

## ANCIENT GREECE

### Background Information 14: The Olympics

#### Where?

- The Olympics were held in Olympia, near the west coast of Greece.
- Olympia was a place sacred to Zeus, and is where he was believed to have wrestled with his father, Kronos. No one really lived at Olympia.

#### When?

- How or when the Games began is not really known. Legend has it that Zeus started the Games himself to celebrate his wrestling victory over his father (see above).
- The poet Pindar noted that Herakles held the first Games to celebrate finishing one of his Labours – the diversion of the river Alpheios. Other such-like stories exist.
- The Olympics were held every four years in August. Because of the heat and the fact that there was no shade for spectators, water channels and basins were built around the stadium for people to drink from.
- Floods of the River Alpheios buried the remains of Olympia in mud until they were rediscovered in 1766.

#### How?

- So that athletes could travel to the Olympics from all over the Greek world in peace, an Olympic truce was announced.
- Athletes achieved their great level of fitness after 10 months of intense training in the *palaistra* and the *gymnasium*. All Greek cities had these training areas. A carefully controlled diet (e.g. high protein for building muscle) contributed to the athletes' fitness levels.
- The Olympics were held at a quiet time of year (harvests over etc), so tens of thousands were able to attend.

- As well as athletes and spectators, merchants, food-sellers etc would attend, as well as musicians, poets and painters etc.
- There was no 'Olympic Village' or hotels – people had to make their own arrangements, i.e. tents.

## Who?

- Pelops was a hero whose ancient tomb is at Olympia. He won an important chariot race – perhaps another clue to the beginnings of the Games.
- Heroes were more than simply famous men. They were believed to be a race of 'super' men, close to the gods themselves. When a hero died, competitions were held as part of the funeral, and the place where he was buried became sacred to the locals.
- Tens of thousands of Greeks went to watch the Games.

## Why?

- The Olympics were more than sport – the Games were part of the Greeks' worship of Zeus.
- The competitors' speed, strength and power were considered offerings to the gods.