

Olympia: Birthplace of the Olympic Games

The Olympic Games has a long history that dates back to ancient times. Everything started in Greece some three thousand years ago. Sports competitions were organized at Olympia and were named after the location; that is why they are now called the "Olympic" Games. Nobody knows exactly when they began, but the first record of the competitions is dated at 776 BC.

The games were special because they brought the Greek world together at a time when Greece was not a single nation, but a series of politically and economically independent communities known as city-states. From Greece, Italy, North Africa and Asia Minor, people travelled to compete or simply observe the games, inspired by a shared feeling of belonging to the same culture or religion. We don't know why people began to participate in these games. The only records available explain their origins as acts of the gods.

On each occasion of the games, a universal peace treaty was declared. Messengers went from city to city announcing the dates of the competitions, calling for all wars to be stopped so athletes and spectators could travel to and from the sites of the games in safety. A climate of peace was considered important during the period of the competitions.

Archaeological excavations have uncovered a number of artifacts of the ancient Greeks, including sculptures, vases, coins and tools. These objects provide important clues on how people lived at the time, and are useful in learning more about early athletes and their competitions.

An athlete who is the subject of a sculpture or a painted scene on a vase is easy to identify by his nakedness. During both training and competitions, athletes wore no clothes. Their bodies, shaped by exercise, were used as models by sculptors and painters who found inspiration for their works in the athletes and their movements while the athletes practised their sport. The ancient Greeks believed that the glory of the naked body reflected internal beauty, that physical beauty illustrated a harmonious balance between mind and spirit. Practising sport was thought to help develop and attain this harmony.

The gymnasium or palaestra where an athlete trained was also the place where young boys were educated. An all-round education was given, including exercise for the body as well as for the mind. Physical activity, music, arithmetic, grammar and reading were all part of the curriculum.