

Politics

Whereas one mission of the modern Olympics is to promote cooperation and unity, the ancient Olympics provided an opportunity for city states to flex their muscles, making politics as crucial to our understanding of the ancient games as religion.

The Sanctuary of Zeus at Olympia

In order to understand the political context of the Olympics, it is useful to consider the form and function of its physical setting: the **Sanctuary of Zeus at Olympia**. Olympia was a **Panhellenic sanctuary**, which meant it was open to all Greeks, regardless of city-state. This provided an opportunity for political posturing. The sanctuary contained **treasuries** (storehouses containing offerings to **Zeus**) set up by different city-states, many of which were decorated with self-aggrandizing propaganda in the form of inscriptions celebrating the victory of one city-state over another, relief carvings promoting a city-state's mythical origins or divine associations, and even spoils of war. In fact, the contents of these treasuries were largely comprised of loot. City-states would also erect **trophies** made up of looted armor, shields, and weapons throughout the sanctuary to declare their military power.

The Sacred Truce

The exact details of the **Sacred Truce** are still debated by scholars today. The truce did not mean a cessation from war among the city states. On the contrary, conflicts continued without pause during the games.. The **Sacred Truce** made no general prohibition of violence across Greece but rather protected those travelling to the games, as well as preventing any other city states from attacking **Elis** while the Olympics were being held. Heralds were sent throughout Greece a little over a month before the games began to announce the beginning of the month-long truce. This created some problems, since the heralds arrived at different city states at different times. Famously, the Spartans were accused of violating the truce in 420 BCE on the grounds that they had sent soldiers into Lepreon to help the city wage war against **Elis**. News of the truce hadn't yet reached Sparta, but the *Hellanodikai* insisted that the Spartans pay 6,000 *minae* as a fine. When the Spartans refused to pay, they were banned from the games. Demosthenes wrote of an incident in which the Athenian Phrynon was

robbed by Philip of Macedon's soldiers on his way to the Olympics. Phrynon went to Macedon to complain to Philip, who repaid him, saying that his soldiers hadn't yet heard that the truce was in effect.

Oversight of the Games

The Olympics were generally managed by the **Elians**, which ruffled the occasional feather, as other city states envied the prestige and power this gave the city of **Elis** (For information about the role of **Elis** in managing the games, see Section 9: Rules and Regulations). To assert their control over the games, the **Elians** would use the local **Elia**n dialect when writing announcements and regulations about the games, emphasizing that although the **Sanctuary of Zeus** was a **Panhellenic sanctuary**, **Elis** had complete charge of the Olympics. A singular city state having authority over a **Panhellenic** festival meant that conflict extended beyond just the athletic competitions, turning the games into an arena for airing out political disputes. After the **Elians** left the **Peloponnesian League**, a group of city-states led by Sparta in opposition to the **Delian League**, who were led by Athens, in favor of Sparta's enemies, they banned Sparta from the 420 BCE games, flogged Lichas, a Spartan aristocrat, and prevented Spartan king Agis from making a sacrifice at Olympia. Sparta used this as an impetus to wage war against **Elis**, considering it to be a crime on par with allying with their enemies.

Individual and State Glory

Athletes who won at the games secured glory not just for themselves, but for their cities as well. The pressure was on for these civic representatives: a victory increased their city's prestige; a loss was cause for mockery and derision. When athletes set up dedications as thanks they inscribed not only their names, but also their place of origin, inextricably linking the individual and the state. Cities offered significant incentives for performing well at the games: for example, Exainetos was escorted back to his hometown of Akragas by 300 chariots; victorious Athenian athletes were allowed to eat in the *prytaneion*, a building reserved for officials and winners; Ephesian victors received cash prizes; and some cities erected statues of their victorious athletes.

Suggested Further Reading

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