

Olympia, in the Peloponnese of Greece, is best known today as the site of the Olympic Games, traditionally founded in 776 B.C. What is not as well known is that the site and the games themselves were sacred to Zeus, the chief god in the Greek pantheon. Thus, the most important place at Olympia was not the famous stadium but the sacred precinct that lay roughly in the centre of the site (see figure 1); here two temples dominated the landscape: the Temple of Zeus, and the smaller Temple of Hera to the north.

The Temple of Zeus was, in its own day, the largest Doric-style temple in Greece. Built from 470-457 B.C., it was made of local limestone that was stuccoed to look like high quality marble. Like most Greek temples, it had a surrounding colonnade, composed of six Doric columns on the east and west sides, and 13 Doric columns on the longer north and south sides (see figure 2). Thus the temple was rectangular in shape, measuring 64 meters in length and 28 meters in width. It was approached from the east by a large ramp which took one through the outer colonnade to a porch fronted by two columns. From the eastern porch one could move into the *naos*, the sacred chamber in which stood a 12 meter tall gold and ivory statue of Zeus himself, framed by a seven column colonnade on two sides. The *naos* was the heart of any Greek temple, for it was here that the god would make his presence felt; there were no pews or seats for any kind of congregational worship - all such activities, including the sacrifice of

animals, took place outside the temple. Behind the *naos*, but not connected to it directly, was a rear porch which had the function simply of balancing the front porch to the east.

In its interior layout, the Temple of Zeus at Olympia was very traditional, but it was unusually rich in its exterior decoration, much of which has fortunately survived the ravages of time. Like other Doric temples, the Temple of Zeus had statues in the round filling the triangular space (pediment) formed above the exterior colonnade at the front and rear by the slope of the roof (see figure 3). The pedimental sculptures at the front (east) depicted the preparations for a famous mythological chariot race, in which the hero Pelops would win the hand of a beautiful princess by beating her father, King Oenomaus, albeit by dubious means. There were 21 statues in all, including the King and Queen, Pelops and the princess, servants and horses. In the centre of the composition, at the highest point of the pediment, stood the imposing figure of Zeus holding a thunderbolt in his left hand.

Similarly, the rear (west) pediment also had 21 statues, but the myth depicted was quite different: the battle between the Lapiths and the

Centaurs. The Lapiths (human beings) were celebrating a wedding, and kindly invited their neighbours, the Centaurs (half-man, half-horse), to attend the festivities; however, the Centaurs had never had wine before, became intoxicated, and then tried to abduct all the Lapith women, including the bride! No wonder a brawl broke out, and the pediment shows Lapiths and Centaurs battling each other while the god Apollo stands in the middle, trying to establish order. All these sculptures, from both pediments, now stand on display in the museum at Olympia itself, although they no longer have all their parts and are lacking the paint that would have originally coloured them brightly.

In addition to pedimental sculpture, the Temple of Zeus also had sculptured plaques called metopes. Roughly square, these relief sculptures were set above the columns of the two porches, with six on each side. Each depicted one of the Twelve Labours of Herakles, a hero with very ancient connections to the site (some sources say he originally established the Games). For example, one metope shows the hero killing the fierce Nemean lion; another depicts him fighting the many-headed Hydra, while another portrays him capturing the terrible Bull of Minos (see figure 4). These sculptures would also have been painted, but today show no trace of their former bright colours.

for all Greeks. Let us at least hope that no further destruction befalls a site which still evokes a sense of our own western heritage, whether or not Toronto "wins" the games for 1996!

Today, visitors to Olympia are usually disappointed by the ruinous condition of the Temple of Zeus. Only the foundation remains, surrounded on all sides by remnants of fallen columns. Much of the destruction is due to earthquakes and changes in the courses of local rivers, but some of it was caused by the actions of human beings, who looted the site when its glory days were over. Thus we need to use our imaginations to re-create the magnificence of the Temple in the fifth century B.C., when it was the centre of a place of pilgrimage