

Ancient Greece: Competitions



Bronze figure of a running girl
Found at Prizren, Serbia
Greek, 520-500 BC

Visit resource for teachers

Key Stage 2

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Before your visit

Background information

The ancient Greeks are well known for their competitive spirit, whether in the field of politics, sport, drama and music, warfare or in a civic and social setting. Competitiveness in the ancient Greek world generated a flourishing and rich culture and exchange of ideas.

Music

Music competitions open to male citizens from all over the Greek world were held at all the Panhellenic (all-Greek) religious festivals, except at the Olympic Games. In Athens, they formed part of the festivals for Athena, the Panathenaia, and for Dionysos, the Great Dionysia. There were contests in playing the kithara (a stringed instrument) and aulos (double-pipes) and in choral singing and dancing. At first the prizes were simple wreaths, but in later years money and other valuable items were offered. Eventually music competitions lost their link with religious festivals and professional associations of musicians were set up.

Theatre

Contests for poets and playwrights were held by city states and the familiar semi-circular theatre was developed to house them. There were three types of play, comedies, tragedies and satyr plays. The actors were all men, even those playing female roles. Ancient Greek theatre reached its height in fifth century BC Athens, where plays offered an opportunity to examine important social and religious issues and often to express open criticism of politics and politicians. The Athenian competitions were judged by one hundred citizens, ten from each tribe, with prizes awarded for first, second and third place. Famous ancient Greek playwrights such as Sophokles, Euripides and Aristophanes have continued to have enormous influence to the present day. The wealth of stories and myths from ancient Greece has inspired the greatest playwrights and artists from ancient to modern times.

Sport

The ancient Greeks were fanatical about sport, so much so that every year they held at least one major sports event attended by many thousands of spectators. Important games were held at Athens, Delphi, Isthmia near Corinth and Nemea, but the most famous were the Olympics, held every four years at Olympia in the north western Peloponnese. They began at least as early as 776 BC and continued for over a thousand years. The Greeks took a keen interest in watching athletic games, but the more serious aspect of sport was the search for bodily perfection. Sport was also important as a means of training for warfare. All sporting competitions were held in honour of the gods, who were thought to grant athletic talent. Winners in the major games became great heroes. Professional athletes could live on the significant rewards won at the many minor festivals. At Olympia, however, the prize was only a simple olive wreath, but victory there brought undying fame. Typical field and track events were running, discus, javelin and the long jump. Combat sports included boxing, wrestling and the pankration. These and the equestrian events, consisting of chariot and bare-back races, were the most dangerous, and the greatest crowd-pullers. The Olympic Games were revived in the modern era in 1896.

Equestrian events

In ancient Greece only the wealthy could afford to maintain a chariot and horses. Chariots had been used to carry warriors into battle, and chariot races, along with other sports events, were originally held at the funeral games of heroes, as described in Homer's *Iliad*. Wealthy citizens and Greek statesmen were anxious to win such a prestigious event. They sometimes drove their own chariot, but usually employed a charioteer. The races took place in an arena called the hippodrome. The most dangerous place was at the turning post, where chariot wheels could lock together and there were many crashes. After the dangers and excitement of the chariot race came the horse-racing. This was hazardous because the track was already churned up, and the jockeys rode without stirrups or saddles, which were not yet invented. The winning horse and its owner were given an enthusiastic reception, and riderless horses that came first past the post were also honoured.

Combat sports

A big attraction at all the Greek games were the 'heavy' events – wrestling, boxing, and the pankration, a type of all-in wrestling. Specialists in the sports could win large sums of money all over the Greek world. Wrestling was a sport of great skill which used many of the throws still seen today. It also featured as part of the pentathlon. Boxing was considered the most violent sport. There were no separate rounds in a match and the contestants fought until one of them gave in. In ancient Greece thin strips of leather were bound around the boxers' fists and forearms, initially to protect their hands, but as time went on they were made of harder leather and could inflict severe damage. In the Roman period a type of glove was developed which was weighted with lead or iron to cause even greater damage. The pankration was a mixture of boxing and wrestling, where almost any tactic was permitted. Only biting and gouging were illegal.

Resources

British Museum websites

Explore

Explore is an online database of over 5000 objects from the British Museum's collection. To investigate objects from Ancient Egypt use the Explore option on the homepage www.britishmuseum.org

Ancient Greece website www.ancientgreece.co.uk

This is an interactive learning and information website with text, images and maps relating to a range of key themes. It includes a wide variety of online activities for pupils and an area for teachers providing guidance and ideas for the classroom.

Books

For adults

Swaddling, Judith, *Ancient Olympic Games*, British Museum Press, 2004.

For children

Woff, Richard, *The Ancient Greek Olympics*, British Museum Press, 1999.

Sheehan, Sean, *The British Museum Illustrated Encyclopaedia of Ancient Greece*, British Museum Press, 2002.

Gallery Information

Room 69 explores the daily life of both the ancient Greeks and Romans. The cases are thematic, covering the major aspects of everyday life. As some of the cases display both Greek and Roman objects encourage your students to try to distinguish the Greek objects.

The cases are numbered and their theme title is clearly displayed. Cases in the centre of the room concentrate on everyday life. Cases along one wall display crafts and on the other mythology.

What is it like to visit this gallery?

Room 69 is a popular gallery with schools and can become very crowded. The room has exits from either end. The north exit leads into a suite of galleries exploring the ancient Greek and Roman worlds. The south-eastern exit leads into the Money Gallery. In the west wall there is a small display area off the gallery which contains changing exhibitions from the Coins and Medals Department. There is a small pool and fountain in one corner of the room.

Case Numbers

Please note that case numbers are usually small, white and high up on the glass.

Preliminary activities

General introductory activities

- Locate the area covered by the ancient Greek world in an atlas and look at all the different modern countries in which the Greeks lived.
- Discuss ancient Greek competitions covering topics including sport, music and theatre. Use the Festival and Games section of the British Museum's interactive Ancient Greece website to help: www.ancientgreece.co.uk/festivals
- Discuss the word 'competition'. Ask the children to identify the types of competition they participate. Do they know of any other competitions?
- Look at objects from ancient Greece using the Explore function from the front page of the British Museum website.

Activities to support gallery activities

- Discuss the competitive activities the ancient Greeks took part in. Use images, text or descriptions to illustrate the activities. Explain any similarities or differences between the ancient Greek activities and modern equivalents.
- Look at images of ancient Greek pottery which show sport, theatre or musicians. Explain how the activities are depicted.
- Discuss why most of the objects students will see during the visit are pottery and not the actual objects used during the competition activities.

During your visit

Gallery activities: introduction for teachers

The gallery activities are a set of activity sheets which can be used by students working in Room 69. The sheets can be used as stand-alone activities or you may wish to develop work around particular sheets as suggested in the before and after sections of this resource.

- Where case numbers are indicated on a sheet, these are usually to be found marked in white numbers high up on the glass of that particular case.
- You are welcome to select the activities which are most appropriate for the focus of your visit and adapt sheets to meet the needs of your students.
- Each activity is designed to support the students in looking at, and thinking about, objects on display in the gallery.
- Individual activity sheets may be undertaken by single students, in pairs or as a small group.
- Where space is provided for recording this may be undertaken by the student or an adult helper as is most appropriate for the students involved.
- Familiarise the students and accompanying adults with the chosen activity sheets at school before the day of the visit. Make sure students and adults know what they are to do and are familiar with the vocabulary used on the sheets or which they may encounter in the gallery.

Gallery activities: briefings for adult helpers

Gallery activity: Chariot racing

- Chariot races took place in an arena called the hippodrome. The most dangerous place was at the turning post, where chariot wheels could lock together and there were many crashes.
- This activity promotes drawing skills.

Gallery activity: Music

- The ancient Greeks had a variety of musical instruments including percussion, string and wind.
- This activity requires the students to use their observational skills.

Gallery activity: Combat sports

- Ancient Greek boxers were naked but wore strips of leather over their hands to protect them. A more brutal form of fighting or combat sport was the Pankration which involved boxing and wrestling and had few rules.
- This activity encourages the students to observe objects and examine them in detail.

Gallery activity: Theatre

- All actors in ancient Greece were male. They wore masks with exaggerated features to make the character more obvious to the audience.
- This activity encourages observational skills.

Chariot racing

- Find case 19. Look at the three pots. They are in the left side of the case. Each pot has a scene showing part of a chariot race.

- The pot on the left shows the charioteer getting ready for the race. Can you see him wearing a long robe or tunic? What colour is it?

.....

.....

- The pot in the middle shows two chariots in the middle of a race. Look at the horses. Do you think the horses are walking or running fast?

.....

.....

- The pot on the right shows a chariot passing the finishing post. Do you think he won the race? Why?

.....

.....

- Choose one of the pots and draw a picture of it in the box below.

- Now discuss with your group what it might have felt like to be racing in a chariot.

Music

- Go to case 22. In this case you will see the three types of instruments shown below. Look at the pictures, read the information and then find each type of instrument in the case. When you find one tick the box next to the picture.

cymbals



These are cymbals. They are a percussion instrument made from bronze and have turned a green colour over time.

auloi



These are auloi. They are wind instruments. Auloi were usually played in pairs

lyre



This is a lyre. This is a stringed instrument. The sound box is made from the shell of a tortoise.

- In the same case there is a large pot with a scene showing musicians. The man on the left holds a lyre. The woman on the right holds auloi. The woman in the middle plays another stringed instrument called a harp. Can you find the pot?

Combat sports



- Look in case 18. Find the pot shown here. It is the small pot in the middle of the case. This pot shows a boxing match.
- Look at the pot to answer the questions below:

- Are the men wearing any protection on their hands?

yes

no

- One of the men's faces is bleeding. Is it the man on the left or the right?

left

right

- Who do you think is winning the contest and why?

.....

- There is another sporting contest shown on the neck of the pot. What do you think this sport is?

.....

- Look at the medium sized pot in the right half of the case. It shows a pankration contest. The pankration was a mix of boxing and wrestling. Look at the men and tick the boxes below when you have found each one.

the judge on the left

the judge on the right

the loser

the winner

- How is the loser showing he has surrendered?

he holds up a sign

he holds up a finger

he runs away

he stands up

- Discuss with your group the differences between ancient boxing and the pankration contest.

Theatre

- Go to case 21. Find the pot shown in the picture below. It is decorated with a scene showing a play at the theatre.
- Looking closely at the pot in the case draw lines from the labels below to where they are shown in the picture.



the roof over the stage

the stage

a boy watching

two actors playing old men

stairs to the stage

- The actors are wearing masks. There is a clay actor's mask in this case.

Draw it here:



After your visit

Follow-up activities: introduction

These activities aim to encourage pupils to reflect on the work undertaken in the Ancient Greek galleries during their Museum visit.

- Some of the activities draw directly on the information gathered at the Museum while others encourage the pupils to draw on personal experience or undertake additional research in the classroom.
- Each activity includes a suggestion for classroom work and also an outcome which may be in the form of a written piece, drama presentation or artwork.
- You may also wish to look at some of the activities available on the Ancient Greece website (www.ancientgreece.co.uk) which relate to your visit.

Follow-up activity: Chariot racing

Curriculum links: history, literacy

Skills: discussion, writing

- Ask the students to recall the pots they saw during the visit. Do they remember what parts of a chariot race they depicted? Return the worksheets to the students. Discuss which pot they drew and what the picture shows.
- Describe chariot races in Ancient Greece. Illustrate where they took place, who might have watched, what larger event they might have been part of, who would drive the chariots and any other information you feel useful. Working as a class ask the students to use descriptive words to illustrate a chariot race. Write the words down on the whiteboard.
- Once you have enough to form a picture of a race ask the students to write a story about a race. These can be in the first or third person, from the point of view of the chariot driver, the audience or from a general perspective. Remind them to use a variety of descriptive language using examples from the board where relevant.

Follow-up activity: Music

Curriculum links: history, music

Skills: hands-on work, group work

- Review the musical instruments seen during the visit. Discuss what types of instruments the ancient Greeks used and what they may have sounded like.
- Using a selection of modern instruments ask the children to group them into wind, percussion and string. Match these groups with the three objects seen during the visit.
- Allow the children time to use the instruments and explore what sounds they make. An additional activity could involve the children writing about their favourite instrument, describing what it looks like and what sound it makes. This activity could be extended to produce a musical performance.

Follow-up activity: Combat sports

Curriculum links: history, art and design

Skills: group work, discussion, investigation, practical design

- Discuss the two pots seen during the visit and the scenes shown on them. Ask the students to recall the two sports shown on them.
- As individuals or in groups give the students different ancient Greeks sports to research. Ask them to find out what the sport consisted of, what equipment was used (if any), where the sport took place, the rules and whether the sport is still practised today.
- Once the students have researched their sport they can design and draw their own pot scene showing that sport. Remind them to include the participants, any equipment needed, perhaps judges and officials or spectators.

Follow-up activity: Theatre

Curriculum links: history, drama, literacy

Skills: discussion, group-work, research, writing

- Discuss what the students saw in the Theatre case. Ask them to describe the scene on the pot and what features and people they remember were on it.
- Working in groups, ask the students to research ancient Greek theatre. Once information has been gathered groups report back to the class on what they found.
- Using this information students can write and put on their own play, either in their groups or as a whole class activity.

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