



11. THE ALTIS GROVE OF ZEUS

i. Olympia

Those who had ever had the chance to experience a wild thunderstorm, with blinding lightning in the sky of Alfeios valley, or were taken aback by a strong bolt of a blue summer day, have not a reason to wonder why the Sanctum of Zeus, the father of gods, is found at this distant place of the Peloponnese.

Klaus Hermann "Olympia: the Sanctum & the Games. The Body & the Spirit".

Olympia is found in the western Peloponnese, in Greece. It had been an ancient religious Sanctuary and the scene of the Olympic Games. It lies on the northern bank of Alpheius, Alfios River and about sixteen kilometres from its mouth. A tributary stream, the Kladeus, Kladeos joins the Alpheius just below ancient Olympia, to the south. The country is rich and well watered, consisting of low, wooded hills alternated with farmland. The ancient Sanctuary of Olympia, just sixteen kilometers inland from the deep-blue Ionian Sea is a magnificent point where the Alfios and Kladios rivers meet.

As soon as the visitor has driven through the Alfeios valley, he senses the atmosphere of the ancient Olympia, and feels the spirit of the archaic beauty of the Olympiads. The Sanctum of Olympia with its radiant acme was a strong uniting link between the Greek town-states and their remote settlements.

Olympia had close bonds with the East; according to tradition, the first supreme ruler of the region was the Phrygian Pelops; who gave his own name to the area previously called *Apia* Island. After he settled down he called it the "Peloponnese", meaning the island of Pelops.

All around the site of the Altis grove of Zeus there was a built-up area with continuous activity since Prior and Post-Hellas age, (~2800-1100 BC). That date has been proved by the arched and rectangle buildings and the vaults found in the site of the Sanctuary. It seems that the idolatry of *Pelops* and *Hippodamia* was the beginning of the religious activity at the site; the horse and charioteer statuettes, which were found at the stone podium, the tomb of *Pelops*, show that at the site of the religious worship, there were also athletic events during the post-Mycenaean era.

Prehistoric findings have been discovered at the south foot of the Cronios Hill; they reveal the worship of *Cronus* and *Rhea*, *Earth*, *Themis* and the *Idaios* Hercules of the most ancient times.

During the geometrical progression and the early archaic period, Altis, the sacred grove of Zeus at Olympia, was a natural place of safety, full of plane-trees, wild olive-trees, poplar-trees, pine-trees and oak-galls enclosed by a low fence or wall. First the town of Pisa controlled the Grove of Zeus at the Sacred Altis. After 570 BC ancient Olympia came under the jurisdiction of Elis and Sparta. There every four years took place the religious festivals, part of which were the athletic events of the Olympic Games, from 8th century BC till the end of the 4th century AD.

There were a few constructions, altars of the gods and the first monuments of *Pelops* and *Ippodamia*. The wild olive-tree, according to tradition was brought from the North, the hyperborean regions and was planted in the small wood by *Idaios* Hercules, Heracles, who used to live in Crete on Mount Ides. This olive-tree was esteemed as hallowed.



Since the early archaic times, the Hellenism of main Hellas, the Mediterranean settlements as well as the colonies of *Euxenos Pontos*, participated in the activities of this Sanctum. Its importance extended continuously and its space was decorated by epoch-making premises constructed till the end of the 4th century BC, when the sanctum acquired an organized joint of the space. During the Hellenistic and Roman times the new way of life as well as the historic needs changed the architecture of the Sanctum.

The very well known ancient site that attracts today the eyes of millions of people at the ceremony of the lighting of the Olympic Flame, burning here eternally. The torchbearers carry the Olympic Flame, and travel from this sanctum all the way to the City where the Summer and Winter Olympic Games are held.

The ancient Sanctuary of Olympia went on shining for over a century after the Roman domination in 146 BC. In 267 AD a raid had threatened the safety of the Altis Grove. Then the priests of the temple themselves demolished most of the serving buildings in order to erect a protective wall around the temple of Zeus and the parliament.

The new Christian religion had been gaining ground. The new ideal of a saint character comes to replace the ancient spirit-soul-body training. Thereafter the Olympic Games are almost expiring. Their final act comes in 393 AD by the decree of the emperor *Theodossius I*. Two years later, in 395 AD, the precious statue of Zeus was carried to the capital of Byzantium, Constantinople. A conflagration extinguished all evidences of its beauty. In 426 AD, with another decree by the emperor Theodossius II this time, the destruction of the pagan temples was signed putting the temple of Zeus in Olympia, into flames.

The earliest remains are four millenniums old, dating from 2000 BC to 1600 BC and the sanctuary itself dates back in ~1000 BC. The first excavations were conducted in May 1829 for a year, by the French '*Expédition Scientifique de Morée*', by Abel Blouet, on the site of the temple of Zeus. The temple was sufficiently cleared to reveal its general plan and fragments of three sculptured metopes; the panels were also found; these panels were placed in the Museum of Louvre, in Paris.

Extensive German excavations began forty-six years later, in 1875. For six years they cleared the whole of the sacred precinct and some buildings that lay outside. Exploratory trenches located the position of the stadium, thus the plan of a great Greek sanctuary was revealed for the first time. Some small-scale exploratory diggings were done in the deeper layers of the sanctuary. Before the World War II, in 1936, the Germans started again a large-scale excavation program. One of the chief aims was the uncovering and the restoration of the Stadium. World War II interrupted the work in 1942 and it was resumed in 1952. After eight years of excavations the Stadium was completed and in 1961 the Stadium was restored.

During this period the most important structure excavated was the workshop of the sculptor *Pheidias*. The sacred section, the *Altis* or *Grove of Zeus*, was an irregular quadrangle of more than 182.9 meters, (200 yards) on the side, bounded on the north by *Cronios Hill* and enclosed by a wall on the other three sides. Inside there were the temples of Zeus and his spouse, Hera; the principal altars and votive offerings, the small treasuries built by various Dorian states, as well as the Olympic administration buildings which were held nearby. Outside this sacred place were the stadium, the hippodrome, the baths, and other athletic installations, the hostels, and supplementary accommodations for the visitors.

Harmony, peace and reconciliation flourished in this scenery. The Olympiads emerged through the religious devotion to Zeus. The hardworking organizers prepared



the Games non-stop during wintertime, through the freezing northern storms and during summer time when the southwest hot wind dried up the Alpheios Valley.

For twelve centuries Olympia symbolized the concept of the highest aspirations. The winning coronation in front of the temple of Zeus lifted the mortals up to the hyper human heights, and it was the only way that could take the athletes to immortality; it would make them heroes of their homeland with a Pan-Hellenic fame. Capable youngsters with almighty leaders struggled for the branch of wild olive tree. The visitors honored the sanctum offering their invaluable donations, which decorated Altis.

During the later classic years Elia passed to conflicts with the neighboring states as well as to inside riots. The construction activity made headway to its final architectural form with the introduction of the light, airy Corinthian order to the Sanctum of Olympia.

ii. Altis and the Monuments in Olympia

Inside the enclosed space there were the Temples and the buildings that had to do with the religious adoration of the Greeks and outside there were the subsidiary buildings, the houses of the priests, the public baths, the guests' houses, the gymnasium and the arena.

1. The oldest temple at Olympia and one of the most venerable in all Greece was Hera's Temple, «Ναὸς τῆς Ἥρας», '*Naos tis Heras*' erected at the foot of Cronios Hill. It was originally a joint temple of Hera and Zeus until a separate temple was built in the 11th or 10th century BC, but this view is now rejected. The existing temple was probably built about 600 BC, and an earlier phase, without *peristyle* colonnade may go back to the 8th century. The temple is long and narrow, having six columns across the ends and sixteen along the sides. The oldest columns are of Doric order, showing a great variety of orders because they were gradually replaced by stone columns. In the 2nd century AD there was still one wooden column in the *opisthodomos*. The entablature was of wood, and the upper parts of walls were of mud brick. The cella had two interior rows of columns, alternate columns being attached by spurs to the cella walls and thus forming bays. Pausanias says that in the temple there was an image of Hera seated on a throne with the figure of Zeus standing beside her. Hera's limestone head has been found at the ancient site. Pausanias also reports the existence of a stone statue of Hermes carrying the young Dionysus, a work by Praxiteles that was found in the cella of the temple in 1877 and is one of the most prized possessions of the Olympia Museum.

2. To the west of Altis, near Kladeos River, there was the Ring, «Παλαίστρα», '*Palaestra*', where jumpers, wrestlers and boxers trained. It was a square of 66.35m by 66.75m, constructed round a *peristyle* yard, where one could see the housing of the changing-rooms, the room where the oil was smeared on the athletes' bodies, «ἐλαιοθέσιον», "*eleothesion*", the «κονιστήριον», "*conistirion*", where, after their practice, the athletes using the brass *strigils* «Στλεγγίδες», "*stlegides*", removed the dust and sweat off their bodies. There were also the baths as well as the instruction rooms with benches.

3. To the North, near the *Palaestra*, there was the Gymnasium, «Γυμνάσιον», '*Gymnasion*', which included an elaborate entrance gateway and a covered running track. It was built in the 2nd century BC. It was a rectangle-enclosed construction, 120m by



220m. Inside, there was a spacious yard and arcades round its four sides. The gymnasium was the practicing place of the athletes of running, javelin and discus.

4. The Treasure Houses, «Θησαυροί», '*Thessavroi*' began to be erected later, on the natural gallery of the slopes of Cronius Hill. These are palace-like little temples, tributes of the Greek towns of the settlements. Pausanias mentions the names of ten such Treasure Houses.

A row of twelve treasures overlooked the Altis from the lowest slopes of the Cronius Hill. These small structures in the form of Doric temples date from the 6th century BC. All were constructed by Dorian states ranging from Byzantium to Gela in Sicily and Cyrene in northern Africa. In the case of only three, Sicyon, Megara, and Gela Treasure-Houses there is enough material available to allow their reconstruction on paper.

These Treasures were built by several states either as a gratitude for their citizens' Olympic victories, or as a general mark of homage to the Olympian Zeus. The Treasures contained the dedicated precious offering gifts, which were the wealth of the sanctuary.

5. The Temple of *Pelopas*, «Πελόπιον», '*Pelopion*' was found between the temples of Zeus and Hera. The Elean hero *Pelops* had a sanctuary in the *Altis* Grove, which was open to the sky with trees and statues, surrounded by a wall. Around the 6th century BC, this temple was restored; the surrounding wall became pentagonal and the *propylaea* were added; there were a lot of trees and statues. *Pelopion* was the seat of the deans and office-holders of the Sanctum.

6. The Prytaneum, «Πρυτανεῖο», '*Pritanio*' dates from the early 5th century BC and was found in the corner of Altis. The Prytaneum was in the northwest corner of the Altis; it contained the perpetual hearth, which burned; there was also a banquet room, where the reception of the Olympians was held, at the end of the Olympic Games.

7. At a particular place of the Prytaneum, they had put up the Sacred Hestia, «Ἱερὴ Ἑστία», '*Hieri Hestia*' where the ceaseless fire, «ἄσβεστο πῦρ», "*asvesto pyr*" was always burning.

8. Zeus' High Altar, «Μεγάλος Βωμός τοῦ Διὸς», '*Megalos Vomos tou Dios*' was in the Southwest of the temple of Hera. The great altar of Olympian Zeus was not in front of the temple, as might have been expected, but to one side and nearer the Temple of Hera. It was elliptical in shape and consisted of an elevated base approached by steps. A large mound made of the ashes of the animals' thighs rose from the base. The whole height of the altar was 6.7 meters (22feet).

Xenophon mentions the existence of a theater, most likely in front of the Altar of Zeus, called so by the «θέα», '*thea*', the view that this position offered to the Altar.

9. The Stadium «Στάδιο», '*Stadion*' was put into shape during the first half of the 5th century BC. The stadium lay to the east of Altis. It had a lower level track and its two long sides were the ordinary slopes of the Hills. It was 212.54m long and 28.50m wide. On the south side there was the stand of the jurors and opposite, there was the altar of *Demeter Chamyne*.

In early classic times it was not cut off from the sanctuary, and one end of the track was in the area directly in front of the temple and the great ash Altar of Zeus, beneath the later Echo Calonnade. In the middle of the 4th century BC the stadium was shifted about 82 meters, 90 yards, eastwards and a little northwards.



The track was surrounded by massive sloping embankments of earth for the accommodation of the spectators; to the north the natural slope of the hill met the requirements. The western embankment, parallel, to which the Echo Colonnade was built, effectively cut the stadium off from the Altis Grove. The Connection between the two was maintained by what was called the “*Krypte*”, or Covered Entrance, which pierced the embankment and was covered with a stone vault in Roman times. This entrance was used the athletes and the umpires.

There were no stone seats in the stadium except for a box on the south side about one-third of the way from the starting line nearest the Altis, where the *Hellanodikai*, or chief judges of the games sat. Directly opposite this box there was the altar of *Demeter Chamyne*, from which the priestess of that cult was privileged to watch the games.

The track was about 210 meters, 230 yards wide, and separated from the sloping embankments by a low stone parapet beside which ran an open stone water channel with basins at intervals. The actual course was marked by stone starting lines at either end. These were about 192.28 meters, 210 yards, equal to 600 Olympic feet. There was space for 20 runners at a time. The classic race was the stadium that is to say one length of the course. There was also a *diaulos*, two lengths, and a *dolichos*, or long-distance race, the length of which varied and might be as much as 24 stadia, or nearly three miles. Other athletic contests were also held in the stadium. This stadium has been fully excavated and its track and embankments have been beautifully restored.

When the stadium embankments were excavated many votive offerings were discovered. Some of these were works of art of various kinds, including bronze statuettes, bas-reliefs and several terra-cotta statues, of which the most noteworthy was a group of Zeus and *Ganymede*, about half-life-size and dating from ~470 BC. Other findings were arms or various armors that had been dedicated in the sanctuary.

The Olympia Museum houses the largest collection of ancient Greek weapons in the world. Some of them have got identifying inscriptions on them that are interesting historical documents, such is as a Persian helmet with the inscription “The Athenians (dedicated this helmet) to Zeus, most probably, they had brought it from the Medes”.

By the end of the 5th century BC, the stadium was widened eastwards by 82m and northwards by 7m; its west narrow side was closed, and it could contain 45,000 viewers.

10. The Echo Gallery, «Στοὰ τῆς Ἐχούσης», ‘*Stoa tis Echous*’ was built, in the middle of the 4th century BC, in the west narrow side of the stadium. They called the Echo Gallery because inside this gallery the sound was echoing seven times or more; it definitely separated the Sanctum from the stadium. The shape and character of the stadium changed; it no longer was a part of the Sanctum; it was disconnect, in the place that it is found today. The gallery was also called «Ποικίλη», ‘*Poikili*’, the Varying Gallery, because of the frescoes that decorated its interior. It included two colonnades, the exterior was of the Dorian order, and the interior was of the Corinthian order. In its far end there were rooms. In that same period the auxiliary buildings were separated from the Sanctum by a momentous porous-stone surrounding wall, with five portals, three in the west side and two in the south side. Deep down beneath its floor, the starting line of the early classical stadium has been found.

11. In the Hellenistic epoch the stadium was joint in its northwest corner with the Sanctum by an arched aisle, the Crypt, «Κρυπτή», ‘*Crypti*’, which in its west side portal had an entry with Corinthian columns. Near the stadium there were a lot of wells providing water to the thousands of the visitors during the Olympic Games.



12. The Hippodrome, «Ἴππόδρομος», '*Hippodromos*' was four stadiums long, about 780m and 320m wide. It was found to the North of the Stadium. The way the horses started the race was settled by an original mechanism. In the North of the hippodrome there was a rise enabling the viewers to watch the races. The hippodrome, where the horse and the chariot races were held lay south to the stadium in the open valley of the *Alpheus* River. No trace of this course has been found. Pausanias gives a long description of the *hippodrome* and its elaborate machinery.

13. Agnaptos' Gallery, «Στοὰ τοῦ Ἀγνάπτου», '*Stoa tou Agnaptou*' closed the west side of the hippodrome.

14. Taraxippous' Altar, «Βωμὸς τοῦ Ταράξιππου», '*Vomos tou Taraxippou*', which was to the west of the hippodrome and had always been the fright of the horses.

15. The Vouleutirion or Council House, «Βουλευτήριον», '*Vouleuterion*' lies just outside the Altis to the south. It comprised two Doric buildings of different date but of identical oblong shape with *apsidal* ends towards the west. The first of the two buildings was built in the middle of the 6th century BC. It was a rectangle building; one of its narrow sides was in succession of the prehistoric constructions in Altis. During the 5th century BC the second building of the parliament had been built. In the space between the two buildings there was a rectangular court. The statue of Zeus *Horkios* stood in the center that was Zeus that kept watch over the oaths.

16. Horkios Zeus' Altar, «Βωμὸς τοῦ Ὀρκίου Διὸς», '*Vomos tou Orkiou Dios*' was the point where the athletes were registered, and gave their legitimate oath before the Olympic Games. They promised not to indulge in foul play during the contests. Those three erections, the two arched ones and the Altar were linked along their eastern side by an Ionian arcade.

17. Zeus' Temple, «Ναὸς τοῦ Διὸς», '*Naos tou Dios*' was erected in the middle of Altis. It was the largest and most important building at ancient Olympia and one of the largest Doric temples in ancient Greece. It began to be built in 470 BC and it was finished in 456 BC. It was the biggest Peloponnesian Doric Temple, a work of the architect *Libon* of *Elis*.

In the 5th century BC, the Sanctum reached its highest point. The Zeus Temple had been the Dorian structural model, «κανὼν», '*canon*'. Being on the same level with the oldest temple of Hera, it dominated the Sanctum with its magnificent size.

The parts of the Temple were: the *pronaos*, porch, the *opisthodomos*, rear porch, and the *naos*, cella; partly enclosed by the walls, and it was divided into three aisles by two rows of slender columns arranged in two storeys. The roof tiles were made of marble.

On the front gable, the east pediment the marble synthesis described the chariot race between Pelopas and Oenomaus; both were shown preparing for the race. On the back gable, on the west pediment there was the battle between the *Lapithes* and *Cedaurus*, during the wedding of *Peirithus* and *Deidamia*, Apollo being in the middle. The frieze that run above the front and back porches consisted of sculptured metopes with the 12 labors of Hercules, six at each end.

The temple was made of a coarse local shell-conglomerate, the exposed surfaces being covered with a coat of fine white stucco. This temple had six columns across the front and thirteen on the sides. It was richly decorated with beautiful sculpture; much of which has survived and it is to be seen in the Museum of Olympia.



18. On the east pediment, at the peak in the central corner the gold-plated a gilded figure of Victory, «Νίκη», ‘Nike’, a piece of work by *Patonius*; at each corner there was a gilded caldron that has not survived.

19. The great *statue of Zeus* was placed within the temple. Crossing the narthex of the ancient temple in thought, we enter the tree-aisle nave and there, at the far end of the nave we find ourselves in front of the *chryselephantine*, gold and ivory statue of Zeus sitting in his throne. It was made by the Athenian sculptor *Pheidias* and was the most famous of all ancient statues; it was counted as one of the Seven Wonders of the World. It made a profound impression on all visitors who saw it, and people generally agreed that *Pheidias* had succeeded in creating the image of Homeric Zeus. The god was sitting on an elaborately wrought throne.

Zeus held a figure of the goddess *Nike*, the Victory, in his right hand and had a scepter in his left hand. This statue was made piece by piece by *Pheidias* and his collaborators in his studio, just outside the *Altis* to the west of the temple. In 395AD, the inestimable statue of Zeus was carried to the capital of Byzantium, Constantinople. A conflagration extinguished all the evidences of its beauty as it was completely destroyed.

20. *Pheidias’ studio*, «Ἐργαστήριον τοῦ Φειδία», ‘*Ergastirio tou Fidia*’ was to the West of the Temple of Zeus. *Pheidias* and his students sculptured the great statue of Zeus in this atelier. *Pheidias’ workshop* was still known in the time of *Pausanias*. The excavations of 1954-58 brought dramatic confirmation of the identification. In the deep layers inside and around the building, particularly toward the south, a great mass of material, evidently waste from an artist’s atelier, was found. This material included various tools, many slivers and worked fragments of ivory and bone, glass ornaments, and molds. The clay molds, of a very heavy fabric, like roof tiles, with the larger ones sometimes reinforced with iron rods, are of an unusual open form and were evidently used for hammering into shape the thin plates of gold that formed the drapery of the statue. Pottery found within this debris is indicating that the workshop was active in ~430 BC, an important fact because it settles an old controversy as to whether *Pheidias* made his Zeus before or after his other great *chryselephantine* statue, the *Athena Parthenos*, which was completed in 430 BC. The new evidence is decisively in favor of the later date. One of the pieces of pottery, a ribbed mug, had an inscription on its bottom in neat clear letters: “I (the pottery) am of *Pheidias*”.

21. Westwards, near the fresh *Alpheios River* and the rivulet *Cladeos*, the *Public Baths* and the *Lido* were built in the 5th century BC; in ~300 BC the Public Baths were enlarged and in ~100 BC the baths were made heated.

22. The Temple of the Great Mother of the Gods, *Kyveli*, «Μητροῶν», ‘*Metroon*’ was a small Doric temple of the 4th century BC, just below the treasures. The old religious order no longer existed in Roman times; the excavated temple contained only the statues of Roman emperors.

23. The bases of Zeus’ small bronze statues, the «Ζάνες», ‘*Zanes*’, have survived along the gallery of the treasures between the *Metroon* and the *Stadium*. The *Zanes* were erected with money collected from the fines imposed on those who inexcusably violated the rules of the games. The bases of sixteen of these statues have been found just outside the covered entrance to the stadium, the entrance by which the athletes entered.



24. The Philippeum, «Φιλίππειον», '*Philippeon*' was a round building of Ionic rhythm, with Corinthian half-columns on the inside. The king of Macedonia, Philip II erected it to commemorate his ascendancy over the Greeks at Chaeronea in 338 BC. The building contained gold and ivory statues of Philip II, his son Alexander the Great, and other five members of the family. They were works of *Leocharus*. The idolized Macedonian dynasty began to be adored in this building.

25. Outside the Altis to the southwest stood the «Λεωνίδαίον», '*Leonidaion*' a large hostel for the reception of distinguished visitors, which was built in ~330 BC. To the west of the Sanctum and to the south of Pheidias' studio there was a guesthouse, called after its architect *Leonidas* of *Naxos*. There were rooms around its four sides, facing inside a peristyle yard with two Doric columns. External Ionian columns surrounded the building, which accommodated the eminent foreign visitors and later the Roman officials. It was remodeled in Roman times.

26. The thousands of Altars and statues of the gods, daemons, heroes as well as the Olympic champions, the kings and the generals, pieces of work by well-known sculptors, complete the picture of the Altis space.

27. The water reservoir, «Ἵδραγωγεῖον», '*Hydragogeion*' was built by Erodes Atticus, in 160 BC. The water of a sumptuous fountainhead was collected in a large tank the Grandstand, «Νυμφαίο» or «Ἐξέδρα», '*Nymphaio*', or '*Exedra*'.

The building was of a semi-circular shape, with two rotund little temples in the front, at its ends; colorful marbles coated its walls. On the semi-circular wall there were twenty statues of *Anthonius Pious* and his family as well as the family of *Erodes Atticus*.

There were two basins in a different height; the water flew into the higher semicircular basin first, and then poured into the lower rectangular one, before it flowed into the distributing aqueduct, all over the Sanctum.

28. In 146 BC the Roman Consul Mommious, offered twenty-one gilded shields to Olympia, after he had shown his supremacy on the Greeks at *Isthmus*. The shields were fastened on to the metopes of the Zeus Temple; later in 85 BC, Syllas looted these shields and the treasures of the Temple, as he did with the Temple of Epidaurus and the one of Delphi, in order to cover the expenses of the war against Mithridatis. Syllas also decided to take the Olympiads to Rome, where the 175th Olympiad was held. Since that time the Sanctum of Olympia fell into decline, till 31 BC, when Augustus brought them into life in the scope of his political plan in ancient Greece.

29. During the Roman times, the Altis area was extended, and a new surrounding wall was built. Many of the baths were replaced by the heated baths, «Θέρμες», '*Thermes*'. A new inn was also constructed to the west of Pheidias' studio.

30. The Basilica Church, «Βασιλική Χριστιανική ἐκκλησία», '*Vassiliki Christianiki ekklessia*' was put into shaped on the basis of the ancient Pheidias' Studio.