remember that Cronus was told that he would be dethroned by his own children and he devoured five of the sons Rhea had given birth to. When Zeus was born she gave a rock to Cronus and he ate that instead. Zeus survived and later dispatched his father to the underworld and Zeus was top God and founder of the Olympic games.

The first Olympic games were held in 776 BC and reached their height of popularity in 576 BC. The festival was open to only Greek born men but later Romans were allowed to compete most likely because they were running the country by then. Slaves and women were not even allowed to be spectators and women caught sneaking in were thrown off a cliff. The events included foot races, wrestling, discus, javelin, long-jump, horse and chariot racing, and a type of boxing called pancratium. There were not only athletic events but also writing, poetry and history readings, plus business transactions and treaties were made between leaders of city-states. There was no television so unlike modern Olympics, spectators were able to see all the events and not just the ones the Americans were in and had a good chance of winning. The games were banned in 426 by the emperor Theodosius II because they were pagan, and the temples were destroyed. They were begun again in 1896 in Athens.

Olympia was always functioning as a place of political projection and the games often fell, especially during late antiquity, victim to political exploitation from important personalities like Philip II, Alexander the Great and his successors. Romans, proving their authentic Greek origin, also took part in the games, after the total submission of Greece to Rome, but by then the glamour and idealistic spirit of the games was considerably weakened.

Directly depending on the the games and the sanctuary of Olympia was the town of Elis, whose sole interest was the preparation and performance of the games.

The excavations at Olympia were begun in May 1829, two years after the battle of Navarino, by French archaeologists.

The finds (metopes from the opisthodomus and parts of the metopes from the pronaos of the Temple of Zeus) were transferred to the Louvre where they are still being exhibited. When the Greek government was informed of the looting of artifacts, the excavation was stopped. Excavations started again 45 years later by German archaeologists. The research is being continued to this day by the German Institute of Archaeology in Athens, and the Ephorate of

Antiquities in Olympia.

Some of the most important monuments of the site are:

The temple of Zeus

The most outstanding building of Olympia is the Temple of Zeus, built by Livon at 470-456 B.C. It contained the 12 meter high statue by Phideas, one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, which was removed to Constantinople by Theodocious and destroyed in a fire.

The Temple of Hera (Heraion)

A Doric temple dated to the end of the 7th century B.C. Made of wood originally it was a richly ornamented large building with a three-aisled cella where the statues of Hera and Zeus stood.

The Stadium

In its present day form it dates from the early 5th century B.C. The track has a length of 212.54m and a width of 28.50m. On the stadium's southern slope there was a stone platform which was for the Hellanodikes (the judges) and opposite was the altar to Demeter Chamyne. The stadium held 45,000 spectators.

The Philippeion

A circular peripteral building, which was begun by Philip II after the battle of Chaeroneia (338 B.C.) and was completed by Alexander the Great. It was used for the heroworship of the Macedonian dynasty. The statues were the works of art of Leochares.

The workshop of Pheidias

Built to house work carried out on the gold and ivory statue of Zeus. In and around the workshop, tools, terra-cotta moulds and other artefacts relating to the work of the artist have been found.

The Palaestra

Erected during the 3rd century B.C. it was used for the practice of wrestling, boxing and jumping.

The Gymnasium

Closed rectangular building with a large yard. Here the athletes practised events such as the javelin, the discus etc. Dated to the 2nd century B.C.

The Prytaneion

Dating from the beginning of the 5th century B.C. it housed the Prytans (officials of the sanctuary). The sacred Hearth with the eternal flame was privately situated within.