



# Olive Press

## Newsletter of the Kefi Club



### Myth, Religion, and Athletics: What Happened at the First Olympic Games?

Duncan Howitt-Marshall



Black-figure Panathenaic amphora depicting runners, c. 500 BC, on display at the Louvre, Paris. [Marie-Lan Nguyen / Public domain]

In the long annals of Greek history, few events resonate as profoundly as the origins and early developments of the Olympic Games. Emerging from the shadows of the so-called Dark Ages (c. 1100-800 BC), ancient Greece unfurled its cultural tapestry amid the verdant hills and valleys of Elis (Iliia), in the western Peloponnese. Here, against a backdrop of myth and ritual, the inaugural Olympic Games took root — a convergence of mythology, religion, and athletic prowess destined to leave an indelible mark on the course of human history.

Traditionally traced back to the summer of 776 BC, the date given in the Olympic victor list of Hippias of Elis, composed in the late 5th century BC, the inaugural Olympic Games — the legendary “1st Olympiad” marked the genesis of a tradition that would endure for over a thousand years. These quadrennial celebrations, staged every four years, transcended mere athletic competition, evolving into a monumental ode to athleticism, the Greek ideal of beauty, Panhellenic unity, and divine reverence to the Olympian gods. Remarkably, the Games persisted, weathering the tides of conquest and empire until their final recorded incarnation in AD 393, under the rule of Roman Emperor Theodosius I.



The Temple of Zeus at ancient Olympia. The sanctuary of Olympia in the northwest Peloponnese became a centre for the worship of Zeus as early as the 10th century BC. [Elisa.rolle / Public domain]

As the torch ignites once more for the 33rd Olympiad of the Modern Era, slated to grace the streets of Paris this summer, we embark on a journey to unravel the mysteries of that fateful first gathering. Join us as we step back in time to explore the hallowed grounds of Ancient Olympia and witness the dawn of an extraordinary legacy — a legacy that continues to inspire awe and wonder around the world, in the hearts of athletes and spectators alike.

## Mythological Origins



In the foreground, the remains of the Pelopeion at Olympia, the mythical burial place of Pelops. The Temple of Hera and Kronion Hill can be seen in the background.  
[George E. Koronaios / Public domain]

To the ancient Greeks, the origins of the Olympic Games were deeply intertwined with religion and mythology, serving as a bridge between mortals and the divine. Various legends attributed the Games to the gods and/or to divine heroes, perpetuating competing narratives about their beginnings.

Writing in the 2nd century AD, Greek historian and traveller Pausanias recounts a tale involving the Heracles, one of the Idaean Dactylidai (not to be confused with Heracles of Twelve Labours fame), and his

four brothers, who raced at Olympia to amuse the infant Zeus. The victor, crowned with an olive wreath, initiated the tradition of the Games occurring every fifth year, symbolizing peace and unity. Other Olympian gods, residing on Mount Olympus, were said to engage in athletic contests as well, including wrestling, jumping, and running races.

Another myth traces the Games' origins to the story of Pelops, a revered local hero. Legend tells of king Oenomaus of the nearby city of Pisa, who, fearing a prophecy of his own death at the hands of his daughter's husband, devised a deadly chariot race to challenge potential suitors — which he would always win. Pelops, smitten with the king's daughter, Hippodamia ("she who masters horses"), sought victory through cunning and guile. He bribed Oenomaus' charioteer, Myrtilus, to sabotage the king's chariot with wax axle pins. During the race, the pins melted, causing Oenomaus to hurtle to his death. In gratitude and purification, Pelops held chariot races as funeral games for the fallen king, thus inspiring the inception of the Olympic Games at Olympia. Pelops rose as a revered king of Pisa, lending his name to the Peloponnese region — "Pelops' Isle." [In another, darker version of the tale, Pelops killed Myrtilus to cover his tracks, thus cursing his own family, the infamous House of Atreus, the dynasty of Agamemnon].

In another origin story, attributed to the 5th century BC lyric poet Pindar, the Games at Olympia are credited to the divine hero Heracles, who established the athletic competition to honour his father, Zeus, upon completing his Twelve Labours. Olympia, already a sacred site by the end of the Late Bronze Age (c. 1200 BC), became synonymous with the worship of Zeus, king of the gods, by the 10th century BC.

Whatever the origins of the Olympic Games, these myths underscore the Greeks' belief that the Games were deeply rooted in religious worship and aimed to bring about peace and harmony by returning to the sacred origins of Greek life.

## Athletics in the ancient world

In the ancient Mediterranean, a rich tapestry of athletic traditions flourished across various cultures. Depictions of athletic scenes adorned the tombs of ancient Egyptian and Mesopotamian rulers, reflecting a cultural appreciation for physical and sporting prowess. However, scholars argue that formalized competitions were likely limited to the elite classes, with participation reserved for king and nobles.

Among the Minoans of Bronze Age Crete, athletics held a revered status, with vibrant frescoes from the 2nd millennium BC depicting activities such as bull-leaping, tumbling, running, wrestling, and boxing. The Mycenaeans of the Greek mainland, influenced by Minoan culture, embraced some of these sporting pursuits, and introduced chariot racing into religious and funerary ceremonies.



The "bull leaping" fresco at Knossos palace, Crete, c. 1600-1450 BC. [Shutterstock]

In the literary realm, Homer's epics, composed sometime in the 8th century BC, serve as a testament to the prevalence of athletic competitions in early Greek society. Within the pages of the "Iliad," the heroes engage in a myriad of sporting contests, including chariot races, boxing, wrestling, foot races, fencing, archery, and spear throwing, all performed as tributes to the fallen – most famously the funeral games of Patroclus, as described in *Iliad* 23. The "Odyssey" expands upon this repertoire, adding the long jump and discus throw to the array of athletic feats showcased in the ancient Greek world.

## The 1st Olympiad

Shrouded in mystery, the precise timing of the inaugural Olympic Games remains a subject of scholarly debate and speculation. While the traditional date of 776 BC marks the purported inception of the so-called "1<sup>st</sup> Olympiad," archaeological findings suggest a later commencement around 700 BC. Complicating matters further, the reliability of historical records, particularly the inscribed lists of victors' names, remains contentious until the 6th century BC.



The stadium at Olympia, located to the east of the sanctuary of Zeus. The length of the first foot race – the "stadion" – was approximately 190m. [Shutterstock]

Despite these uncertainties, glimpses of the first Games do emerge. According to textual sources, the only known event was the "Stade" or "stadion," a rudimentary running race spanning approximately 190m — the length of the ancient stadion at Olympia, from which the modern English term "stadium" derives.

To the east of the Sanctuary of Zeus at Olympia, a specially designated stadion accommodated up to 20 competitors for this straight-line sprint. At the commencement of the race, a resounding trumpet blast signalled the start, while vigilant officials known as the "agonothetai" ensured fair play and adjudicated the

victor at the finish line. We know from later Games that if a tie occurred, the race was rerun to determine a clear winner.

Historians believe the competitors started the race standing upright, likely with their arms extended forward; a stance that appears in stark contrast to the crouched position familiar to modern sprinters. Soft underfoot, the track surface of the ancient stadion consisted of packed earth.

Thanks to artistic representations on vases and statuary, it is popularly believed that these early runners competed in the nude, which was certainly the case for later Games. However, Pausanias records that the *first* naked runner was Orsippus, an athlete from Megara, west Attica, who won the stadion race at the 15th Olympiad, in 720 BC. During the race, it was said that Orsippus deliberately discarded his garment because running without it was easier. Pausanias recalls that he was the “first of all Greeks to be crowned victor naked.”



Three runners featured on an Attic black-figured Panathenaic prize amphora, 332–333 BC, on display at the British Museum, London. [Marie-Lan Nguyen / Public domain]

We also know that participation in the first Olympic Games, as with all subsequent Olympiads, was open to freeborn Greek men only, representing their respective city-states — although, later on, women were allowed to take part in equestrian events.

For the first 200 years or so, only athletes from city states in close proximity to Olympia took part. Over time, the Games gained wider recognition, attracting athletes from around the Greek world.



Lighting the Olympic Torch at Ancient Olympia, the site of the first Games in 776 BC.

## The First Victor

According to tradition, Koroibos of Elis was the winner of the First Olympic Games and heralded as the “Olympioníkes” — overall winner.

For his triumph in the inaugural stadion race, Koroibos, received the coveted olive wreath, a symbol of victory and honour. His legacy endured, with the inhabitants of Elis venerating him long after his triumphant sprint. Centuries later, when the traveller-historian Pausanias was writing his famous “Description of Greece,” the location of Koroibos’ grave was still known; a testament to his immortal achievement.

The stadion foot race remained the only recorded event for the first 13 Olympiads. The “diaulos,” also known as the “double pipe,” made its debut at the 14th Olympiad in 724 BC. Athletes raced the equivalent of two stades, likely guided by marked lanes and turning around distinct posts before sprinting back to the starting line.

Long after the introduction of other events at the Games, the running races were still regarded as the most prestigious. As the philosopher Xenophanes (c. 570 – c. 478 BC) aptly noted: “Victory by speed of foot is honoured above all.”



The Philippeion, initially built by Philip II of Macedon after his victory at Chaeronea (338 BC), and completed by his son, Alexander the Great.

Despite the uncertainties surrounding its origins and the simplicity of its inaugural sporting event, the First Olympic Games ignited a flame of inspiration that has endured for nearly three millennia to the present day. From Koroibos’ triumphant sprint to the introduction of new competitions like the “diaulos” and subsequent events — boxing, wrestling, chariot racing, and so on (there was even a mule cart race!) — what took place at the 1st Olympiad laid the foundation for a tradition that would transcend borders and epochs.

While the grandeur of the modern Olympic Games may seem worlds apart from their humble beginnings in ancient Greece, the spirit of competition, unity, and excellence remains unchanged. As athletes from across the globe gather to test their mettle in the hallowed stadiums of the 21st century, they pay homage to the enduring legacy of the 1st Olympiad.

---

This article appeared in Greece Is ([www.greece-is.com](http://www.greece-is.com)), a Kathimerini publishing initiative

The first meeting of our Autumn Season will be on Friday 18<sup>th</sup> October  
“Murder, passion, betrayal, revenge: how Greek drama made these entertaining”

An illustrated talk by Bob Stone

Check our website for details of our other 24/25 Season events

**Chair:** Bob Stone  
Email : [stonebob@talk21.com](mailto:stonebob@talk21.com)

**Newsletter Editor:**  
Lindsay Kontarines

**Club Secretary:** Nick Kontarines M. 07837288887  
Email: [nkontarines@btconnect.com](mailto:nkontarines@btconnect.com)

**Committee Members:**  
Celia Canham Email: [celiacaham@celiacaham.plus.com](mailto:celiacaham@celiacaham.plus.com)  
Judith Bates Email: [batesjudith@gmail.com](mailto:batesjudith@gmail.com)  
Sally Rees Email: [rees.sallyjane@gmail.com](mailto:rees.sallyjane@gmail.com)

**Club Treasurer:** Sherod Williams  
Email: [Sherod.williams@walkerthompson.co.uk](mailto:Sherod.williams@walkerthompson.co.uk)



We're on the web. [www.kefi-club.org.uk](http://www.kefi-club.org.uk)