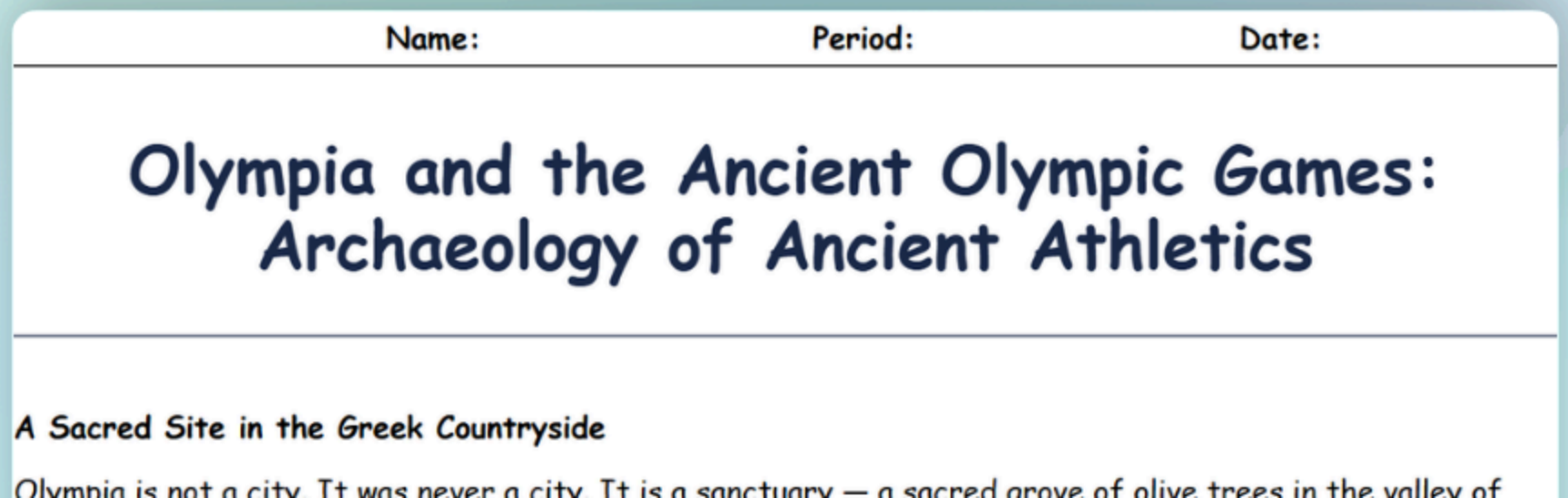
NO PREP

Olympia and the Ancient Olympic Games

Archaeology of Ancient Athletics

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key



Name: Period: Date:

Olympia and the Ancient Olympic Games: Archaeology of Ancient Athletics

A Sacred Site in the Greek Countryside

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A Sacred Site in the Greek Countryside

Olympia is not a city. It was never a city. It is a sanctuary: a sacred grove of olive trees in the valley of the Alpheus River in the Peloponnese, dedicated to Zeus, the king of the Greek gods. Every four years from 776 BCE until 393 CE, a continuous period of nearly twelve hundred years, athletes from across the Greek world gathered at Olympia to compete in the Games. During the sacred truce (ekecheiria), wars were paused, hostilities suspended, and athletes from rival city-states arrived under divine protection to compete, not fight. The Olympic Games were the most important Panhellenic festival in the ancient world, drawing competitors and spectators from every Greek colony and city-state from Spain to the Black Sea. The physical site of Olympia preserves one of the most extensive archaeological complexes from the ancient Greek world. German archaeologists have been excavating here since 1875 (one of the longest continuous archaeological projects in history), and the results are spectacular: the foundations of the Temple of Zeus (once home to one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World), the Temple of Hera (the oldest surviving Greek temple), the stadium where athletes competed, the gymnasium and palaestra where they trained, and dozens of treasury buildings where city-states deposited offerings to Zeus.

The Stadium and Athletic Competition

The ancient Olympic stadium at Olympia could hold approximately 40,000 spectators, an astonishing number for a festival site far from any major city. The track was approximately 192 meters long (one stade, which is the origin of the word 'stadium'), and athletes competed barefoot on a surface of packed earth and sand.

The starting line and finishing line are still visible as stone sills in the ground, worn smooth by the feet of countless athletes over more than a thousand years of competition. Walking through the tunnel that leads from the sanctuary into the stadium is one of the most evocative experiences in archaeology. It is the same tunnel that ancient Olympians walked through before their competitions. The ancient Olympic program was different from the modern Games. Events included footraces of various distances, wrestling, boxing, the pankration (a brutal combination of boxing and wrestling with almost no rules), the pentathlon (five events: running, long jump, discus, javelin, and wrestling), chariot racing, and equestrian events. There were no team sports and no medals. Victors received olive wreaths cut from a sacred tree behind the Temple of Zeus. The real prizes were glory and status: an Olympic victory brought honor not just to the individual but to his entire city-state. City-states sponsored training, erected statues of victors, and granted them tax exemptions and free meals for life.

Cheating, Politics, and the Reality of the Games

The ancient Olympics were not the idealized festival of pure amateurism they are sometimes portrayed as. Evidence of cheating, bribery, and political manipulation appears throughout the ancient record, and in the archaeological record. At Olympia, the approach to the stadium is lined with bronze statues of Zeus paid for by fines levied on athletes who cheated. Ancient sources describe gymnasts paid to throw events, weight throwers who bribed judges, and entire city-states accused of bribing their way to victories. The zanes (Zeus statues funded by cheating fines) are a uniquely archaeological record of ancient athletic corruption: an equivalent, perhaps, of a modern doping scandal hall of shame. Political tensions also invaded the sanctuary. Wars sometimes continued despite the truce, and powerful rulers used Olympic victories as propaganda tools. Alexander the Great's father, Philip II of Macedon, won chariot races at Olympia in 356 BCE and used the victories to legitimize Macedonian claims to Greek culture. The Romans eventually adopted and modified the Games, extending participation to non-Greeks. The emperor Nero competed in 67 CE, was declared the winner of a chariot race he did not finish, and had his victory officially expunged after his death, making him perhaps history's most memorable Olympic cheater.

The Temple of Zeus and the Lost Wonder

The greatest structure at Olympia was the Temple of Zeus, built around 460 BCE and housing one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World: a forty-foot-tall statue of Zeus seated on a throne, made by Phidias (the same sculptor who made the Athena Parthenos) from gold, ivory, ebony, and precious stones. Ancient writers described the statue as overwhelmingly powerful in its presence — the Roman general Aemilius Paullus reportedly burst into tears upon seeing it. The statue was eventually removed to Constantinople, where it was destroyed in a fire in the fifth century CE. The temple itself was devastated by earthquakes. Today, a row of fallen column drums lies exactly where they collapsed, providing one of the most visually dramatic ruins at the entire site.

Key Information: Olympia and the Olympic Games

Detail	Information
Location	Sacred sanctuary in the Alpheus River valley, Peloponnese, Greece
Olympic Period	776 BCE to 393 CE — nearly 1,200 years of continuous games
Sacred Truce	Ekecheiria — wars paused during the Games; athletes traveled under divine protection
Stadium Capacity	Approximately 40,000 spectators
Victory Prize	Olive wreath (not a medal); winners received lifelong honors from their city-state
Excavating Institution	German Archaeological Institute, beginning 1875 — one of the longest running excavations
Zanes	Bronze Zeus statues paid for by cheating fines, lining the path to the stadium
Lost Wonder	Phidias's forty-foot gold and ivory Zeus statue; destroyed in Constantinople, 5th century CE

Case Study: Kallias Trains for Olympia

Kallias of Elis had been training for four years for this. He rose before dawn every morning and ran to the gymnasium, where he trained under his coach's eye until the heat of the day made the dust rise in choking clouds. His father had sold two cattle to pay the training fees. His mother had stopped buying new cloth for dresses. The entire household understood that this was an investment — not just in Kallias, but in the family's honor. He was a wrestler. Not the biggest wrestler at Olympia, and not the fastest, but technically precise and hard to put on the ground. His coach told him he had a chance. His coach said that every year to every boy. What Kallias had not told anyone was that the wrestler from Corinth had sent a messenger two months ago with an offer. Throw the semifinal. Walk away from the match early and make it look like an injury. In return, a sum of money that would pay off his father's debts and buy back the cattle twice over. He had not answered the messenger. He had not answered because he was still deciding. The olive wreath meant nothing to a man whose family went hungry. The statue of Zeus ahead of him seemed to be watching.

1. Kallias is considering whether to throw the match for money. Using evidence from the reading, explain what the consequences might have been if he accepted the bribe and was caught.

2. The reading says that city-states 'sponsored training, erected statues of victors, and granted them tax exemptions and free meals for life.' How does this context change your understanding of what an Olympic victory meant beyond personal glory?

Multiple Choice

1. What were the 'zanes' at Olympia, and what did their existence reveal about the ancient Olympic Games?

a) Bronze statues of Zeus paid for by cheating fines, revealing that bribery and corruption existed at the ancient Games

b) Treasury buildings erected by city-states, revealing the underlying political competition behind athletic competition

c) Stone starting blocks used in footraces, revealing the precise distance of the ancient stadium

d) Grave markers for athletes who died during competition, revealing the dangers of ancient sports

2. Why was an Olympic victory particularly valuable to a city-state, beyond honoring the individual athlete?

a) City-states received exemption from the Olympic Games' entrance fees for the next four years

b) Victory brought honor and political prestige to the entire city-state, which could use wins as propaganda

c) The winning city-state received a large portion of the offerings stored in the Olympia treasury buildings

d) Olympic victors were automatically given military command in their city-state's army

3. The reading mentions that Emperor Nero's Olympic victory was officially expunged after his death. Why is this historically significant?

a) It confirms that chariot racing was the most prestigious event at the ancient Games

b) It demonstrates that Nero was the only Roman emperor to personally compete and participate in the ancient Olympics

c) It shows that even in a politically distorted competition, there was a process for correcting fraudulent results

d) It proves that Romans were banned from Olympic competition under Greek rules

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ ekecheiria	A) A training facility for wrestlers and combat athletes, part of the Olympia sanctuary complex
2. ___ pankration	B) Relating to all Greeks collectively, used to describe the Olympic Games' cross-city-state participation
3. ___ pentathlon	C) An ancient combat sport combining boxing and wrestling with almost no rules, considered extremely brutal
4. ___ palaestra	D) The sacred truce declared during the Olympic Games during which wars were paused and athletes traveled safely
5. ___ Panhellenic	E) A five-event athletic competition combining running, long jump, discus throw, javelin, and wrestling

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. Olympic victors received a wreath made from _____ cut from a sacred tree behind the Temple of Zeus, though the real prize was the lifelong honor and privileges granted by their city-state.

2. German archaeologists have been excavating Olympia since _____, making it one of the longest continuous archaeological projects in history.

3. The ancient Olympic stadium could hold approximately _____ spectators, an astonishing number for a sanctuary far from any major city.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. The reading describes the ancient Olympics as far from the idealized amateur festival they are sometimes portrayed as. What specific evidence — both from ancient sources and from the archaeological record — supports this more complicated picture?

2. The sacred truce required warring city-states to pause their conflicts during the Games. What does this practice reveal about the role of religion in ancient Greek political life?

3. The Temple of Zeus at Olympia housed one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, but the statue is gone and the temple lies in ruins. What does this fate illustrate about the challenges of preserving ancient sites and objects across thousands of years of history?