

NUFFIELD PRIMARY HISTORY



ANCIENT GREECE: OLYMPIC GAMES

TEACHERS' NOTES

This was the fourth lesson in a ten-week unit about the ancient Greeks. The class was a delight: 33 enthusiastic Year 6 children in an urban county primary school. We had already looked at Homer's Iliad, examining Greek ideas about heroes and roles; investigated the evidence for the Trojan War; and used topic books to identify and classify the main features of ancient Greek life. Throughout the unit ran a strong literacy strand.

Now, in an Olympic year, we turned to the ancient Olympic Games. We knew the children would have concepts of the Olympics gained from the modern Games. So, we decided to present the class with the challenge of learning from clues found on Greek pottery – to interpret and organise the pictures painted on the pottery to create the ancient Olympic Games programme. This active approach is particularly productive with visual and kinaesthetic learners.

Year group/class

Year 5/6, mixed ability, age and gender.
33 children in the class, with two absent for this lesson.

Teaching time

Two hours fifteen minutes.

Learning objectives

For the children to:

- learn actively about the ancient Olympics by constructing a programme for the games from primary pictorial evidence
- develop their thinking skills by examining, interpreting, classifying and ordering pictorial clues about the past
- be creatively challenged by having to plan an Olympic programme from historical clues.

Key questions

What events did the ancient Greeks have in the Olympics?

How did they organise the Olympic Games?

Resources

14 pictures of Olympic events, depicted on Greek pottery. We had: boxing (2), discus, jumping, wrestling (2), pankration, running, sprinting, a runner on the starting line, race-in-armour, horse racing, chariot racing, trumpeting.

7 additional 'wild card' pictures that do not show events: athletes cleaning themselves (2 pictures); oil jar and strigil; jump weights; a statue of Poseidon; a judge at the games; a victor receiving a victory wreath.

The pictures glued onto 3 x A3 sheets (photocopied to form 8 sets = 24 sheets in total).

You can find good Olympic pictures in:

Swaddling, J (1980) *The Ancient Olympic Games*, British Museum Press, and

Boardman, J (1985) *Greek Art*, 2nd revised edn, Thames & Hudson

There are also several internet sites with Olympic pictures:

<http://www.thebritishmuseum.ac.uk/>

Follow Compass and do a search for Greek pottery

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/Olympics/sports.html>

This American university site also includes good, clear explanations suitable for children to read – so useful for personal pupil research to follow up the lesson

<http://www.culture.gr/2/21/211/21107a/og/games.html>

The Greek Ministry of Culture site. It contains useful information for teachers about the ancient Games; also images of statues of Zeus and other gods, and of strigils.

A typical programme for the Games, taken from Swaddling's book, 8 copies (supplied, 1 per group).

40 sheets of blank A3 paper (5 for each group).

At least 8 pairs of scissors and 8 gluesticks – more if possible.

Coloured felt-tip pens and/or pencil crayons.

For the follow-up literacy lesson: Ode to a victorious athlete by Pindar.

The teaching

Episode 1

Focus: Setting the Olympic Games in their historical context.

We began with a whole class explanation, telling the children that the traditional date for the beginning of the Olympics is 776 BC. We placed the date on our Greek timeline, noting that this was same century in which Homer might have lived.

We looked at the Games' religious aspects. The Games were held in honour of Zeus, although other gods also had temples at Olympia (for example, Zeus' brother Poseidon who, besides being lord of the seas, was also the patron of horses). We also sketched in other details, such as the pan-Hellenic truce during the Games.

Episode 2

Focus: Examining the evidence – reading pictures as text.

We set the children the challenge of devising a 5-day programme for the ancient Olympics, working from pictorial evidence only. We talked about pictures as texts, and how they could be 'read' to gain information about the ancient Olympics.

We divided the class into eight groups of four. We gave each group five sheets of A3 paper (one for each day of the Olympic programme), scissors, glue, pens and a set of three Olympic picture sheets.

We told the children that they had to devise a 5-day programme for the Olympic Games, using the pictures as clues about what happened at the Games.

They could choose which pictures to cut out to illustrate their programmes. Each pictured event had to be accompanied by an explanatory caption. We advised the children to look carefully at each picture, to decide what it depicted, before they tried to plan their programmes.

We wrote the key points on the board for the children to refer to:

- Try to work out what each picture is about.
- Create a 5-day programme.
- You do not have to use all the pictures – you can choose.
- Give each picture you use a caption explaining what is happening.
- Not all the pictures show events.
- There may be two pictures showing the same event.

Episode 3

Focus: Problem-solving. Groups devise Olympic programmes and explain their thinking.

The groups set to, eagerly examining their pictures, while we circulated to join with discussions and resolve any issues. The seven 'wild card' pictures challenged the children mightily, giving rise to much debate and many ingenious ideas about what they were.

One picture, of a runner standing poised on the starting line with his arms stretched out in front of him, they all mistook for a diver. This was a classic example of how modern models of the world influence how we interpret the past.

The children also had no idea about what the oil jar and strigil were. They were similarly puzzled by the picture of an athlete cleaning his thigh with a strigil – most thought he was treating a wound. I told them that the two pictures were related to one another, and also that the jar contained olive oil, used for cleaning the skin. This was enough for some of the children to put two and two together and work out what the athlete was holding and doing.

Rowan and Richard, not normally keen scholars, were so motivated to find out exactly what each picture depicted that they kept sneaking to the desk to peek into my books for the answers (I had brought in Swaddling and Boardman's books to show them). At last I allowed them to delve – I couldn't deny such enthusiasm for knowledge.

Soon the groups were cutting out pictures and the volume rose as they discussed which events to group together, and which of the five days they were to take place on. Next came the writing and assembling of the programmes on five A3 pages – one page per day of the Games.

The groups worked very well together, collaboratively making decisions, and dividing up cutting, gluing, programme design and caption-writing so that all were included.

When each group had finished its programme, they in turn presented their work to the rest of the class and explained why they had selected and ordered the events as they had.

There was quite a bit of variation, with some groups putting all the running events on the first day, all the fighting on the second, and all the equestrian events on the third. Others decided on mixed days. Some groups interspersed the wild card pictures among the others, while James' group made a separate sheet of things which happened in-between events (washing, announcing, etc.).

Some groups wrote simple captions (e.g. The discus; Fighting), while others wrote long explanatory notes.

Episode 4

Focus: Comparing our programmes with the real thing.

Only now did we explain what some of the puzzling pictures depicted (hasty caption-changing from several assiduous group members). Next we distributed the Programme sheet to each group. They pored over it, exclaiming at the recitals by philosophers and historians and at the contests for heralds and trumpeters (most had the trumpeter down as a herald for the games, not as a competitor). They had also not appreciated how strong the religious element of the games was. This led into a whole class discussion about differences and similarities between the modern and ancient games.

Finally we read the children Epictetus' comments. He evokes powerfully the experiences of spectators at the Olympics:

There are enough irksome and troublesome things in life; aren't things just as bad at the Olympic festival? Aren't you scorched there by the fierce heat? Aren't you crushed in the crowd? Isn't it difficult to freshen yourself up? Doesn't the rain soak you to the skin? Aren't you bothered by the noise, the din and other nuisances? But it seems to me that you are well able to bear and indeed gladly endure all this, when you think of the gripping spectacles that you will see.

Dissertations I 6. 23-9, 1st/2nd century AD

Learning outcomes

The children:

- developed deep knowledge about the ancient Olympics by actively working from primary pictorial evidence
- developed their thinking skills by examining, interpreting, classifying and ordering pictorial clues about the past
- worked collaboratively and productively within their groups to meet the challenge of the task.

Reflection/evaluation

This was a hugely enjoyable lesson, with the children completely immersed in producing good Olympic programmes. The children worked entirely from primary sources of history, learning actively through problem-solving.

Nuffield Primary History project

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