

Article for *The Word*

The Olympic Games, ancient and modern

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In August 2004, Athens will host the twenty-eighth modern Olympic Games.

In the run-up to the event, much is being made of the fact that this year's Olympiad will see the games returning to Greece, where the first modern games were held in 1896, and where the very notion of the Olympics originated in antiquity. But to what extent, if any, do the modern Games resemble the ancient Olympic festival?

The ancient Olympics were held, not in Athens, but at Olympia, located near the western coast of the Peloponnese, the large peninsula that makes up southern Greece. The precise origins of the games are uncertain, but ancient tradition dates the first games to 776 BC. Like the modern games, the ancient Olympics were held every four years. Indeed, the cycle of games was important, and historians of the ancient Greek world reckoned the passage of time according to Olympiads, the four-year cycle linked to each celebration of the games.

Boys, youths and men competed in various sports at Olympia. There were athletic events such as running; contact sports such as wrestling, boxing,

and the violent *pankration* (which combined wrestling, boxing, and kicking, but forbade biting and gouging with fingernails); and the pentathlon tournament, in which athletes competed at wrestling, running, the long jump, and the throwing of discus and javelin. There were also equestrian events, such as chariot and horse racing. Women were excluded from the main events (even as members of the audience), but a description of Olympia written by Pausanias in the second century AD refers to a separate event called the Heraea, at which young unmarried women ran in races. Buildings associated with the Olympic contests have been uncovered by archaeologists, including the *palaistra*, where athletes trained, and the stadium, where athletic events took place. References in ancient texts provide a surprising amount of detail about the ancient athletes themselves. These make it clear that Olympic victors were held in high esteem by their home cities, where they received free meals for life. Given the rewards of victory, incidents of cheating were not unknown: in 332 BC, for example, the Athenian athlete Callippus was caught bribing his opponents in the pentathlon.

An important dimension of the modern Games is that they are designed to showcase the 'Olympic spirit', which highlights amity between nations, fair play among athletes, and a rejection of commercial profit. In recent decades, these ideals have come under pressure, and not just from scandals over cheating by athletes. The Olympics' efforts to rise above politics have been dented by events such the kidnapping and subsequent deaths of 11

Israeli athletes at Munich in 1972, and the widespread boycott of the Moscow games in 1980 by nations objecting to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. In many respects, the political significance attached to the modern games echoes that of their ancient predecessor. The games celebrated at Olympia were the most important of four major Panhellenic ('all Greek') festivals — the others were at Delphi, Isthmia, and Nemea — in which athletes from the entire Greek world participated. By the sixth century BC, athletes from as far away as the Greek colonies in Sicily and Southern Italy are found competing at Olympia. The political importance of the games was manifested in other ways too. Celebration of the Games was accompanied by the Olympic truce, a cessation of war that allowed safe passage for athletes and spectators to Olympia. Copies of treaties between Greek states were set up at Olympia, as were monuments commemorating military victories. Buildings erected at the site by Greek colonies made a physical statement of their belonging to the Greek world. This political importance of Olympia endured throughout antiquity. In the fourth century BC, a massive shrine was erected in honour of king Philip II of Macedon and members of his family, including his son Alexander the Great. Later, in AD 67, the games were specially rescheduled to coincide with the visit to Greece of the Roman emperor Nero, who participated in singing contests. Such rescheduling reflected Nero's astonishing vanity. Other Greek games were similarly re-arranged to allow the emperor to participate in them, and by the end of his tour of Greece he

had accumulated 1808 first prizes. Moreover, when the emperor was performing at a festival, his bodyguards surrounded the venue to prevent members of the audience from leaving — it is said that some people even feigned death in an effort to escape!

Yet Olympia was important not simply because of its games. The site was significant primarily as a religious sanctuary sacred to Zeus, the king of the gods, in whose honour the games were held. This was true also of the other Panhellenic festivals: the contests at Nemea honoured Zeus, while those at Delphi and Isthmia celebrated Apollo and Poseidon respectively. Like Delphi, Nemea, and Isthmia, the architectural complex at Olympia was centred not its sporting venues, but on a complex of religious buildings. The largest and most elaborate was a temple of Zeus. Although seriously dilapidated today, this temple once housed one of the seven wonders of the ancient world, the colossal cult statue of Zeus wrought from gold and ivory by the famous Athenian sculptor Pheidias in the fifth century BC. Since the Greeks were polytheistic, other gods were worshipped at Olympia too: there was a temple to Hera, Zeus' divine consort, and another known as the Metroon dedicated to the mother of Zeus.

It was the religious significance of Olympia for pagans that sealed the fate of the games. As the Roman Empire converted to Christianity in the fourth century AD, the days of such pagan festivals were numbered. We have records that the games were still being held at the end of the fourth century.

Thereafter, they disappear from view, and in the fifth century the workshop in which Pheidias had built his great statue of Zeus was converted into a church. In succeeding centuries, the site disappeared under debris deposited by earthquakes, landslides, and floods. But the ancient ideal of the games lived on to inspire the modern Olympic movement. At the first modern games, medals carried a portrait of Zeus, the god of Olympia, while the cover of the programme bore the dates '776-1896', thus linking the beginnings of the modern Olympics with the origins of the ancient festival.

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