The Olympic Games

To the west of the Peloponnese is Olympia. It is famous throughout the world as the birthplace of the Olympic Games, which the Greeks held every four years in honour of the god Zeus. People believed that sport and religion were connected, and for this reason festivals often mixed the two together. The first Olympic Games were held in 776 BC.

Olympia was a meeting-place, where men from cities throughout the Greek world gathered to compete in the festival games, or join in as spectators. Women were barred from entering Olympia while the games were on.

Before the start of the games the Olympic Truce was declared. All fighting between cities was stopped until the end of the festival. People who went to the games went to Olympia in peace.

The contests at the Olympic Games were for men only. Athletes arrived at Olympia one month before the festival began. During this time they trained hard for their events. The games were held in August or September, and lasted for five days from the 12th to the 16th day of the month.

Winning athletes were awarded a garland of olive leaves and a palm frond, and ribbons were tied to their upper arms. A winning athlete was hailed as a hero who brought honour to his home town.

Besides the Olympic Games, other sporting festivals were the Pythian, Isthmian and Nemean Games. Collectively, these four festivals are known as the 'Panhellenic Games'.

In AD 393 the Romans stopped the Olympic Games because they wanted to abolish all pagan festivals. By that time the games had been held at Olympia for more than 1,100 years.

A marble statue of a discus thrower. In most games male athletes competed naked, or nearly so.

Athletes running in armour. Note their helmets, shields and leg armour.

Fact File

Olympic events
We’re used to seeing many different sports in the modern Olympic Games. There were far fewer sports in the original games, and fewer competitors. Some events we still follow today, but others have not been revived. Here are the main events the Ancient Greeks competed in.

Boxing two men punched each other until one gave in or was knocked out. Habs were often worn for protection.

Chariot racing chariots drawn by teams of horses raced around a circuit.

Discus a polished flat disc of stone or metal was thrown as far as possible.

Horse racing a long race in which the rider rode without a saddle.

Javelin a pointed rod was thrown as far as possible.

Jumping competitors jumped as far as they could from a standing start.

Pentathlon a competition designed to find the best all-round athlete across five events: discus, javelin, jumping, running and wrestling (‘penta’ means ‘five’).

Running the shortest race was the ‘stade’ which was one length of the track. The ‘dolichos’ race was ten lengths and the race in armour was two.

Wrestling two men pushed and pulled each other until one gave in. A violent game, though killing one’s opponent was strictly against the rules.

REVELATION AND FESTIVALS