Prizes

There were two classes of athletic competitions in the ancient Greek world: civic and Panhellenic. Civic competitions included the Great Panathenaia at Athens, games in honor of Asklepeios at Epidauros, and games honoring Zeus at Larissa. The Panhellenic Games included the Olympics at Olympia in honor of Zeus, the Nemean games at Nemea, also in honor of Zeus, the Pythian games at Delphi in honor of Apollo, and the Isthmian games at Isthmia in honor of Poseidon.

These two types of games, civic and Panhellenic, can be distinguished according to the prizes awarded as well as the identities of the participants and the deities venerated.

Crown Games

In the 4th century BCE, ancient authors and inscriptions described the four Panhellenic games as stephanites, literally “of a crown,” to indicate that while the games themselves awarded only an olive wreath as a prize, individual cities motivated their contestants by offering gifts and honors (see Section 6: Politics). However, during the Hellenistic period (321-31 BCE), cities sought to apply the term stephanites to their local games. Perhaps in an effort to distinguish the Panhellenic games once more, the term hieros, “sacred,” was used by ancient sources. Unfortunately, this term was often used in conjunction with stephanites since every game, local or Panhellenic, was put on to honor one god or another. As a result, non-Panhellenic games were given the title of hieros, putting them once again into the same class as the Panhellenic games. Suffice it to say, the matter is complicated, made more so by anachronistic assignment of Panhellenic games to the category of stephanites, and the local games to the category of thematikos, prize-games, despite the fact that thematikos was used by the ancients as a category only starting in the 2nd century CE. Furthermore, a game may have been viewed as stephanites by one city, but not by another city, and games moved between categories over time.
At the Olympics, the prize was a crown of wild olive branches from the sacred tree that Herakles himself was said to have planted. Individual cities offered their victorious athletes additional prizes, nothing of monetary value was awarded at Olympia itself. At other games, participants could earn bronze amphorae filled with olive oil or a sum of money.

**Suggested Further Reading**


