

THE OLYMPIC FLAME

The Olympic Flame, along with the five rings, the most recognisable symbol of the Olympic Games, represents the positive values that Man has always associated with fire. It is also a link between the Ancient and Modern Games and underlines the profound connection between these two events.



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According to the Ancient Myth of Prometheus, who stole the power of fire from Zeus, fire is the symbol of life, rationalism and freedom as well as inventiveness and was symbolised by the ageless flame that used to burn on the Altar of Prytaneion in Ancient Olympia throughout the celebration of the Ancient Olympics. It's the place where the flame for the Modern Olympics is being lit. The present ceremony in Ancient Olympia for the lighting of the Olympic flame, and the Olympic Torch Relay that follows, happened for the first time in 1936 for the Games held in Berlin. Many historians believe Hitler's Third Reich introduced the relay as a propaganda stunt to publicise the Games. There were never any relays held at the ancient Olympics. However, in Athens and other cities of Ancient Greece there were torch races (*Lampadedromia*) held in honour of certain gods, including Prometheus.

The ritual of the Lighting of the Flame starts from the Altar of Hera, in front of the goddess' temple (Heraion), which is opposite to the Temple of Zeus, at the archaeological site of Olympia.

The ceremony begins with the procession of the priestesses, all under the supervision of the High Priestess. Dressed in archaic-style clothing, priestesses surround the Altar.

Then, the High Priestess calls the Sun God Apollo to light the torch using a concave mirror to focus the sun's rays. The High Priestess then says a prayer to Apollo and Zeus.

When the flame lights, the High Priestess relays the flame in a small ceramic pot and heads to the Panathinaiko Stadium with all priestesses in procession.

They pass by the Olive Tree, where they stand for a moment and "*Amphithalis Pais*", the young boy cuts off an olive branch, as a symbol of peace and a meaningful winner's prize.

When the procession arrives at the Stadium, the High Priestess lights the torch of the first runner and the torch relay begins.

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