Olympia was well known to the ancient world for its sanctuary dedicated to Olympian Zeus. According to tradition, Iphitus, king of Elis, wishing to end the calamities that had befallen his kingdom, asked the Oracle at Delphi for advice. The prophetess Pythia commanded Iphitus and the people of Elis to establish the Olympic Games. In 776 B.C. we have the first list of Olympic victors and this date marks the beginning of the most important athletic games of the ancient – and the modern – world, the Olympiads. The Games were held once every four years. In the first Olympiads the contest consisted of a simple race in the Stadium, which was approximately 192 metres long. Later there were introduced the double course (diavlos), the long race (dolihos), wrestling, boxing, the pangration (a combination of wrestling and boxing), the pentathlon (long jump, javelin, running, discus and wrestling), chariot-racing and horse racing. Initially the Games lasted for one day but in the course of time they increased to five days (in the 5th c.). The period of four years from one celebration of the Games to the next was called an Olympiad.
Who took part in the Olympic Games

The contests were open only to free Greek citizens. Participation of slaves was not allowed. After the conquest of Greece by the Romans, Roman emperors and high officials took part in the Games. From 212 B.C. all subjects of the Roman Empire were given the same rights as Roman citizens and so other peoples had the chance to take part in the Games (Italians, Armenians, Syrians, Egyptians, Spaniards). From that date on the Olympic Games became international.

Married women were not allowed to compete in or watch the Games, but this did not apply to unmarried girls.

Who organized the Games

The Hellanodici organized the Games and they were elected from among the people of Elis. They were assisted by the Alytarchi and Alyti who were responsible for the observance of the rules of the contests.

Before the Games started, citizens of Elis, carrying a herald’s rod and crowned with a branch of olive, went throughout the whole Greek world to announce the Games and proclaim the Ekecheiria, the truce observed during the Games. These heralds were called spondophori.

Ekecheiria

According to tradition, three kings -Iphitus of Elis, Lycurgus of Sparta and Cleisthenes of Pissa- agreed to proclaim Elis a sacred place dedicated to Zeus and established the Ekecheiria. By this, anybody who crossed the borders into Elis was obliged to hand over his weapons.
What were the prizes for the Olympic victors

The only prize was the kotinos, a wreath made of a branch from the sacred wild olive tree. The official prize-giving for all the victors took place on the last day of the Games. The herald announced the name of the victor, his father's name and the city he came from. At the same time he tied a red ribbon round his head.

Olympic victors had the right to have their statues set up in the sanctuary. Returning to their own cities, they enjoyed great honors. Their countrymen pulled down part of the city walls to welcome them, implying that since they had citizens like this, they did not need walls.

What were the Zanes

Athletes who broke the rules of the Games were punished by fines which went to the temple. Out of the money from penalties of this kind, bronze statues of Zeus were erected along the entrance of the stadium. These statues were called Zanes.

The Heraea

The Heraea were games that took place every four years in Olympia to honour the goddess Hera. Only unmarried women were allowed to take part. The only contest in the Games was a 500 ft. race (approximately 160 m.). These games were held one month before or after the men's games.