

## Religion and Ritual

Unlike the modern Olympics, the ancient games were inextricably linked with religion. For one, they took place in the **sanctuary of Zeus at Olympia**, providing a religious setting for the Olympics.

The ancient Olympics took place in the larger context of a festival honoring **Zeus**, and there were many points during the games when spectators and athletes alike were reminded that as entertaining as the Olympics were, they were more than just entertainment. Features of the games such as ritual procession, sacrifice, and oath-making were all important threads connecting the spectacle of the Olympics to the religion of the festival. Furthermore, in the background of the games were common manifestations of Greek religion: oaths made to the gods as well as prayers and sacrifices to ensure victory.

### Sacred Procession

The ancient Olympics, just like the modern games, kicked off with a procession. In the case of the ancient Olympics, however, this procession was religious. The procession began at the town of **Elis** and ended at the **sanctuary of Zeus at Olympia**, a distance of approximately 31 miles that took two days to complete. This procession would have included the athletes, their family members, representatives from different city states, and the *Hellandikai*, the judges and referees of the games. A stop was made at the Fountain of Piera in order to sacrifice a boar, whose blood was sprinkled over the *Hellandikai* before they cleansed themselves in the sacred spring.

### The Olympic Oath

Ancient Olympic athletes had to swear an oath just like modern ones, and so did the *Hellandikai*. On the first day of the games, the athletes, trainers, and judges assembled at the altar of **Zeus Horkios**. There, the priests of **Zeus** sacrificed another boar, over which the athletes and trainers testified that they had completed the requirement for ten months of training before the games, and that they would not cheat or cause a scandal during the games. Next, the *Hellandikai* swore to faithfully uphold the rules of the Olympics and not accept any bribes. (For information on the punishment for breaking the oath, see Section 9: Rules and Regulations)

### **Pelops**

Naturally **Pelops**, as one of the mythical founders of the games, was included in the rituals that took place during the Olympics. After the events of the second day, there was once more a sacred procession, this time to the *Pelopion* (Number 17 on the plan of Olympia), the shrine of **Pelops**, where priests sacrificed a black ram. **Pindar** pays special attention to **Pelops'** reception of this ritual in *Olympian 1*:

And now he partakes/ of the splendid blood sacrifices/ as he reclines by the course of the  
Alpheos/ having his much-attended tomb beside the altar thronged by visiting/ strangers.

The specific ritual described by **Pindar** was designed to get **Pelops'** attention; a personal invitation, as it were, to attend the Olympic games.

### **Sacrifice and Feast**

The games were paused on the third day in order to properly worship **Zeus**. Priests, judges, athletes, and spectators met at the *Bouleuterion* (Number 7 on plan of Olympia) from where they processed to the altar of **Zeus** together with 100 oxen. There, the priests slaughtered the animals, burning the thighs as an offering for **Zeus**, while the rest of the meat was saved for a banquet that evening. By sharing a feast with the gods, so to speak, the banqueters experienced a closer connection with the divine.

### **The Closing Ceremony**

The Olympics were bookended with religious ceremonies to ensure that no one forgot the true purpose of the games: to celebrate and honor **Zeus**. The games ended with another procession; this time, a couch was carried from the temple of Hera to the temple of Zeus (Numbers 16 and 8 on the plan of Olympia, respectively). Boys cut off branches of the *Kotinos Kallistephanos*, a sacred olive tree, which were fashioned into wreaths that were placed on the couch. The winning athletes were then crowned with these wreaths at the temple of **Zeus** by the *Hellanodikai* in front of the cult statue of Zeus, emphasizing that victory was only brought about by divine support. This statue was made by the sculptor Phidias from gold and ivory and was considered one of the seven wonders of the ancient world.

### **Suggested Further Reading**

Ekroth, Gunnel. "Pelops Joins the Party: Transformations of a Hero Cult within the Festival at Olympia". In *Greek and Roman Festivals: Content, Meaning, and Practice*. Edited by J. Rasmus Brandt and Jon W. Iddeng, 96-136. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012.

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