

The Olympic flame and torch relay

- **Introduction**
The flame, from Olympia to the stadium by relay. 2
- **Origins and Evolution**
Symbolic use of fire in Olympia - The flame in Antiquity - Heralds of the sacred truce - Today's flame-lighting ceremony. 3
- **Relay history, itineraries and modes of transport**
First summer and winter relays – Itineraries and themes - Original forms of transport. 6
- **Relay facts and figures at a glance**
Some examples of summer and winter relays: total distance in kilometres, number of runners, countries crossed and final torch bearer. 9
- **Torches and design**
Technological and aesthetic creativity in imagining supports for the Olympic flame. 11



Introduction

FLAME

In the context of the modern Games, the Olympic flame represents the positive values that Man has always associated with fire. The purity of the flame is guaranteed by the way it is lit using the sun's rays.

The choice of Olympia as a departure point emphasises the link between the Ancient and Modern Games and underlines the profound connection between these two events.

RELAY

The flame is carried by relay all the way to its final destination. Although it is usually carried by runners on foot, other modes of transport are also used.

For air transport, the flame is sheltered in a security lamp, similar to a miner's lamp. At night time, it burns in special cauldrons. All along its route, the flame heralds the upcoming Olympic Games and transmits a message of peace and friendship amongst peoples.

STADIUM

The highlight of the opening ceremony of the Olympics is the entrance of the Olympic flame into the stadium. The identity of the final torchbearer is kept secret until the last moment. It is often a personality from the sports world or a young person symbolising hope for the future.

The final torchbearer often does a lap of the stadium before lighting the monumental cauldron with the Olympic flame. A symbolic release of doves evokes the climate of peace in which the Olympic Games should take place.

The flame remains lit for the duration of the Games and is only extinguished at the closing ceremony.





Evolution from the origins

Fire for mankind is...



RITUAL



LIGHT



WARMTH



COOKING



PROTECTION



CREATION

SYMBOLISM OF FIRE

Fire has always played a very important role in the life of Man. The mastery and use of fire figure amongst the most important achievements of humanity. Its place in the beliefs of most ethnic groups is proof of this. The Ancient Greeks, for example, explained the presence of fire on earth through the myth of **Prometheus**.

The divine origin of fire made it a sacred element and the Greeks maintained perpetual fires in front of their principal temples. The flame was obtained when the sun's rays were captured at the centre of a recipient called a *skaphia*, the ancestor of the parabolic mirror used today for lighting the Olympic flame, causing an intense heat which allows a flame to be obtained.

FIRE IN OLYMPIA

In the sanctuary of Olympia, where the Ancient Olympic Games took place, a flame burned permanently on the altar of the goddess **Hestia**, situated in the *Prytaneum* (building used for the large banquets held in honour of the athletes at the end of the Games). Also obtained from the heat of the sun's rays, this fire was used to light the other fires of the sanctuary.

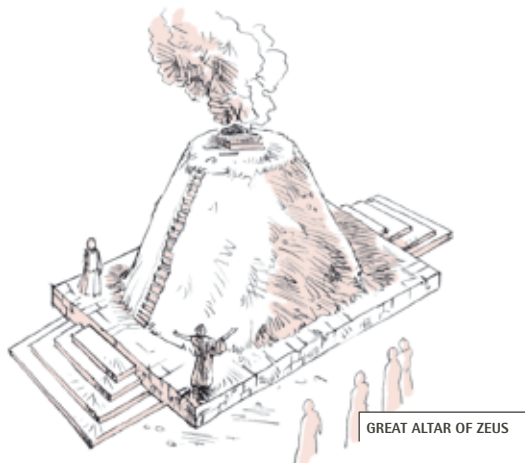
Such fires were lit on the altars of **Zeus** and **Hera**, situated in front of their temples. To honour these gods, animal sacrifices were made in the same place. Today, nothing remains of the altars, but the present ceremony for the lighting of the Olympic flame in front of the temple of Hera acts as a reminder of these events.

PROMETHEUS stole fire from the gods to give to Man. As a punishment, he was chained to a rock by Zeus, father of the gods. Every day, an eagle came to devour his liver, which grew back every night. Prometheus defied the gods with his theft of fire but by the same act he also revealed the secrets of knowledge, wisdom and the human spirit to Man.

HESTIA – (Roman name Vesta) virgin goddess of the hearth. In the Roman religion, the Vestals were the guardians of the city's fire.

ZEUS – (Roman name Jupiter) father of the gods of Olympia, he brought order and justice to the world. The Games in Olympia and Nemea were held in his honour.

HERA – (Roman name Juno), sister and wife of Zeus, she reigned with him. In Olympia, her cult was probably linked to that of another, older goddess of fertility. Hera herself was associated with birth.



GREAT ALTAR OF ZEUS



TEMPLE OF HERA

TORCH RACES IN ANTIQUITY

There was never a relay organised for the either ancient Olympic Games or other Panhellenic Games (organised in Nemea, Delphi and Isthmia). [see sheets "The Games of Antiquity"]

However, in Athens, flame races called **lampadedromia** were organised to honour certain gods, including Prometheus. The flame was transmitted by runners and the first competitor to arrive at the altar of the god had the honour of renewing its fire.

LAMPAEDROMIA – Greek word for the ancient torch relays. They were part of religious ceremonies rather than sporting events.

HERALDS OF THE SACRED TRUCE

At a set time before the start of the ancient Olympic Games, messengers wearing olive crowns left **Elis** to announce in other cities the exact date of competitions. They invited the citizens to come to Olympia and proclaimed **the sacred truce** (*ekecheiria*), that is, the obligation to halt combats one month before and during the period of the Games. In this way, the athletes and spectators could travel without fear to Olympia and back home.

ELIS – The sanctuary of Olympia was situated on the territory of the city of Elis, some 50 km to the north.



HERALD OF THE OLYMPIC TRUCE

Lighting of the flame today

SUMMER GAMES

It all begins in Olympia, Greece. A few months before the opening of the Olympic Games, a ceremony is organised on the original site of the Olympic Games, at the ancient sanctuary of Olympia. The flame is lit in front of the ruins of the Temple of Hera by actresses playing the part of priestesses. The choreography and costumes used in the ceremony are based on those of Antiquity.

The flame is lit according to the ancient method of the sun's rays in the parabolic mirror. The Olympic flame can only be lit in this way. The flame is placed in an urn and transported into the ancient stadium where it is given to the first runner by the high priestess responsible for this operation.

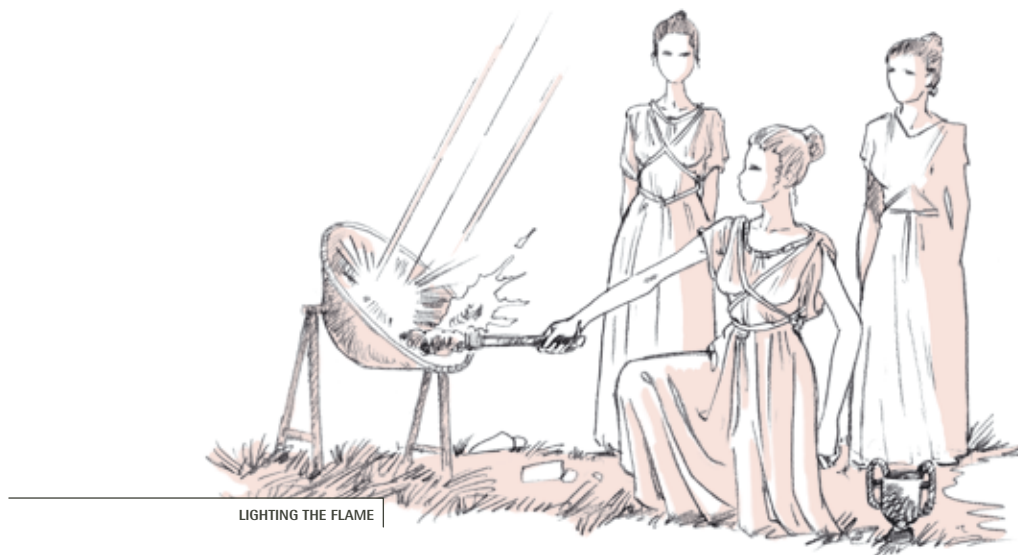
This process takes place months before the opening of the Games, in order to allow for the relay to take place and bring the flame to the host city.

WINTER GAMES

Before the introduction of a torch relay for the Winter Games in **Oslo 1952**, fire was present in the stadium on two occasions – at Garmisch-Partenkirchen in 1936 and St Moritz in 1948. Since **1964**, the torch has been lit in the same way as for the Summer Games, with one difference: the handing over of the flame to the first runner takes place near the monument to Pierre de Coubertin, situated in a copse close to the stadium.

WHAT IF THE SUN ISN'T SHINING?

As a precaution, on a sunny rehearsal day before the official ceremony, a flame is lit according to the traditional method. In this way, even if the sun is not out on the day of the ceremony, the torch can be lit from this flame, which is kept in a security lamp.





Relay history, itineraries and modes of transport

History of the first torch relays – summer and winter

- > In **1936**, Carl Diem, Secretary General of the Organising Committee of the Games of the XI Olympiad in Berlin, proposed the inclusion of a torch relay in the programme of the Olympics. The flame was lit in **Olympia** and **transported to Berlin** via a torch relay.
- > This **first summer relay** had to overcome several practical problems:
 - the site of Olympia was hard to access and roads had to be specially built;
 - planning of the itinerary required a lot of travelling for that period in time;
 - the absence of suitable products (torch, cauldron, etc.) meant that research into specialist technology had to be undertaken, such as tests with the sun's rays and different optical instruments.
- > In the context of the **Winter Games**, the first relay took place during the **1952 Games in Oslo**. This first relay did not start in Olympia, Greece, but in the valley of Morgedal in Norway.
 - the region, considered as the birthplace of skiing, was chosen as a reminder of the origins of this sport;
 - the flame was lit in the hearth of the chalet belonging to Sondre Norheim, a legendary figure in Norwegian skiing.
- > At the Winter Games in Cortina d'Ampezzo in **1956**, the flame was lit in front of the Capitole in Rome, as the city had just been elected host of the Games of the XVII Olympiad. The tripod used for the ceremony was sent from Olympia.
- > At the Winter Games in Squaw Valley in **1960**, the flame was once again lit in Norway, at Sondre Norheim's chalet. The inscription on the torch "Olympia to Squaw Valley" is a reference to an attempt to start the relay in Olympia, which did not succeed as the time period was too restricted.
- > Since the **Innsbruck Games in 1964**, the relay for the Winter Games has begun in Olympia.

Itinerary of the relay

BASIC ROUTE

Choosing a route for a relay is not as easy as drawing a straight line between Olympia and the host city of the Games! Each relay has its own "flavour" and allows for the discovery of the history and culture of a new part of the world.

From Olympia to Athens ... the organisation of the lighting of the flame in Olympia is always handled by the Greek Olympic Committee. This Committee also organises of the transport of the flame by runners to Athens or, more precisely, to the Panathenaic stadium which was used for the 1896 Games.





From Athens to the host city... the rest of the relay to the host city of the Games is handled by the Olympic Games Organising Committee (OCOG). This Committee chooses the theme of the relay, which then helps them determine the regions to be crossed, the stops planned and the different types of transport. The following are some examples of themes which have influenced the itineraries of the flame.

Thematic routes – some examples of significant relays

The relay of peace – London 1948

In a Europe sorely afflicted by the war, the 1948 relay carried a welcome message of peace. The first runner, Corporal Dimitrelis, took off his military uniform before carrying the flame, commemorating the sacred truce observed in Ancient Greece. The planned route highlighted border crossings, where festivities were organised to celebrate the return of peace. The relay went through Lausanne, Switzerland. In homage to the restorer of the Olympic Games, a ceremony was organised at Pierre de Coubertin's tomb in the Bois-de-Vaux cemetery.

The ancient Relay – Rome 1960

The relay shone the spotlight on the two poles of classical civilisation: Athens and Rome. Lesser-known ancient sites in Greece and Italy were thus brought to the public's attention. For the first time, the relay was televised and the event closely followed by the media.

The relay to the New World – Mexico City 1968

The relay retraced the steps of Christopher Columbus to the New World. The idea was to underline the link between Mediterranean and Latin-American civilisations and between ancient (Greco-Latin) and Pre-Hispanic civilisations. A direct descendant of the great navigator, Cristóbal Colón de Carbajal, was the last runner on Spanish soil. The Olympic flame made a stop at the Great Pyramid of the Moon in Teotihuacan. A "New Fire" ceremony was organised which, in the Aztec tradition, was celebrated to mark the end of a 52-year cycle. The reappearance of the sun at dawn symbolised the renewal of the world.

The oriental relay – Seoul 1988

The relay showcased the traditions of Korea. Its route, which was a zigzag from east to west, symbolised the harmony to be found in the balance between two opposite poles. The torchbearers did not wear the official uniform provided by the Games Organising Committee, but instead wore regional or traditional costumes. The runner who brought the flame into the stadium was Sohn Kee-Chung, Olympic champion of the marathon in Berlin in 1936, under the name of Kitei Son. At the time, his medal was awarded to Japan, as Korea was under Japanese rule.

The "Down Under" relay – Sydney 2000

The relay had a twofold goal: to situate Australia within Oceania and to promote the culture and heritage of the different regions in the country. The start of the relay on the Australian continent was in the "red centre" at Uluru (Ayer's Rock), a sacred site for the indigenous population. The Aboriginal athlete Nova Peris-Kneebone, Olympic field hockey champion, was the first runner in the relay. The enthusiasm of the crowd along the relay route grew bigger and bigger. One million spectators welcomed the arrival of the flame in Sydney. In a ceremony which recalled the elements used in the design of the torch (fire, water, earth), Cathy Freeman "walked on water" before lighting a circle of fire which revealed itself to be the monumental cauldron.



Originality of transportation

Traditionally, relays have been carried out on foot (for Berlin 1936, London 1948 and Moscow 1980 the relays were entirely run in this way). Although at the beginning, runners were mainly selected from amongst athletes, gradually the general public, including children, old people and people with disabilities, began to participate as well.

With the celebration of the Olympic Games throughout the world, the flame had to travel by plane. The **modes of transport** have slowly become more and more diversified, not only for practical reasons, but also to showcase the particularities of the regions crossed.

The flame in the snow! Legendary Norwegian skiers (or their descendants) carried out the entirety of the transport of the flame. (Oslo 1952) – The flame went into the **Arctic Circle** at Inuvik, with stages carried out by snow-bike and skidoo. (Calgary 1988)



The flame in the water, on the water and under water! In the sea off Veracruz, Mexico, swimmers carried the flame from the boat *Durango* to the shore. (Mexico 1968) – A diver **swam** across the port of Marseilles holding the flame out of the water. (Grenoble 1968) – The flame travelled on the frigate *Cataluña* for the passage between Greece and Spain and arrived on Spanish soil in Empuries, the gateway to Greek civilisation on the Iberian peninsular (circa 600 B.C.) (Barcelona 1992) – A diver carried the flame **under** water at the Great Barrier Reef. (Sydney 2000)



The flame in the air, through the air and in space! The flame made its first trip in an aeroplane. (Oslo 1952) – It later traveled faster than the speed of sound on its journey from Athens to Paris – on Concorde! (Albertville 1992) – The wonders of technology were highlighted when the Canadians organized the transmission of the flame by satellite between Athens and Ottawa. (Montreal 1976) – For the first time in the history of the Olympics, the transfer of the flame took place between two parachute jumpers. It also made an impressive entry at the opening ceremony of the Games, carried by a ski jumper during his actual jump! (Lillehammer 1994) – The torch (but not the flame) was carried into space by astronauts. (Atlanta 1996 and Sydney 2000)



The flame on horseback and on a camel! To mark the fact that the equestrian events were held separately from the other Olympic events, the torchbearers for the journey of the flame to Stockholm carried the flame entirely on horseback. (Melbourne/Stockholm 1956) – Horses played a special role again when the history of the Pony express was featured as a part of a torch relay. (Atlanta 1996) – They were replaced by camels when the flame crossed the Australian desert. (Sydney 2000)



The flame in the Wild West! The modes of transport that are used bring to mind great moments in American history. For example, the flame traveled in an Indian canoe, on a Mississippi steamboat, and on a wagon of the Union Pacific (the first transcontinental railroad). (Atlanta 1996)

Relays facts and figures at a glance

Summer Games

BERLIN 1936

Total distance >	3 187 km (including special stages in Kiel and Grünau)
Countries crossed >	Greece, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Hungary, Austria, Czechoslovakia, Germany
Number of torchbearers >	3 331
Final torchbearer >	Fritz Schilgen, symbol of German sporting youth

TOKYO 1964

Total distance >	26 065 km (including air transport)
Number of torchbearers >	101 866 (this high number is explained by the fact that in Japan, 1km was covered by the bearer of the flame, two reserve runners and up to 20 accompanying people)
Countries crossed >	from Greece to Japan with stops in the following countries- Turkey, Lebanon, Iran, Pakistan, India, Burma, Thailand, Malaysia, Hong Kong, Taiwan. Three routes inside Japan
Final torchbearer >	Yoshinori Sakai. Born the day the atomic bomb was dropped on his city, he was nicknamed "Hiroshima Baby"



MONTREAL 1976

Total distance >	775 km
Countries crossed >	Greece, Canada
Number of torchbearers >	approx. 1 214
Final torchbearer >	Sandra Henderson, an English speaker, and Stéphane Préfontaine, a French speaker. For the very first time, two people lit the cauldron together. The two teenagers symbolised Canadian youth and the two founding peoples of Canada. Contrary to certain rumours, the young "couple" did not subsequently get married!

SYDNEY 2000*

Total distance >	27 000 km (Australia)
Countries crossed >	Greece, Guam, Palau, Micronesia, Salomon Islands, Samoa, Cook Islands, Fiji, New Zealand, Australia
Number of torchbearers >	800 (Greece), 1 500 (Oceania), 11 000 (Australia)
Final torchbearer >	Cathy Freeman, Aboriginal athlete, medallist in athletics in 1996 and future Olympic champion (Sydney 2000)

ATHENS 2004*

Total distance >	over 78 000 km
Countries crossed >	Greece, plus international route covering all five continents and visiting all previous Summer Games host cities as well as Beijing.
Number of torchbearers >	approx. 7 700 (Greece), approx. 3 600 (internationally)
Final torchbearer >	Nikolaos Kaklamanakis, 1996 Olympic champion in sailing (mistral event)

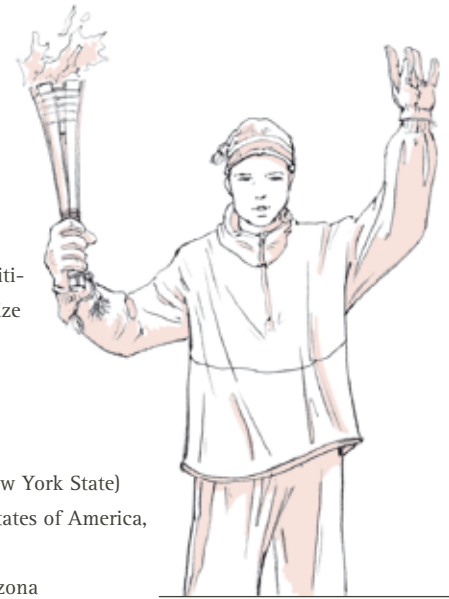
Winter Games

OSLO 1952

Departure →	from Morgedal, valley in the Telemark region, Oslo
Total distance →	~ 225 km
Countries crossed →	Norway
Number of torchbearers →	94 (skiers)
Final torchbearer →	Eigil Nansen, grandson of the explorer, savant and politician Fridtjof Nansen, who received the Nobel Peace Prize in 1922

LAKE PLACID 1980

Total distance →	12 824 km (of which 1600 km in the USA)
Countries crossed →	Greece, USA (from Langley, Virginia to Lake Placid, New York State)
Number of torchbearers →	52 (26 men and 26 women representing the different states of America, the District of Columbia and the town of Lake Placid)
Final torchbearer →	Dr Charles Morgan Kerr, psychiatrist, University of Arizona



CALGARY 1988

Total distance →	18 000 km in Canada, figures not provided for Greece
Countries crossed →	Greece, Canada
Number of torchbearers →	~ 7 342
Final torchbearer →	Robyn Perry, 12 years old, future Olympic hope in figure skating

TORINO 2006*

Total distance →	11 300km
Number of torchbearers →	10 001
Countries crossed →	Greece, France (to former Olympic Winter Games host city Albertville) and Italy
Final torchbearer →	Stefania Belmondo, multiple Olympic medallist and participant in cross country skiing (Calgary 1988, Albertville 1992, Lillehammer 1994, Nagano 1998 and Salt Lake City 2002)

NB :

Figures concerning the relays are in accordance with those cited in Olympic Torch Relays by Walter Borgers :

- Total Distance refers to the route of the relay, from Olympia to the host city of the Games.
- Countries Crossed are those countries which organised welcome ceremonies or relays on their territory.
- The Final Torchbearer is the person who lights the cauldron during the opening ceremony of the Games

Exceptions which come from another source are marked with an asterisk :

*Sydney 2000 and *Athens 2004 figures are from the Official Report of the Olympic Organising Committee

*Torino 2006 figures are from the IOC website



Torches and design

Technological and aesthetic creations

For each edition of the Games, a new model of torch is designed to very high technical and aesthetic standards!

THE TECHNICAL SIDE OF THE OLYMPIC TORCH

It must conform to exact technical standards. During the relay, the flame must never go out. The torch must be able to stand up to difficult weather conditions (such as wind, rain, snow and extreme heat) and the most unusual modes of transport. It must also be capable of burning longer than the amount of time reserved for the relay leg, in case the runner has any problems on route.

In 1936, when the first relay was organised, experiments were necessary to determine the best shape for the torch and the most suitable combustible. Magnesium, gunpowder, resin, olive oil... all these products (and many others!) have been used to fuel the Olympic Flame. These days, a gas cartridge in the body of the torch is the most popular solution chosen. The type of gas used can influence the colour of the flame (from white to yellowy-red) and its intensity.

THE LOOK OF THE OLYMPIC TORCH

In the early days of the relay, the torch models were more or less the same. With the evolution of the Olympic Games, the shapes, colours and materials used have become more and more varied. This diversity shows not only the will to differentiate editions of the Games, but also a desire to present, through the object, the particularities of the host country.

The Nagano (1998) torch, for example, takes its inspiration from the traditional Japanese “taimatsu” torch, whereas the Sydney (2000) torch is reminiscent of the Opera House and the curved shape of a boomerang. Nowadays, torches are produced in great quantities and, as a result, runners sometimes have the possibility of buying their torch after their participation in the relay.

THE ARRIVAL OF THE TORCH AND FLAME AT THE STADIUM

On the occasion of the opening ceremony of the Games, a torch of a different design or material from the one used in the rest of the relay may be used. A smoke apparatus is sometimes added so that the public can see the arrival of the flame in the stadium and easily follow its route through the crowd right up until the moment the cauldron is lit.



HOW THE TORCH WORKS

Explore a little further...

Imagine the organisation of a torch relay. What is the message conveyed by the flame? What is the route of the relay? What are the places or monuments to be showcased and used as stops for the flame in your region? How would you choose the modes of transport? What criteria would you use to select the runners?

Study the symbolism of the more recent Olympic torches. Look for the relationship between the shape, materials and colours used in the torch and the culture of the city or country where the Games took place.

Compare the role of the Olympic Flame in the Games with the role of fire in other ceremonies you know about. What do fire and light bring to these ceremonies?

Discover the history of fire. How do you explain the importance given to this element in all the civilisations of the world?

SELECTIVE BIBLIOGRAPHY

Young readers

- > Dufresne, Didier, **Le feu**
[Paris]: Castor Doc Flammarion, 2001. (in French)
- > Swaddling, Judith, **The Ancient Olympic Games**
London: British Museums Publications Ltd, 1987

Teachers

- > **Official Reports of the Olympic Games**
- > Borgers, Walter, **Olympic Torch Relays**
Diem – Archives / IOC
Kassel: Agon Sportverlag, 1996
- > Skiadas, Eleftherios G., **The Olympic Flame, the torch of centuries**
Athens 2004 Bid Committee
Athens: Mikros Romios Ltd, 1997
- > Film, **Following the flame**
Olympic Studies Centre Lausanne 2002