

The starting point – the **Ancient Stadium of Nemea**

The **Ancient Stadium of Nemea** must had a capacity of 40.000 spectators, gathered for the Nemeia/Nemea Games from all over the known world of the time.

On 573BC the first Nemea Games were part of the sacred circle of the Panhellenic Games.

Nemea were very prestigious, were held every two years in turn with the Games of Delphi, Olympia and Isthmia and were under the auspices of Ancient Kleone.

The Stadium was excavated between 1974-81 by the American School of Classical Studies (University of California) under Prof. Stephan Miller.

At the back of the vestiary rooms – of which today some columns still stand – starts the stone built arched passage – crypte – a perfect piece of architecture of this kind – that led the athletes in the Stadium. In this tunnel and on the stones one can read names and words that athletes have engraved while waiting their exit to the stadium to compete.

Except the Ancient Stadium, in Nemea one finds the Temple of Zeus, the Museum and archaeological park.

Since the antiquity Nemea is famous of its vineyards, then named Fliassio Terrain, where was the active city of Flious. There, according to Pausanias, Pelops devoted his winning chariot after the race with Oinomaus.

In Nemea, the first labour of Hercules is performed, obeying the order of Euristheus to bring him the fleece of the Nemea Lion.

Today. The wider area of Nemea is the largest vineyard area of Greece in which famous wines are produced under the VQPD name of "Nemea".

Every two years are organized the Nemea Games, revitalized after 2300 years. It is an international athletic event that connects the present time with the ancient Greek athletic ideal.

**Aidonia:** The Mycenaean cemetery of Aidonia (16-15th century BC) was spoiled by illicit traders. However, items were found and returned to Greece after 20 years. This is the world famous "treasury of Aidonia", namely 312 gold garments. Today are exhibited in the Athens

Archaeological Museum.

**Platani.** A very important junction of four chariot-roads. A large number of chariot-rail traces are inside and outside the village. Some remains are in the courtyard of a village house. The athletes are passing in a meter distance from the traces.

Remains of Neolithic settlements. Underground tunnel of the Adrian Waterduct system that supplied water to Corinth from the Stymphalis lake.

**Skotini.** Close to the ancient Alea where Artemis of Ephessos and the Alea Athina were honoured. Chariot-rails on the top of Agia Anna exactly on the route of the athletes. From the passage Siouri of Skotini one can drive towards ancient town of Stymphalos and its lake where Hercules defeated the mythic Stymphalian Birds.

**Kandila.** The name comes from Kandilean area with forest and temple of Artemis, close by the ancient Kafyes. Chariot-rails of important road used by the military forces of Spartans and Macedonian are found in the area.

**Levidi.** Historic town in the boarders of Orhomenos and Mandinia areas, close to the ancient Elymia. The route of the race bypasses the small church of Virgin Maria that is believed is built on the ruins of the temple of Artemis.

**Vytina.** In this area flourished the ancient town of Kafyes and Methydrio, situated on the road Olympia-Orhomenos where stood the temple of Apollon.

**Magouliana.** In the area passes the ancient river Mylaon with many watermills on its bends.

**Valtessiniko.** Picturesque mountain village. Close by are the remnants of unidentified ancient city.

**Ladonas Lake**, an artificial lake that is shaped by the Ladon river. In its waters Goddess

Demeter was swimming and in its banks Goddess Artemis was hunting. Ladon was the father of the nymphs Thelpousa and Metopi with whom the Assopos River made famous daughters ie Nemea, Arpinna, Aegina, Thebes, Salamis etc. Ladon had also met with Earth who born Dafnae adored by Apollo. Pan as well, wandering around Ladon river, fall in love with nymph Syrinx and started to chase her. Ladon, however, trying to help her, he transformed her to a reed. Then Pan cut some of the reeds and by connecting them he created the syrinx, the music instrument only himself was able of playing.

**Tropea.** A small town by the legendary river Ladon, in the area of the ancient city of Thelpousa, known for the temples of Asklipios and Demeter.

**Doxa – Kalliani – Kastraki:** villages belonging to the ancient area of Thelpousa.

**Irea:** during antiquity was the most important and largest arcadian city close to the borders with Ileia. Together with eight more municipalities comprised the Irea land, where the Olympic champions Dimaratos, Theopombos, Nikostratos, Lykinos and others came from. In the area one finds mycaenian remnants.

**Erymanthos River:** Flows in the area of ancient Psophis the inhabitants of which considered the river as god and had devoted him a temple and statue. In the forest of the Erymanthos mountain, Hercules performed his forth labour, arresting the Erymanthos boer.

Between the rivers Ladon and Erymanthos, rather close to Belessi village, the Ileians buried Korryvos to honour him being the first Olympian champion in running at the Olympiad of 776BC that bears its name as well.

**Aspra Spitia:** By this village are remnants of prehistoric settlement that was inhabited until the Neolithic era. In the area stood the temple of Hercules on the point where the hero killed the robber Savros

**Alpheios River** A river god, mythical son of Ocean and Tithys that was honoured by two altars in Olympia. Before being a river god he was a hunter. He fall in love and chased Arethousa in vain. In order to avoid him, she was transformed to a waterspring, the waters of which were

flown to the sea at the land of Ortygia close to Syracuse. Alpheios in order to meet her for ever, he became a river.

Finish point: **Stadium of Ancient Olympia.**

The divine archaeological site for the athletes of all eras. The famous stadium, 212m long, accommodates 45.000 spectators and was the place that Olympic Games were taking place for twelve centuries.

The sacred Altar was surrounded with fabulous temples, thesaurus, altars, statues of gods and Olympian champions.

## OLYMPIA

In the middle of a valley where the rivers Alphios and its tributary Kladeos flow, at the foot of the pine covered Kronion, where all is peaceful and harmonious there developed one of the most renowned sanctuaries of the ancient world and cradle of the Olympic Games, Olympia.

The Altis, the sacred grove at Olympia took shape in the 10th – 9th Century B.C. and was devoted mainly to Zeus. The first magnificent structures were erected in the Archaic Period (7th – 6th Century B.C.) and since 576 B.C. the prestige and glory surrounding the institution had reached their peak. Philosophers, politicians, poets, writers, rhetors, sculptors, they all came here as this was the largest audience for their works and ideas, to be heard and spread: Plato, Aristotle, Herodotus, Lysius, Alchiviades, Themistocles, Pindarus, Alexander the Great.

The most magnificent among the buildings was the temple devoted to Zeus (460 B.C. – 467 B.C.) erected in the middle of the sacred Altis, a masterpiece by the great architect from Elis, Livon. According to Pausanias “the eastern pediment commemorated the chariot race between Pelops and Oenomaus with Zeus standing in the middle. On his right hand side stands Oenomoaus with a helmet on his head and next to him his wife Steropi.

The western pediment depicts the fight between the Lapiths and the Centaurs". The exquisite figure of Apollo stands in the middle. These two pediments are among the most brilliant examples of ancient Greek sculpture and are exhibited at the Olympia's Archeological Museum. In the middle of the temple stood the colossal statue of Zeus, made of gold and ivory, work of the greatest sculptor of the 5th c. B.C., Phidias.

Another two masterpieces of the 5th c. B.C., unearthed in good condition ornate Olympia's Archeological Museum. Hermes of Praxiteles holding Dionysus in his arm, with the elegant yet virile lines of his body and the gentle classical beauty of a 5th Century B.C. Greek adolescent's face, makes this statue an unsurpassed work by the great 5th c. B.C. sculptor, Praxiteles. The other statue of Niki or Victory, sculptured by Peonios, suggesting the idea of Niki descending from heaven in triumph, conveys the idea of flight with her chiton delicately clinging to her body as she prepares to crown the victors.

The famous Stadium was located on the East side of Altis. The athletes entered the Stadium through the Crypte, an arched passage 32m. long, 3.7m wide and 4.4m high. Two pillars of Corinthian rhythm stood at each side of the entrance.

The Stadium is a rectangular parallelogram with a capacity of 45,000 spectators seating directly on the inclined ground closing the Stadium on all sides. The flat surface of the stadium was 212m long and 28.6m – 29.7m and 30.7m wide. The running area was 197.27m long as long as the distance of a "stadion", the outstanding foot race contest for centuries. The athletes taking part in the foot race lined up along the starting line and by means of a system of ropes and stakes called "ysplich" they all started at the same time. This was achieved when the person standing behind them pulled the ropes which caused the stakes to fall.

Other foot race contests were: diaulos 384.5m introduced on the 14th c. B.C., dolichos 4,600m introduced in 720B.C. and hoplitodromos 384.5m with helmet and shield. The races held since prehistoric times were reorganized during the 8thc. B.C., the sacred "truce" had been instaurated, the games held every four years and acquired a pan-Hellenic character.

Victors in the games were crowned with a branch of the "beautiful crowned wild olive tree" which bestowed the greatest honor upon the competitor and his native city and could not be compensated for by either money or higher office.

Since 776 B.C. when the official recording of the races started, the institution of the Olympic

Games flourished for twelve centuries and made a brilliant contribution to the history of sport.

The Olympic idea that the aesthetics of the body are inseparable from the intellectual fulfillment has had a long standing impact on the entire world, which explains why the sacred flame that burned at Altis had never gone out for twelve centuries. However, it did go out when temples were destroyed and pagan religions abolished in 426 A.D. by Theodosius II decree. Nowadays, in spite of whatever historical-political agitations or alterations worldwide, we consider that the flame is still burning whenever and wherever Olympic Games are being held and this is a very significant oecumenical heritage bestowed upon us by Olympia's splendour.