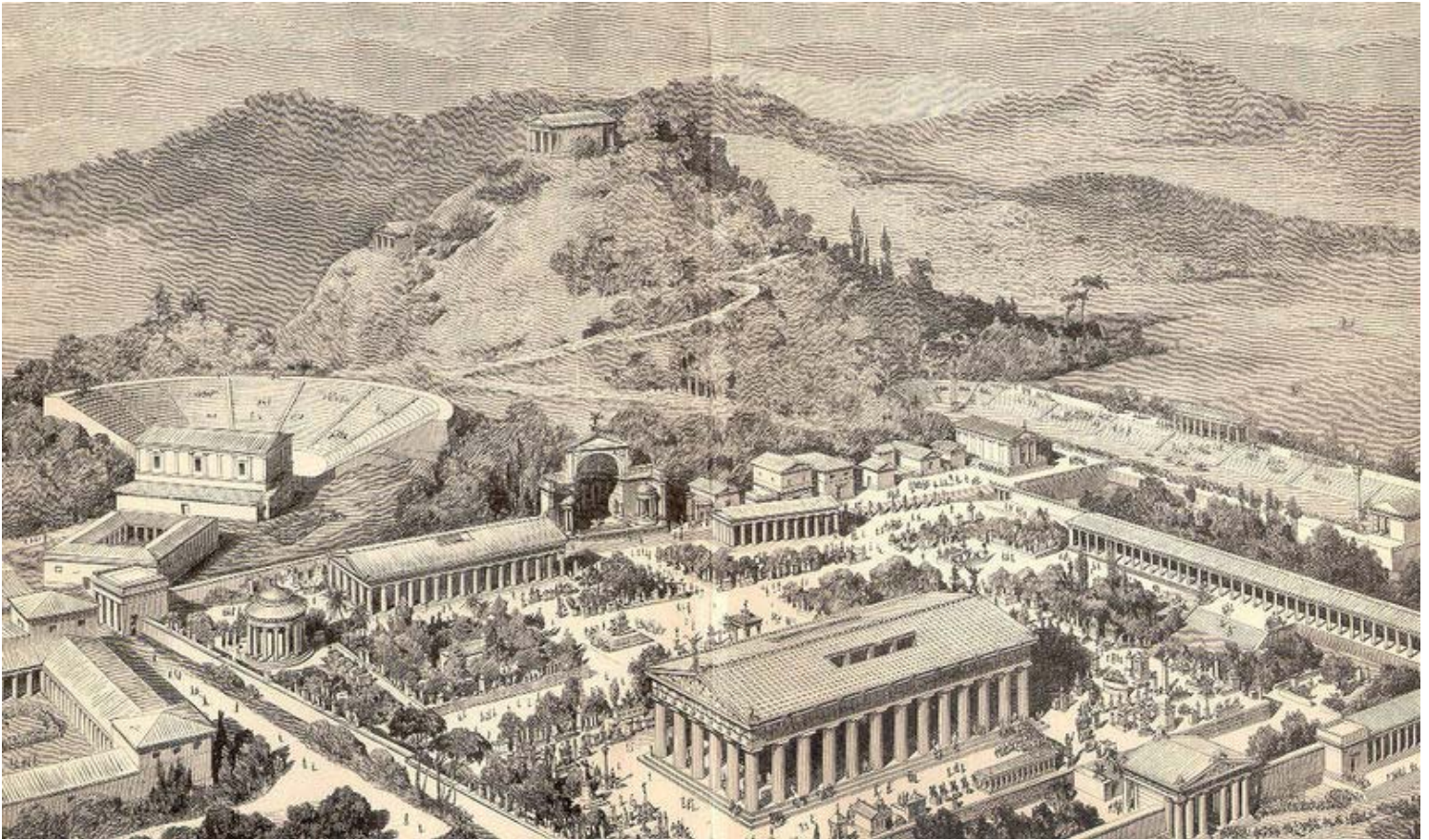


When Ancient Greece Banned Women from Olympics, They Started Their Own

Sadly, historians lack good documentation on the badass Heraean Games.

by Lauren Young
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An artist's interpretation of ancient Olympia. [Photo: Public Domain]

Much like their modern counterpart, the Olympic Games in ancient Greece wasn't exactly a level playing field for women. It's true that women of all ages were allowed to enjoy the festivities and exhilarating athletic events in cities throughout the Peloponnese states, including Delos and Athens. But the Games in Olympia in the land of Elis—the city where the Olympics originated—retained its traditional, sacred ban of women. Elis decreed that if a married woman (unmarried women could watch) was caught present at the Olympic Games she would be cast down from Mount Typaeum and into the river flowing below, according to Greek geographer and travel writer Pausanias.

During these ancient times, women lived much shorter lives, were excluded from political decision-making and religious rites, were forced into early marriages, and then gave birth to several children. Despite the societal inequalities and oppression, women in Greece wanted to play—so they started their own Olympics called the Heraean Games.

“Every fourth year,” Pausanias wrote in 175 A.D., “there is woven for Hera a robe by the Sixteen women, and the same also hold games called Heraea.”

The Heraean Games, a separate festival honoring the Greek goddess Hera, demonstrated the athleticism of young, unmarried women. The athletes, with their hair hanging freely and dressed in special tunics that cut just above the knee and bared their right shoulder and breast, competed in footraces. The track shortened to about one-sixth the length of the men’s was made up in the Olympic Stadium. While women were not allowed to watch the men’s Olympics, it’s uncertain if men were barred from these all-female races.



The ruins of the Temple of Hera in Olympia, Greece. [Photo: Matěj Bařha/CC BY-SA 2.5]

It wasn't that women were discouraged from sports in general; physical fitness was highly valued by women in Greece. A few women have been documented driving chariots, owning horses that won Olympic competitions, swimming, juggling, performing acrobatics, and potentially even wrestling. Spartan women were well-known for promoting physical education, believing good fitness assisted in healthy childbirth. By the first century A.D., female athletic competitions were common under the Roman Empire, Gerald Schaus and Stephen Wenn wrote in *Onward to the Olympics: Historical Perspectives on the Olympic Games*. But, the Olympics still kept its ban.

Scholars are unsure of when the Heraean Games began, some estimating that it could be as old as the first Olympic Games, which traces back to 776 B.C. In Pausanias’ detailed recording of the Heraean Games, the Temple of Hera in Olympia, and women at the Olympics, he states that the maidens' footraces go back to “ancient times.”

He writes two theories about the origin of the Heraean Games. The first associates the Heraean festivities to the queen Hippodameia who married Pelops, the son of the King of Lydia. To show her gratitude for her marriage, she created the games to thank and honor Hera and selected 16 women to compete in footraces. The second legend details that the games were a result of resolving tensions between Elis and Pisa, a town in western Greece. The citizens of Elis chose a wise, elderly woman from each of the 16 Peloponnese city-states to weave a robe for Hera every four years and conduct the games in her honor as symbols of unification and peace.



Historians believe this bronze statuette is of a Heraean victor due to the similarities in the costume Pausanias described, while others think the girl is a dancer. [Photo: Public Domain]

The women who won the Heraean races were crowned with headdresses of olives and awarded a portion of the cow that was sacrificed to Hera. Pausanias also wrote that there were statues dedicated to the victors with their names carved on them. However, no statues have ever been found at Olympia, sport studies professor Betty Spears wrote in the *Journal of Sport History*.

There are few records about the individual athletes or the cities that sent women to compete. It's thought that Spartan girls often ran and won the Heraean games because of the city's nearby proximity. The only known victor historians have tracked down is the mythical Chloris, a granddaughter of Zeus and a niece of Pelops, who is said to be the first winner of the Heraean Games. There is a statuette in the Vatican that people believe may be Chloris, but the identity has never been proved. Other women have been recognized as Olympian victors including Cynisca, an ambitious woman who entered her horses in the chariot races and became the first female to win at Olympia, wrote Spears.

Skeptics debate whether the Heraean games were even real because the little evidence that exists is based on a few documented accounts. "If numerous Spartan and other Greek girls won the Heraea over the several centuries, why do we not read about the Heraea until Pausanias?" Schaus and Wenn argue.



"Footraces" at the London 2012 Summer Olympics. [Photo: Aurelien Guichard/CC BY-SA 2.0]

The lack of documentation of the Heraean Games suggests that society saw women's sport as insignificant, Spears reasoned. "For each vase depicting women in sport-like activities there are many, many more showing men in athletic activities or in palaestra scenes."

These days, women rule the Olympics. Gymnast Larisa Latynina holds 18 Olympic medals, which is the second highest to be won by a single athlete. Forty-five percent of the 11,520 athletes at the 2016 Summer Olympics in Rio de Janeiro are women, this year's games reporting the most women ever. While underappreciated during their time, the first female athletes at the Heraean games set precedence for women Olympians today.