

Ancient Olympics KS2

The 2016 Olympics are a great opportunity for primary teachers. As a topical event, they capture the imagination and competitive instincts of pupils. A topic on the Olympics can encompass several subject areas, including P.E., Geography and History. This pack covers part of an overall topic on the Olympics through time, which is ideally complemented by the River & Rowing Museum's new 'Rio to Rio' Geography and P.E. workshop.

Background Information for Teachers

Origins

In 776 BCE, the ancient Greeks began a long tradition of travelling to Olympia every four years to take part in a series of sporting competitions. According to the poet Pindar, Heracles ran a race here in celebration of one of his labours, and decreed that it be repeated every four years. In reality, the Olympics were a religious festival in honour of Zeus, king of the gods.

Olympia

Olympia was not a formal settlement; it was a small sacred area surrounded by a wall, containing the important sanctuary. It was named after the revered Mount Olympus, which was believed to be the home of the gods. It was situated close to the river Kladeos, which in the fourth century CE changed its course, destroying part of the *gymnasion*. Eventually, floods (attributed to tsunamis by modern scholars) destroyed most of the sanctuary and covered the remains with several metres of silt. It remained missing until 1776 when it was rediscovered by English antiquarian Richard Chandler.

The Greek Festival

The modern Olympics feature several rituals wrongly believed to have derived from Greece - among them the grand and often emotional torch relay (this was first included in the 1936 Berlin games). The original games were announced by an oracle, normally for around mid-August, and a messenger would be sent across Greece to declare a Panhellenic (all-Greek) truce. The games lasted three days, and the athletes competed in the nude (beneficial in the extreme heat of Olympia). Instead of the elaborate closing ceremonies we watch today, the final day of the Olympics would feature a feast in which one hundred oxen (sacrificed for Zeus on the first day) were eaten by participants.



Two men wrestling while watched by a trainer, from the The University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology.

Popular Sports

The most popular event was probably the *stadion* race - a sprint of one *stade* (roughly 192m). Other races varied from 2-24 *stades*, and the *hoplitodromos* race featured athletes running in weighty armour (demonstrating military prowess). Another popular sport was the *pankration* – a brutal boxing event with virtually no rules (biting and eye gouging were not permitted). The Greek pentathlon featured discus, javelin, jumping, running and wrestling. The most expensive sport was the chariot race; due to the cost of raising and training horses, it was the owner of the horse that received a victory wreath as opposed to the rider. The only recorded female victor of the Olympics was Kyniska, a Spartan woman who owned and trained a winning horse.

Other Contests

Music was often used as an accompaniment to sports as it was believed to improve the rhythm of athletes' movements. Later, there were separate contests for musicians, as trumpeters competed prior to the games for the honour of being the Olympic herald. During the Hellenistic period, other events were added such as poetry and acting contests.



Winner of a Roman chariot race.

Roman Olympics

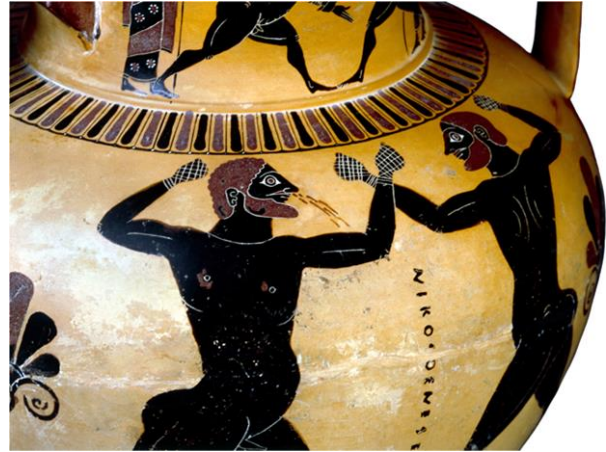
While athletes were treated with almost heroic reverence in ancient Greece, citizens of Republican Rome considered it shameful to take part in competitive sport; they were accustomed to bloody gladiatorial fights, in which only slaves and criminals competed. Respectable men exercised in private. However, with the rise of the Empire came a renewed interest in Greek culture, and respect for the Olympics increased. In 86CE, the emperor Domitian founded the Capitoline Games, the first Greek games to be celebrated in Rome. Alongside traditional events, the new Games featured Roman contests such as horse racing and poetry recital.

The original games in Olympia continued throughout this time, and the emperor Nero is said to have taken part (and won) on numerous occasions. The Romans introduced several amenities to the site at Olympia – including the first public toilets – making the games more comfortable and enjoyable.

Activity Ideas

Art Detectives (Art and History)

Show your pupils the images below of ancient Greek pots. All of these pots depict some kind of ancient Olympic sport. Challenge them to spot clues in the pictures of what happened in the ancient Olympics, and see if they can figure out what was happening.



As an extension, ask them to examine the artistic features of the pots – the colours, the poses of the athletes and the presence of writing. They can then draw their own pictures in the style of a Greek pot, showing a sport of their choice. Alternatively, for a more hands on activity, they can make Greek pots using papier mache and paint.

Independent Research (ICT and History)

Using the library and ICT, challenge your pupils to find out the following information about the ancient Olympics.

- Where did the ancient Olympics take place?
- What differences and similarities are there between ancient and modern Olympics?
- What sports did the ancient Greeks take part in?
- Who was allowed to take part?
- Who was Milo of Kroton, and why did he come to such a sticky end?
- Were there any other famous Greek athletes?
- Did any athletes cheat at the ancient Olympics?
- What's the most interesting fact you can find about the ancient Olympics?

Below is a list of suitable webpages for pupil research:

- http://www.bbc.co.uk/schools/primaryhistory/ancient_greeks/the_olympic_games/
- http://www.britishmuseum.org/explore/young_explorers/discover/all_about/sport_in_ancient_greece.aspx
- <http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/Olympics/index.html>
- <http://www.ancientgreece.com/s/Olympics/>
- http://www.ducksters.com/history/ancient_greek_olympics.php

Sweet Victory (Art)

Rather than receiving medals, victors at the Olympic Games received sacred olive wreaths. For a simple art activity, olive wreaths can be made out of paper plates and green sugar paper.

Simply:

- Cut out the middle of the paper plate; this can be done by cutting two lines (roughly 5cm apart) into the edge of the plate, then cutting around the inner circle. You should be left with a wreath-shaped band.
- Cut out olive leaves out of green sugar paper. You might want to do this for the pupils, or provide them with a template to cut out themselves.
- Glue the leaves to the paper plate, making sure it is all covered.
- Children can use their olive wreaths as a prize for a mock Olympic race (see below).

Mock Olympics (P.E.)

A fun P.E. idea is to try and recreate a *stadion* (192m) running race. Participants chose which lanes they ran in by drawing lots; this can be recreated by drawing names from a hat. Racers should start by standing straight with their arms extended in front of them. The herald (the teacher or a chosen pupil) shouts 'Apite!' ('Away you go!') to signal the start of the race – like the modern games, false starts led to disqualification. If there is a tie, the race starts again. The victor receives an olive wreath (see above) and red ribbons are tied to their hands.

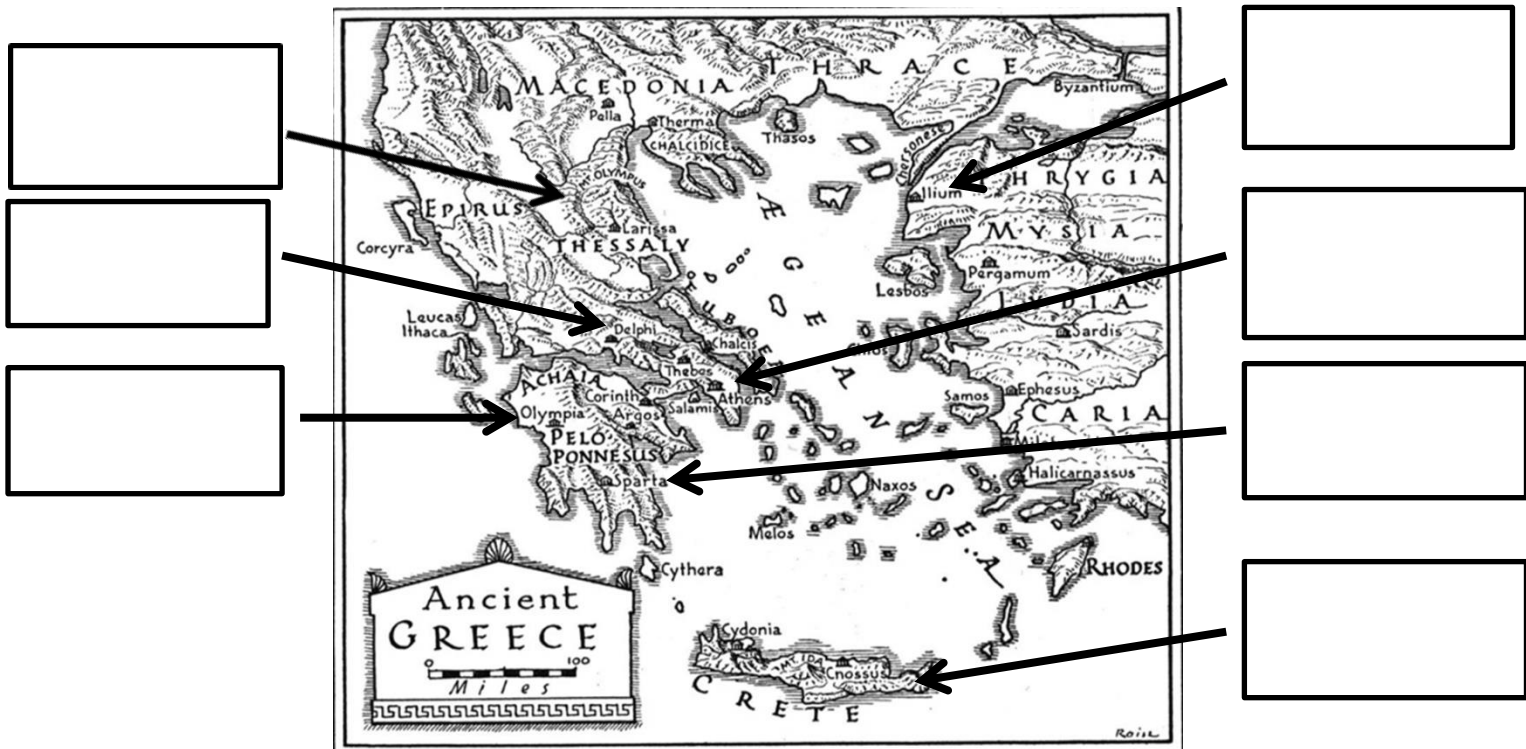
While many other Greek sports aren't appropriate to be recreated by children (*pankration* was far too brutal!), with a bit of imagination it's possible to get the flavour of certain events safely. For example, the discus can be recreated with Frisbees, and the *hoplitodromos* (race with armour) could simply be a race with extra clothes on. Challenge your pupils to come up with ways of 'updating' Greek sports for Sports Day!

Destruction of Olympia (Geography)

The site of the Greek Olympics has many tie-ins with physical geography. To start, get pupils acquainted with the geography of ancient Greece with the 'Mythbusters' map activity on page 6.

Olympia has been victim of several natural disasters. Most tragically, the site of the Olympics was damaged and covered by silts because of tsunami floods. Pupils can research the basic science of tsunamis, finding out how they are caused and the impact they can have.

Mythbusters: Find and label the locations from Greek mythology.



Ilium: also known as 'Troy' – the site of the ten year long Trojan War.

Mount Olympus: home of the Greek gods.

Olympia: a famous sanctuary for Zeus, home of the Olympic games.

Athens: home of the hero Theseus, who defeated the dreaded minotaur.

Delphi: people travelled here from all across Greece for advice from Apollo's oracle.

Crete: home of King Minos and his deadly minotaur.

Sparta: birthplace of the legendary beauty, Helen, who left her husband and caused the Trojan War.

Olympic Programme (Literacy)

Have your pupils read a programme of events from a recent Olympics. Have them answer the following questions:

- How is a programme structured?
- What information is included?
- What sort of language is used?
- Are there any pictures?
- If you can find more than one programme, compare them and see which features are always there and which have been added.

Using their research, ask them to make a programme of events for an Olympics in either Greek or Roman times, including information about what sports there are to watch and which famous athletes are taking part.

Alternatively, they could write a diary entry as either a competitor or someone who has been to watch the ancient Olympics. They should think about what their character did, thought and felt during their day at the festival.