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Ancient Olympics took place at Olympia. Participating athletes honored their gods, of whom Zeus was chief. People believed that their gods lived atop Mount Olympos (Olympus), which was located some distance from Olympia. This map locates both Olympia and Mt. Olympos (Olympus).

The Olympics began in the Early Archaic Period - a time of Greek political, economic and cultural development. Some scholars think that Homer, a blind poet who is credited with both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, likely lived (if he was an actual person) around 800 B.C., a mere twenty-four years after the first recorded Olympics.

Homer's epics - perhaps first written in the Ionic version of the Greek alphabet (which has roots in Phoenician characters) by someone who was listening to a "live" Homeric performance - remain important links to this ancient period.

Olympic sports, at the time of Homer (scroll down 80%) and later, were rooted in religion. First - and always foremost - athletes participated in sports to honor their gods. The Olympics were *created* to honor Zeus. The modern meaning of "sports" and "games" is therefore not descriptive for what the Greeks were really up to at *their* Olympics.

Competitive exercises, for a Greek living in the Archaic Period, were called agon (from which we get our word "agony"). *Gymnikos agon* (meaning "naked struggle") was the way an ancient Greek viewed athletic competition.

Ponos, Greek for "pain," was an expected part of training and competing. (The Greek god Ponos, parenthetically, was the son of Eris [strife] and Erebus [darkness].) And ... Olympic sports, at that time, were not team events. Focus was on individual performance and winning. No prizes were given for second and third place.

The foot-race was the first Olympic event - and the only event for the first 13 Olympiads. It measured a distance of one stade (192.28 meters for the Olympics) and took place in the stadion (from which we get our word "stadium"). The point of the race was to beat the best man, not run to a stop watch. Runners who "jumped the gun," to use a modern phrase, could be flogged by referees holding willowy rods.

At first, the Olympic stadium (where foot-races were run) was itself inside the Altis (the sacred area). Spectators viewed races from the Kronion (Kronos Hill). By the late Classical period, however, a stadium was built east of the sacred precinct, where its remains (connected to the sanctuary by a vaulted passageway) are still visible.

Other sports - beginning with wrestling and the pentathlon in the 18th Olympiad - were added and, by Classical times, the games numbered eighteen. They included boxing, horse racing, and additional running events. The Marathon, which takes its name from the famous battle in 490 B.C.) was never part of the ancient Olympics.

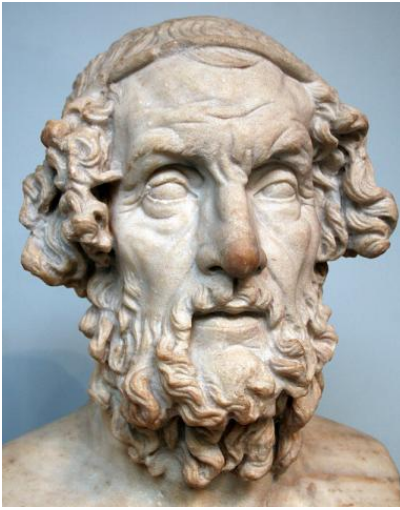
Thanks to surviving Greek pottery, we can view ancient athletes in action. Let's take a look at their prowess.

See Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/ANCIENT-OLYMPIC-SPORTS-Ancient-Olympics>

See Learning Tasks for this story online at:

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Bust of Homer

Image online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

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Illustration of Eris

Image online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

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Olympia from West with Alpheios River at right, Hill of Kronos at left

Kronos Hill

Image online, courtesy Wikimedia Commons.

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Vaulted Passageway

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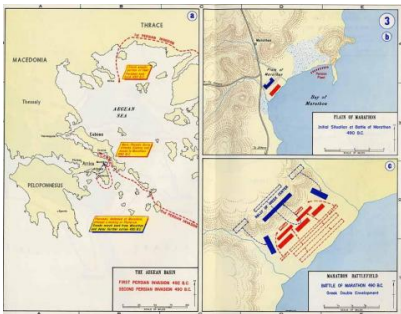
Bronze statue of boxer, ca. 100 B.C.

Bronze Statue of a Boxer

Image online, courtesy the Ancient Olympics [website](#).

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Map depicting the Battle of Marathon

Image online, courtesy the Orders of Battle [website](#).

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