

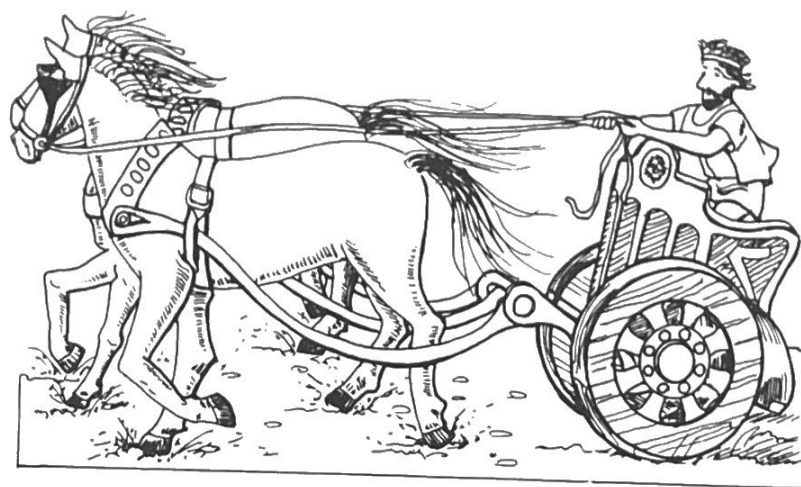
The Olympic Games

Today, people around the world thrill to the ival of the Summer Olympic Games every four years—an international sports competition involving events from boxing to basketball.

Falling halfway between the Summer Olympics are the Winter Olympics, featuring skiing events, skating competitions, and snowboarding. The spirit of these biannual athletic contests began on the Greek Peloponnesus in the year 776 B.C.

Although the original Greek Olympic Games were very different from today's extended international games, the competition was

keen. Even when the various city-states were in conflict or at war, every four years they sent their best athletes to Olympia along the s of the Alpheus River on the Peloponnesus.



Chariot racing was a feature of the Olympic Games

At the 776 B.C. Olympics, the people of Elis (the Eleans), who lived on the level plains near Olympia, held a foot race of about 200 yards to honor their god, Zeus. As other Olympics were held, other city-states sent their athletes to compete in the races.

By 708 B.C., the games included not only foot races, but jumping, discus throwing, wrestling, and javelin throwing. Later games included boxing and chariot racing.

As many as 50,000 Greeks might gather at the games as spectators, cheering for the athletes from their city-state with patriotic pride. The games were scheduled during the months of August or September. By then, farmers had brought in their annual harvest and were free to attend the games. But the season is a hot one on the Peloponnesus, and the athletes competed in burning heat. Perhaps this is why the athletes generally per-

formed in the nude, covering their bodies with oil.

Typically, Greek Olympic Games lasted five days, with the first day marking the opening of the events by a sacrifice to Zeus. During this ritual, athletes swore to compete honestly and not to cheat. Judges vowed to be fair, as well.

The second day featured chariot races, which might pit as many as 40 chariots against one another. Other events held on the second day included a pentathlon, consisting of running, long jumping, discus throwing, javelin throwing, and wrestling. Long jumpers held lead or stone

weights when jumping, which they swung forward to help carry them farther through the air.

One brutal event at the games was pankration, a no-holds-barred combat with only two rules: no biting and no eye-gouging.

Foot races were held on the third and fourth days, as well as boxing and wrestling. The foot races were eventually held in a stadium measuring 218 yards long with a sand-covered field.

On the fifth day, the winning athletes received prizes which included a great banquet and a wreath of wild olive cut from the sacred trees outside the temple of Zeus. Other prizes might include exemption from taxes and honor at home.

Research and Write

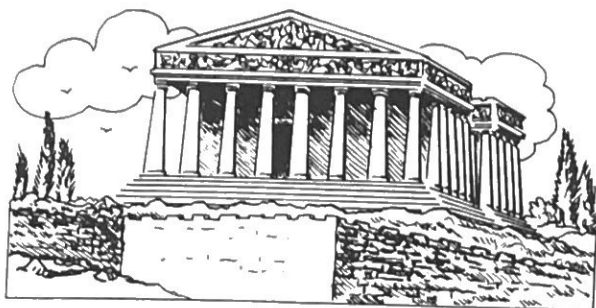
Research the modern Olympic Games. What Greek events are still included in today's games?

Greek Gods and Goddesses

When the Europeans we call Greeks migrated south to the Greek peninsula by 2200–2000 B.C., they brought with them a religion consisting of various gods and goddesses. How these deities behaved and interacted with humans had much to do with what was considered important to the Greeks in their religious practices.

According to Greek religion and myth, Greek gods were not far removed or remote. They were directly involved in the lives of human beings. They intervened in human activities, causing or allowing certain events to take place.

They gave help to people they liked and made things difficult for those they did not. Such gods were very human themselves, sometimes acting in keeping with seemingly human emotions.



Thus, it was important to stay on the good side of the gods. People performed ritual sacrifices to the Greek gods as a way of maintaining divine favor. Since Greek religion had few structures and systems, it did not have an organized priesthood. People performed their own carefully defined rituals and often sacrificed at home.

In addition to home-based sacrifice, the Greeks honored their gods by constructing beautiful marble temples which also functioned to show off the wealth of the city-state. Such temples became sites where people offered their wealth by giving gold, jewels, and other valuable items.

In such temples, priests and priestesses carried out rituals and sacrifices, often on behalf of the entire community or city-state. Animal sacrifice was common. Sheep, goats, cattle, and pigs had their throats slashed and their bodies burned, with the priests and others eating the meat.

Not only did the Greek gods act like humans, they were also envisioned as looking like humans. Therefore, the gods were thought of as strong, handsome, beautiful, young, or old.

The pantheon, or group of gods and goddesses, included many interesting deities. Above all gods was Zeus who ruled the heavens. He was often pictured as an older, bearded man, seated on a throne, and holding a lightning bolt. He was married to his sister, Hera, the goddess of women and marriage. Zeus's brother, Poseidon, was the god of the sea. In Greek art, he was usually pictured as Zeus, but carried a trident, or three-pronged fishing spear.

Additional gods and goddesses of the Greeks included Apollo, god of healing and music; Ares, god of war; Hermes, the messenger god; Aphrodite, goddess of love and beauty; Demeter and her daughter Persephone, goddesses of fertility; Hephaestus, god of the blacksmith; and Athena, goddess of wisdom.

Athena was the patron goddess of the city of Athens (the city was named for her). The Athenians built a great temple to her and every four years held a special celebration called the Great Panathenaea festival.

The Greeks did not create a religion with a definite code of behavior such as the Hebrews had done with their Ten Commandments. However, Greek citizens were generally to act in a way that did not shame the community.

Review and Write

1. Why do you think the Greeks created their gods to look, act, and feel like humans? What problems may have been created by having gods and goddesses who could sometimes act selfishly?
2. After looking at the list of gods and goddesses noted above, draw some conclusions about what the Greeks held as important for their world.