

Olympic torch begins its voyage to France

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Online Desk: The Olympic flame on Saturday began its journey to France on board the Belem leaving the Greek port of Piraeus after spending the night at the French embassy in Athens.

“The feelings are so exceptional. It’s such an emotion for me”, Tony Estanguet, Paris Olympics chief organiser, told reporters before the departure of the ship.

He hailed the “great coincidence” how the Belem was launched just weeks after the first modern Olympic Games were held in Athens in 1896.

The 19th-century three-masted boat was accompanied off the port of Piraeus by the trireme Olympias of the Greek Navy and 25 sailing boats while dozens of people watched behind railings for security reasons.

“We came here so that the children understand that the Olympic ideal was born in Greece. I’m really moved,” Giorgos Kontopoulos, who watched the ship starting its voyage with his two children, told AFP.

On Sunday, the ship will pass from the Corinth Canal — a feat of 19th century engineering constructed with the contribution of French banks and engineers.

The Belem is set to reach Marseille — where a Greek colony was founded in around 600 BCE — on May 8.

Greece on Friday had handed over the Olympic flame of the 2024 Games, at a ceremony, to Estanguet.

Hellenic Olympic Committee chairman Spyros Capralos handed the torch to Estanguet at the Panathenaic Stadium, where the Olympics were held in 1896.

Estanguet said the goal for Paris was to organise “spectacular but also more responsible Games, which will contribute towards a more inclusive society.”

Organisers want to ensure “the biggest event in the world plays an accelerating role in addressing the crucial questions of our time,” said Estanguet, a member of France’s Athens 2004 Olympics team who won gold in the slalom canoe event.

A duo of French champions, Beijing 2022 ice dance gold medallist Gabriella Papadakis and former swimmer Beatrice Hess, one of the most successful Paralympians in history, carried the flame during the final relay leg into the Panathenaic Stadium.

Nana Mouskouri, the 89-year-old Greek singer with a worldwide following, sang the French and Greek anthems at the ceremony.