

Winning at the ancient Games

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Traill

Discus thrower: the Discobolus

Roman copy of a Greek original around
450–440 BC

Tivoli, Italy

GR 1805,0703.43 BM Sc. 250



The official poster
for the 1948
Games staged in
London, designed
by Walter Herz.
GR 2007,5006.1

Chinese sculptor
Sui Jianguo's
reinterpretation of
the Discobolus is on
display in Room 3
from 1 June to the
9 September.

This marble statue of a discus thrower is a Roman copy of a Greek bronze original made by Myron of Athens. The original was famous throughout the ancient world and a number of Roman copies survive. This version was discovered in the emperor Hadrian's great pleasure park at Tivoli, near Rome. It was found largely complete except for the head. This was missing and was replaced by a head from a quite different statue.

What role did discus play in the ancient Olympic Games?

Discus-throwing was the first event in the five-part contest known as the pentathlon. Pentathletes were sometimes considered inferior to those athletes who excelled at a particular sport, but their physical appearance was much admired as no single muscle group was overly developed. This statue is an idealised representation rather than a realistic depiction of a discus thrower. It conveys the essence of youthful male beauty, harmony, rhythm, balance and proportion.



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Treasure

Victorious athlete

Roman version of a Greek bronze original of about 440–430 BC

Found by the Roman theatre at Vaison, France, perhaps from a nearby villa

GR 1870,0712.1 (Sculpture 500)



A reconstruction drawing of the statue, showing the red victory ribbon

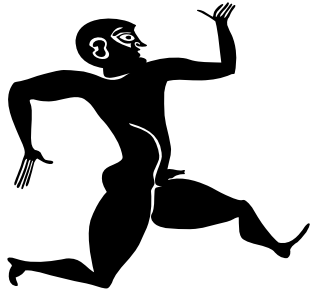
Known as the *Diadoumenos* (ribbon wearer) this statue shows a triumphant athlete tying a ribbon round his head to symbolise victory. At ancient Greek sports festivals it was the custom to give red ribbons to winning athletes. All Greek athletes exercised and competed nude, taking pride in the muscular perfection which they had striven hard to achieve. The identity of this athlete and the event he won are not known. He may represent athletic victories in general.

What is a victor statue?

Victor statues were intended to immortalise successful athletes. Bronze was favoured for athletic statues, perhaps because it better represented tanned, oiled skin, but many figures were carved from marble. They were set on bases inscribed with details such as a dedication to a god, the athlete's name, father's name, home town and contest. This Roman marble statue copied a bronze original by the Greek sculptor Polykleitos. It is recorded that the original fetched the price of a hundred talents, an enormous sum in the ancient world.



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Trail

Model of ancient Olympia

Model by Preview of Westerham



Model reconstruction of the great gold and ivory statue of Zeus, 13 metres tall, which stood in the temple of Zeus at Olympia (British Museum. Model made by Sophie Kleinschmidt)

This model shows the site of Olympia as it looked around 100 BC. On a scale of 1:200, it represents the buildings, monuments and landscape of Olympia, but there would also have been thousands of statues. The largest of these was a gold and ivory statue of the god Zeus, over 13 metres tall, which stood in his temple (centre). Statues were set up to honour not only gods but also heroes, statesmen and the vast numbers of athletes who had won at the Games over the centuries. It was like an open-air Olympic hall of fame.

Why were the Games always held at Olympia?

Olympia was the oldest sanctuary of Zeus, the supreme god of Greek mythology. The Games were held in his honour, as he was believed to grant athletes their strength and skills. Visitors came to Olympia for the Games every four years since at least 776 BC. The Games lasted for over 1000 years, but finally came to an end when the site was ravaged by invasions, flooding and earthquakes, and a decree outlawed pagan cults.



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Motya Charioteer



Trail



Made by a Greek sculptor in Sicily, about 460–450 BC

Found on the Sicilian island of Motya (Mozia), off the western tip of Sicily, in 1979

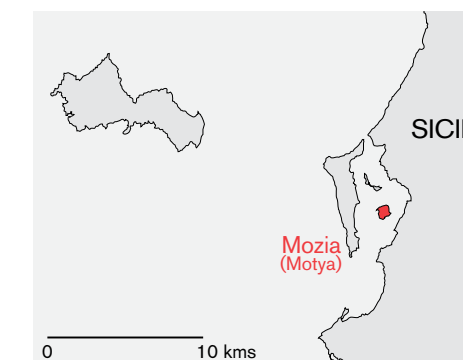
On loan from the Assessorato and Dipartimento dei Beni Culturali e dell'Identità Siciliana, Regione Siciliana with thanks to the Italian Cultural Institute in London.

Normally on display at the Museo Giuseppe Whitaker, Mozia



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This is a very rare surviving example of an original Greek victor statue. The athlete stands in a confident pose, raising his right arm probably to place or adjust a victor's wreath on his head. The wreath would have been metal, attached to the head by pins. The statue is renowned for its remarkable touches of realism, such as the way the fingers of the left hand press into the hip and pull the fine fabric.



Map showing the location of Motya

How do we know that this sculpture is a charioteer?

Although there has been a range of interpretations of this figure, the youth's tunic indicates he is probably a charioteer. The tunic is a *xystis*, a long white garment traditionally worn by charioteers, which clings to his body after the sweat and toil of the race. The reins were sometimes attached to the chest band to help the charioteer control the horses.

Wealthy Greek aristocrats, among them rulers of the Greek cities in Sicily, revelled in competing in the chariot events at the Olympics. Sometimes they competed themselves but often they employed professional charioteers for this difficult and dangerous sport.

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Trail

Prize amphora showing a chariot race

Made in Athens about 410–400 BC
Found at Taucheira in Cyrenaica, modern Libya
GR 1866,0415.249, Vase B606



Speeding chariot from the south frieze of the Parthenon, slab XXXI, 78–9 (close by the statue of the Motya Charioteer, stop 4)

The painter of this vase has been highly successful in creating the illusion of speed as the chariot careers along. The hair and tunic of the charioteer are blown back, and the manes and tails of the horses fly in the rush of air. The chariot is coming up to a post which may represent the turn or the finish line. Both moments would be climaxes in the race.

What was the first prize in the chariot race?

This vase would have been awarded to the winner of the chariot race in the Panathenaic games, a major sports festival held in Athens. The victor would have received 140 of these vessels, each containing 40 litres of olive oil. Chariot racing was the most popular spectator sport in ancient times. Up to 40 chariots could compete in a race and crashes were common. The two turning posts at either end of the oblong course were the most dangerous parts of the track.



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Trail

A competitor in the long jump

Greek, but made for the Etruscan market, about 540 BC

Found at Cerveteri in ancient Etruria

1847,0806.26, Vase B 48

On the shoulder of this vase an athlete is captured mid-jump. It's one of the best depictions of the event that survives. To the right a trainer urges him on, and far right is a discus thrower. To the jumper's left is an athlete holding possibly javelins, and far left, two wrestlers. Beneath the jumper are pegs, which may record his previous jumps or those of other athletes. The writing is mainly decorative rather than meaningful.

How did the ancient long jump differ from the modern version?

In the ancient long jump athletes carried weights that were swung forward on take-off and back just before landing. It's often said that the weights increased the length of the jump, but it is more likely that they were a handicap. Most ancient sport evolved as a means of training for warfare, and this exercise would simulate a jump carrying kit. Skill in this sport would be useful for crossing a stream or ravine.

The battle scenes on the vase, and friezes of birds and animals are not related to the athletic scenes.

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Pair of lead jumping weights, weighing 1.07kg. each (undamaged)





Trail

Stele of Lucius who 'competed in a manner worthy of victory'

Didyma, (modern Didim, Turkey)
GR 1859,1226.19, Inscription 928

This inscription honours a Roman athlete called Lucius, son of Lucius, for his sporting achievements. The back of the stone block is broken away so we cannot tell whether it once supported a statue of Lucius or was simply an honorary inscription, perhaps set into a wall. It says that Lucius 'won at the Didymaeian games, competed for the crown at Olympia, and competed in all the other athletic festivals in a manner worthy of victory'.

Why is this inscription unusual?

Apart from his success in the local games at Didyma, it seems that Lucius could not claim any actual Olympic victories. Usually only athletes who came first were commemorated with inscriptions. We don't know why Lucius was singled out to be honoured in this way, but he may have been a celebrated local citizen or perhaps Didyma could not boast many entrants in the major Games. The games at Didyma were held in honour of Apollo, within the god's sanctuary.



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Trail

Sprinter on a vase from Rhodes and a bronze running girl

East Greek amphora found in the Fikellura cemetery, Kamiros, Rhodes

Made in Miletus in modern Turkey, about 530–500 BC

GR 1864,1007.156

Greek bronze figure said to have been found at Prizren, Kosovo

Made in Sparta about 520–500 BC

1876,0510.1, Bronze 208



Runners took off from a standing start, one foot slightly in front of the other, the toes of each foot in the two parallel grooves in the starting sill.

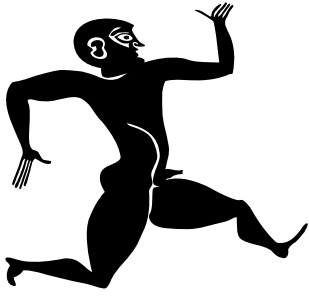
This vase shows a lively image of a sprinter racing past, his arms and legs going furiously to and fro. He forms a strong contrast to the three long distance runners on the large amphora in this case, whose arms hang loosely at their sides as they plod steadily on. The bronze running girl, probably one of three or more from the rim of a bronze bowl which has not survived, seems to be looking back to see how far away her competitors are.

How did the men's footrace influence the Greek calendar?

The men's sprint was the only contest at the first thirteen Olympics. The race was so important that the Greeks kept their calendar according to the names of the victors. Women, who were not allowed to compete at the Olympics, had their own foot races at Olympia but at a different time of year. Unlike male victors who were allowed to set up statues of themselves, women were allowed only painted portraits.



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Treasures

Hercules mosaic

Roman period, about AD 200

Possibly made in North Africa

GR 2011,5005.1

This heavy-weight hero is shown bruised and battered, perhaps after one of his battles against man or monster. The reddish tones of the face seem intended to show fresh injuries. The mosaicist has cleverly rendered the human form and the texture of skin stretched over muscles and tendons. The hero clutches what look like palm branches, formed from green and slate-grey *tesserae* (mosaic pieces). Palm branches were tokens of victory at athletic contests.



Metope or panel from the Temple of Zeus at Olympia. The goddess Athena shows Hercules where to breach the banks to let the River Alpheios flow in and cleanse the cattle stables of King Augeias, one of his Twelve Labours. © The Archaeological Museum of Olympia.

Why is Hercules associated with the Olympic Games?

The lion's skin tied around the figure's hips and what is possibly a club by his left leg suggests this mosaic depicts Hercules (*Herakles*). According to legend, Hercules founded the Olympic Games to celebrate the last of his twelve labours – the cleansing of the cattle stables of King Augeias, whose palace was situated near Olympia. Hercules is said to have set the length of the stadium at just over 192 metres, the distance he could run in one breath. During the Roman period guilds of professional athletes were formed, adopting Hercules as their patron.



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Trail

The victory of a cheating pankratiast

Greek amphora made in Athens about 520–500 BC

Found near Vulci, ancient Etruria

Purchased from Alexandrine Bonaparte, Princess of Canino, sister-in-law of Napoleon

GR 1843,1103.69 (Vase B271)



Etruscan bronze head of a wrestler wearing a leather cap to prevent his opponent from grasping his hair. Etruscan, 300–250 BC (Room 71: case 13)

This vase shows the end of a wrestling contest, perhaps the *pankration*, a type of all-in wrestling where only biting and gouging were forbidden. Once a competition had ended, no more blows were allowed. Here the wrestler down on one knee admits defeat by raising his right index finger. The athlete (right) draws this to the attention of the judge (far left) but the opponent lands one last blow before the bout can be stopped.

Why was Theagenes of Thasos famous?

The so-called heavy events, boxing and wrestling, were extremely popular with the crowd. Many stories were told about the strongmen in these contests. One of the best known was Theagenes of Thasos who won over 1400 victory crowns at various Greek festivals. At the age of nine he is said to have carried off a full-size bronze statue that took his fancy in the market place. In later times his own statue stood at Olympia beside that of Alexander the Great.



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Trail

The goddess Nike crowning an athlete

Burnt sard sealstone, 2nd-1st century BC

Found during excavations at the Temple of Artemis at Ephesus

1874,0710.347 (Gem 1198)



Cast from the sealstone showing Nike crowning a winning athlete.

This small engraved sealstone, perhaps from a finger ring, shows the winged goddess Nike placing a crown of leaves on the head of a winning athlete. The goddess was closely associated with Zeus, god of the Olympic Games, and is often shown in flight, bearing a wreath or victory ribbon. The athlete holds a small branch, also symbolic of victory. Whether this sealstone belonged to an athlete or simply a sports enthusiast we shall probably never know.



Nike on the palm of Zeus, patron god of the Olympic Games. From the British Museum's model of the gold and ivory statue of Zeus at Olympia (made by Sophie Kleinschmidt).

What were victory wreaths made of?

Statues of Nike featured prominently at Olympia, in connection with both sporting and military victories. Victory wreaths were usually made of foliage that could be dried and kept for a long time to preserve the memory of a victory. At Olympia they were made of twigs of olive, sacred to Zeus. Winning athletes were showered with flowers and leaves. This mark of celebration is called *phyllobolia* and is echoed today in the throwing of confetti and 'ticker tape'.



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Trail



A winner is presented with tokens of victory: branches and red ribbons. From a Greek drinking-cup, about 500–475 BC. GR1843,1103.53 (Vase E52)

Gold medal from the London 2012 Olympics

No medals were given to winners in the ancient Olympics, only the crown of wild olive leaves. Yet they shared with modern athletes the same drive and passion to achieve that greatest sporting achievement, an Olympic victory. Ancient athletes also became celebrities. The most successful of them had followings of fans and could command appearance money. Some were revered so much that it was thought that they had healing abilities. But what mattered to them most was that their names should go down for posterity.

What it was like to watch the ancient Olympics?

If the Olympic Games were being held right now you would be able to see for yourself why we attach such great importance to athletics. No-one can describe in mere words the extraordinary pleasure derived from them and which you yourself would enjoy if you were seated among the spectators feasting your eyes on the prowess and stamina of the athletes, the beauty and power of their bodies, their incredible dexterity and skill, their invincible strength, their courage, endurance, power and tenacity. You would never stop applauding them. Lucian, 2nd century AD, *Anacharsis* 12 (abridged)



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