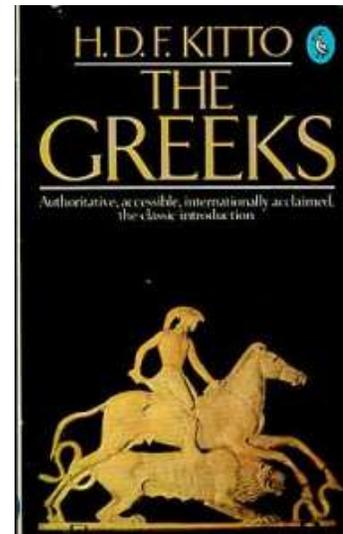


## An excerpt of the essay “Ancient Olympics”, by Kireet Joshi

[http://kireetjoshiarchives.com/teachers\\_training/mystery\\_excellence/ancient-olympics.php](http://kireetjoshiarchives.com/teachers_training/mystery_excellence/ancient-olympics.php)

the original essay is inspired by the classic accounts [The Greeks](#) by H.D.F Kitto & from [The Greek Way](#), by Edith Hamilton.



### How the Greece differed from the Egypt, Rome & Mesopotamia

"..The Greeks loved to play, and they played on a great scale. Athletic contests of every description: races — horse, boat-, foot-, torch races; contests in music and dance; games where men leaped in and out of flying chariots; games so many one grows weary with the list of them. They are embodied in the statues familiar to all, the disc thrower, the charioteer, the wrestling boys, the dancing flute players. The four great games were so important, when one was held, a truce of God was proclaimed so that all Greece might come in safety without fear. There "glorious-limbed youth" — the phrase is Pindar's, the athlete's poet — strove for an honour so coveted as hardly anything else in Greece. An Olympic victor — splendour attended him, processions, sacrifices, banquets, songs the greatest poets were glad to write. Thucydides, the brief, the severe, the historian of that bitter time, the fall of Athens, pauses, when one of his personages has conquered in the games, to give the fact full place of honour. If we had no other knowledge of what the Greeks were like, if nothing were left of Greek art and literature, the fact that they were in love with play and played magnificently would be proof enough of how they lived and how they looked at life. Wretched people, toiling people, do not play, he commented. Nothing

like the Greek games is conceivable in Egypt or Mesopotamia. The life of the Egyptian lies spread out in the mural paintings down to the minutest detail. If fun and sport had played any real part they would be there in some form for us to see. But the Egyptian did not play. "Solon, Solon, you Greeks are all children," said the Egyptian priest to the great Athenian. At any rate, children or not, they enjoyed themselves. They had physical vigour and high spirits and time, too, for fun. The witness of the games is conclusive. And when Greece died and her reading of the great enigma was buried with her statues, play, too, died out of the world. The brutal, bloody Roman games had nothing to do with the spirit of play... Play died when Greece died and many and many a century passed before it was resurrected.

### **The lodestar of 776 BC, and Homer's earlier references**

Such was the veneration attached to disciplined physical achievement that in the confused chronology of early Hellenic history perhaps the only date which historians can treat as a lodestar in their search is 776 BC. This is called the first fixed date in Greek history, the year in which the Olympic Games were founded in honour of Zeus.

But this was by no means the beginning of Greek athletics. We know from Homer, the author of the two famous epics the Iliad and the Odyssey, that the events of the Games had been practised in the Greek world many centuries before the Trojan War. In the Iliad, right in the middle of that war, the great hero "swift-footed Achilles" organises "funeral" games in honour of his dear friend Patroclus, who has just fallen in battle. Achilles watches all the games and distributes the prizes. Only then does he consider that he has paid a proper tribute to his friend. Athletics were thought to be the best way of honouring the gods and those striving to surpass them, the "heroes".

### **The ideal of Physical culture**

The Greek made physical training an important part of education, not because he said to himself, 'Look here, we mustn't forget the body', but because it could never occur to him to train anything but the whole man. It was as natural for the polis to have gymnasia as to have a theatre or warships, and they were constantly used by men of all ages, not only for physical but also for mental exercise.

## **They made the games a part of their religion...**

But it is the Games, local and international, which most clearly illustrate this side of the Greek mind. We have perhaps heard the reproach that man "makes a religion of games". The Greek did not do this, but he did something perhaps more surprising: he made games part of his religion. To be quite explicit, the Olympian Games, the greatest of the four international festivals, were held in honour of Zeus of Olympia, the Pythian Games in honour of Apollo, the Panathenaic Games in honour of Athena.

And so for five days, 45000 spectators, who had slept in the open under the stars, kept their places in the stadium all day long, despite the heat, the mosquitoes, and the thirst. No women sat among them: women were not allowed to attend the festival.

## **The sports, and the ultimate event - a Pentathlon**

The usual events were a sprint, of about 200 yards, the long race (1.5 miles), the race in armour, throwing the discus, and the javelin, the long jump, wrestling, boxing (of a very dangerous kind), and chariot-racing. The great event was the pentathlon: a race, a jump, throwing the discus, and the javelin, and wrestling. If you won this, you were a man.

Winning in the Olympic Games was believed to be as pleasing to the Doric gods as it was to the princes and spectators assembled to watch the events. Unfairness and corruption were deemed displeasing to the gods; it was considered a sacrilege to violate the rules of the game. A strong bond linked every Greek athlete with his gods, to whom he believed he owed his success. Early competition in Greece was quite free of corruption, particularly at Olympia.

## **Even poems were composed for the Victor!**

The victor in one of the great games was a Man. He was indeed almost something more, a Hero, and was treated as such by his fellow citizens. Public honours were paid him — which might include the grant of dinner in the town-hall at the public expense for the rest of his life (something to off-set the Crown of Wild Olive), and, especially among the Dorians, the custom grew of commissioning a poet-composer to write a solemn choral hymn in his honour, for performance at a banquet or at some religious festival. So it came about that of the two most majestic and serious poets of the early fifth century, Aeschylus and Pindar, the

latter is known to us entirely (but for some fragments of other poems) as a writer of victory-odes. A strange idea to us, that a serious poet should write odes to athletes.

Sculptors made bronze or stone statues of the victor. The physical perfection of the all-round athlete generated the ideal of Greek statuary. The festival gave the sculptor unequalled opportunities to study the nude human body in every natural form and pose.

## **The two pauses in Olympic history**

Greece lost its freedom when it was made part of a Roman province in 146 BC. The Olympic Games, however, went on without interruption. Roman aristocrats and athletes now came across the seas to compete with Greek athletes in the ancient Games. But when the Roman Emperors converted to Christianity, the Games lost their patronage. An edict of the Emperor Theodosius I, in AD 393, closed all "pagan" shrines. Zeus the Thunderer and all the other gods of Mount Olympus were banished. The last Olympiad, the 293rd, was probably held that same year.

Olympia lay buried in mud for about 1,400 years. Early in the nineteenth century, archaeologists began to explore the remains of the temple of Zeus, and they have been digging in the area ever since.

## **The Olympics Re-envisioned**

A French nobleman, Baron Pierre de Coubertin, envisioned a modern revival of the ancient games, and he spent many years appealing for support from the nations of the world. In 1896 he finally was able to restage the Games for the first time in fourteen centuries. Now every four years a "priestess" lights an Olympic flame from the light of the sun, enters the stadium in Olympia, and hands the torch to a priestly "king" of the new Olympiad. He passes the torch to the leader of a team of runners, who usher it out of the altis to a grove dedicated to Baron de Coubertin. There an urn is lit on a modern altar, where it burns for the entire duration of the Games.

Another torch, lit from the urn on the altar, is carried by relays of runners until the Olympic flame has reached a temporary home, wherever in the world the Games are about to take place."