

CHAPTER 1

Greek Athletic Competitions

The Ancient Olympics and More

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1 Introduction

Before the start of the Battle of Salamis in 480 BCE the reluctant Corinthian Adeimantos remarked that “at the games those who start too soon are flogged,” and the eager Athenian Themistokles responded that “those who start slowly win no victory crown.”¹ Herodotus (8.59) could use this athletic metaphor because the practices and terms of sport were common knowledge to most ancient Greeks.² In the present day, on the other hand, most people are unfamiliar with the “nuts and bolts” of ancient Greek sport. This essay, accordingly, provides a basic overview of the contests, contexts, categories, terms, and rules of sport in Archaic and Classical Greece (700–323 BCE). It focuses on “athletics,” a term derived from the Greek words for contest (*athlos*) and prize (*athlon*) (Scanlon 2002: 7–9; Kyle 2007: 9–11). “Athletics,” taken as a subset of the broader, more inclusive term, “sport,” applies herein to public, physical competitions with prizes.

We begin with some matters of perception and approach. The ancient Olympics, with their wreath prizes, huge crowds, and famous victors, were the pinnacle of Greek athletic competition. Since the Olympics were revived in the late nineteenth century CE, the ancient Olympics have frequently been viewed through the prism of the modern Olympics. Despite evidence and scholarship to the contrary (Young 1984, 2004: 138–57), people eager to accept the historical authenticity of the modern Olympics have been inclined to accept illusions and outright misconceptions about the ancient Olympics. The modern games did adopt some ancient events (e.g., running, wrestling), but they also incorporated modern events (e.g., shooting, bicycling) and invented new traditions. The ancient Olympics, in fact, had no medals or second prizes, no team or women’s events, no winter or water sports, and no ideology of universal brotherhood and peace.

A Companion to Sport and Spectacle in Greek and Roman Antiquity, First Edition.

Edited by Paul Christesen and Donald G. Kyle.

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The modern games, however entertaining and admirable, have become more and more removed from those of ancient Olympia.

This essay concentrates on the events at the ancient Olympics because such events were fairly standard and practiced in most ancient Greek communities, but it is important to realize that there was no rigid uniformity throughout Greek athletics. Like the city-states themselves, Greek athletics show both broad patterns (e.g., footraces and wrestling, limited female participation) and regional variations (different local events and prizes). They also show both continuity (ongoing, close ties to religious festivals) and change over time (more games and nontraditional participants). As Jason König (2010: 8) writes, “Underlying the shared, Mediterranean-wide athletic practice was a vast range of different local cultures, each with its own priorities and its own debates.”

To understand Greek athletics thoroughly, and to investigate social issues, scholars have gone beyond Olympia and the other “crown” games, which conventionally are called “stephanitic” because they awarded only wreaths (*stephanoi* in Greek). Scholars now also study games held in cities and sanctuaries as part of local athletic festivals; these local games are conventionally termed “chrematitic” because they typically awarded prizes of material worth (from the Greek *chremata*, meaning valuable items).³

2 From Funeral Games to Athletic Festivals

The earliest literary account of Greek athletics comes from Homer’s *Iliad* (23.262–897), which describes how Achilles organized funeral games consisting of eight events (starting with a chariot race and ending with a spear-throwing contest) for his dead friend Patroklos. With elite warrior athletes and substantial material prizes (weapons and war plunder), these funeral games suggest the use of athletics as surrogate combat. Elsewhere Homer (*Iliad* 22.158–64) contrasts funeral games that featured horse races with rich prizes, such as elaborate bronze cauldrons and women, with more humble occasions that featured footraces offering simple prizes such as sacrificial beasts or oxhides. His *Odyssey* (8.97–253) describes noble youths in Phaiakia competing in public but more casual contests, not for prizes but to entertain their guest Odysseus. Homer’s athletic world, then, which probably reflects the ninth to eighth century, already shows patterns and variations. (For more on sport in the Homeric poems, see Chapter 3 in this volume.)

By the Archaic period (700–480) the phenomenon of Greek athletics had grown greatly (Christesen 2007b) and was even more complex and varied. Athletic contests were associated with competition for glory and status, militarism, eroticism, and conspicuous consumption and display. Competitions could apparently include traditions from sources as varied as funeral games, initiation rituals, and hero cults, but there was a pattern: most formal public athletic competitions were held as components of religious festivals.

Games were seen as an appropriate way to honor gods and heroes, and a fundamental tie between religion, sanctuaries, and games endured for centuries. Before competing, athletes prayed for divine assistance, swore sacred oaths, and vowed dedications to major deities such as Zeus and Athena and to gods especially associated with athletics such as Hermes and Herakles. Victors were thought to enjoy divine favor, some great athletes were thought to have magical powers, and some dead athletes were venerated with hero

cults (see Chapter 20). The prominence of athletics increased over time, with more events, dedications, statues, and expanded facilities, but religion continued to hallow and regularize the games. Athletics never secularized the festivals, nor did the contests become a surrogate religion or a replacement for piety. When Christian emperors suppressed athletic contests such as the Olympics in the fifth century CE, they did so out of concerns about persistent pagan piety.

3 The Historical Ancient Olympics

The sanctuary of Zeus at Olympia in the city-state of Elis in the northeastern Peloponnese housed the earliest, greatest, and longest-enduring Greek athletic festival.⁴ (The political entity of Elis, whose territory encompassed a fair amount of the northwestern Peloponnese, had its capital at an urban center called Elis; see Map 8.1.) Athletic contests were also established at the sanctuaries at Delphi, Isthmia, and Nemea in the sixth century, about a hundred years after the foundation of the Olympic Games. These four competitions became known as the “circuit” (*periodos*) of sacred crown games (see Map 1.1). Olympia was the fixed site of the Olympic Games, which were held every fourth year in late summer (July–August) at the second full moon after the summer solstice. The timing corresponded with a lull in agricultural work, and the event was correlated with an astronomical phenomenon understood by all. By the fourth century, numbered Olympiads, the four-year periods from one set of games to the next, and the names of the men’s sprint race winners in those Olympiads, provided the basis for a common chronology for the Greeks (Christesen 2007a: 1–15).

The traditional foundation date of 776 for the ancient Olympics has been challenged since antiquity (Christesen 2007a: 18–21), and archaeology now suggests that major contests at Olympia developed only around 700. Limited and local games probably arose slowly at Olympia, perhaps in response to gatherings of worshippers and as a supplement to an early religious festival. By the seventh century Olympia offered events in two broad categories: gymnastic or “naked” contests (*gymnikoi agones*: track and field and “combat” (fighting) events) and equestrian or hippic contests (*hippikoi agones*: horse and chariot races) (Miller 2004a: 31–86).

Before each Olympics, heralds (*spondophoroi*) from Elis traveled throughout the Greek world announcing the upcoming games, inviting athletes, spectators, and groups of envoys from Greek states, and proclaiming the so-called sacred truce (*ekecheiria*). This truce or armistice was not a general or common peace. It forbade the entry of armies into Eleian territory during the Olympics and ordered safe passage through any state for travelers to and from the games. The truce assisted the success of the games, but it has been overly idealized in modern times. It did not stop wars throughout Greece (Lämmer 2010). The fiercely independent city-states politicized games and decorated sanctuaries with monuments and trophies commemorating Greek military victories against fellow Greeks as well as non-Greeks. The truce helped make it possible for athletes and spectators from Greek communities throughout the Mediterranean basin to converge on Olympia and, despite local differences of dialect and laws, take part in an experience grounded in a shared religious piety and enthusiasm for sport. The Olympics were thus “Panhellenic,” which should be understood as meaning that they were open to all free



Map 1.1 Sites of the *periodos* games.

Greek males and attracted visitors from a geographically diverse array of Greek communities. It does not, however, mean that Olympia or other Panhellenic sanctuaries such as Delphi were havens of peace and harmony (Scott 2010: 256–64). (For further discussion, see Chapters 8 and 19.)

Preparations began 10 months before the start of the games, at the city of Elis (located about 25 miles north of Olympia), with the selection of officials, originally called *diaitateres* but later (by c.480) called *Hellānodikai*, “judges of the Greeks.” By 400 there were 9 *Hellānodikai* and from 348 the number remained 10 (Pausanias 5.9.4–6). These men, apparently chosen by lot from a preselected group of Eleian citizens, learned the proper customs from Eleian officials (*nomothetai*, Pausanias 6.24.3). As the sponsor of the games, Elis had headquarters for these officials and also training facilities for athletes. Aspiring athletes had to train at the city of Elis for a month prior to the games (Philostratus

Life of Apollonius of Tyana 5.43). As was probably the case at most major games, the judges supervised and scrutinized athletes to ensure their competence and to dissuade or select out any deemed unworthy (Pausanias 6.23.1–4). (For more on the *Hellānodikai*, see Chapters 8 and 17.) At Elis, as in their prior training at home at their local *gymnasion* (gymnasium, a place for exercising nude) or *palaistra* (wrestling school), and in the upcoming games at Olympia, all gymnastic athletes (but not equestrians) had to be completely nude. They applied olive oil to their bodies before exercise and later used a metal scraper or strigil (*stlēngis*) to remove oil, sweat, and dirt. Such intriguing customs, and the related homoeroticism, have been much debated (Scanlon 2002: 64–97, 199–273; see also Chapter 13, which includes an excursus on nudity).

Athletes at Olympia differed not by ethnicity but by event and age. All free Greek males were eligible, but females, non-Greeks, and slaves were excluded from direct participation. Olympic contests were held among men (*andres*), who most probably were 18 years of age and up, and, from 632 on, among boys (*paidēs*), perhaps aged 12–17 (Golden 1998: 104–12; see Chapter 14). Judges ensured that all entrants for boys' events were members of a Greek state, had a father and a family, and were free and not illegitimate (Philostratus *Gymnastikos* 25; Crowther 2004: 23–33).

Competitors went to Olympia on their own initiative; they were not screened or selected at home by state officials. Most athletes represented their native cities, but they were allowed to transfer their loyalty and victories by declaring that they were representing another state. The first known “free agent,” Astylos, won Olympic footraces for the city of Croton (in 488, 484) and then for Syracuse in 480 (Young 1984: 141–2).

Early Olympians came from Elis or nearby states, but the scope of participation increased as Greeks spread throughout the Mediterranean world. However, although Macedonians, Alexandrians, and others would test and expand the limits of Greekness and eligibility, Olympia traditionally upheld the hierarchies of Greek above barbarian, free above slave, and male above female.

A couple of days before the official opening of the games, a procession of Eleian officials, athletes, trainers, official representatives from individual Greek communities (*theoriai*), and spectators, perhaps several hundred all told, set out for Olympia. Before they left, Eleian officials offered athletes a chance to withdraw (Philostratus *Life of Apollonius of Tyana* 5.43). The procession stopped overnight en route, and the officials purified themselves at the spring of Pieria as they approached the sanctuary. With perhaps a hundred thousand people in attendance, the atmosphere at Olympia was comparable to any major Greek festival or modern sporting spectacle.

At Olympia athletes swore sacred oaths before a statue of Zeus. Pausanias (5.24.9–10) says that the athletes, along with their fathers, brothers, and trainers, swore that they would “do nothing evil” against the games. Athletes also swore that they had been training responsibly for 10 months. The *Hellānodikai* who judged the ages of boys (and by 384 of colts) took an oath to judge fairly, accept no gifts, and keep secret any information about the competitors.

Three judges ran the hippic events, three ran the footraces, and the rest ran the combat events. Conspicuous with their purple robes and forked sticks, the judges could expel, fine, or scourge athletes for cheating or lying. They paired opponents, assigned lanes or byes using lots, identified victors, and awarded prize wreaths. The judges'

decisions were absolute and irrevocable. As Stephen Miller points out (2004a: 19, 232–3), winners were chosen by what he calls objective criteria – prizes were given to whomever crossed the line first or forced his opponent to submit rather than by the more subjective criteria used in dance and musical events. Nevertheless, there were controversies. In 396 two of the three judges credited the victory in the sprint to their countryman Eupolemos of Elis, while the third chose Leon of Ambracia (Pausanias 6.3.7). When Leon appealed to the Olympic Council (an Eleian governmental body), the biased judges were fined but Eupolemos's win stood. In another incident, in 372, one of the judges entered and won two hippic contests (Pausanias 6.1.4–5). Thereafter, no Eleian could both judge and compete in an equestrian event. (For further discussion of the actions of Eleian judges at the Olympics, see Chapter 8.)

At Olympia there were only individual, first-place victors, and they received only a wreath of olive leaves from the judges and bunches of foliage and fillets (wool ribbons) from admiring spectators. For each winner there were far more losers, and there was little dignity in defeat. Pindar mentions defeated boys sneaking home by back streets (*Pythian* 8.85–7). Despite their oath, ancient Olympians sought advantages and sometimes crossed the line. Some offenses were ad hoc fouls in the heat of competition, but others involved ruthless ambition, planning, and collusion. By the fourth century *Zanes*, statues of Zeus paid for by athletes caught and fined for lying, bribery, and cheating, lined the route to the stadium (Pausanias 5.21.2–18).

4 The Olympic Program of Contests

The exact sequence of activities at Olympia remains uncertain, but by the mid-fifth-century contests and religious rituals were intermingled over a five-day festival (Lee 2001). The following list gives the traditional reconstruction of the development of the program of events (based on Pausanias 5.8.5–9.2, whose accuracy on details is sometimes doubted; cf. Christesen 2007a: 16–17, 66, 476–8).

Event(s)	Year added to Olympic program
c.200m sprint (<i>stadion</i>)	776
c.400m run (<i>diaulos</i>)	724
Distance race (<i>dolichos</i>)	720
Pentathlon, wrestling (<i>pale</i>)	688
Four-horse chariot race (<i>tethrippon</i>)	680
All-in wrestling (<i>pankration</i>), horseback race (<i>keles</i>)	648
Boys' <i>stadion</i> , boys' wrestling	632
Boys' pentathlon (discontinued immediately thereafter)	628
Boys' boxing	616
c.400m run in armor (<i>hoplites</i> , <i>hoplitodromos</i>)	520
Mule-cart race (<i>apene</i>)	500
Horseback race for mares (<i>kalpe</i> or <i>anabates</i>)	496
<i>Apene</i> and <i>kalpe</i> discontinued	444
Two-horse chariot race (<i>synoris</i>)	408
Contests for heralds and trumpeters	396
Four-colt chariot race	384

Two-colt chariot race	268
Horseback race for colts	256
Boys' all-in wrestling (<i>pankration</i>)	200

5 Gymnic Contests

The *stadion* race was a basic sprint down the track, and Koroibos of Elis was supposedly the first *stadion* winner at Olympia. A *stadion* was also a Greek measure of distance, some 600 Greek feet. The *stadion* at Olympia was 192.28 meters, the *stadion* at Delphi was 177.5 meters, and that at Nemea was 178 meters. Modern exactitude was not required, and the measurements used and the lengths of tracks varied from site to site.

Using rectangular, not oval, tracks, runners in races longer than the sprint had to turn around a wooden post or posts (Miller 2004a: 35–43). The *diaulos* or “double-flute” race was of two lengths, down and back (c.384 meters), with each runner turning around his own individual post. The *hoplites* or *hoplitodromos* was a *diaulos* with the runners wearing helmet, shield, and sometimes greaves (shin guards). In the *dolichos*, the long race of perhaps 20 lengths (c.3,800 meters), all runners turned around a single post.

Elsewhere in Greece torch races transferred sacred fire from one altar to another, but we have no sound evidence for a torch race or relay, or ultra-long-distance races, at Olympia. Greek long-distance messengers (*hemerodromoi*) could run 26 miles and further (Herodotus 6.105–6, Nielsen 2009), but the modern marathon race was invented in 1896 and has no real basis in ancient sport.

Runners started from an upright position, with their left feet somewhat ahead of their right feet and their toes in parallel grooves in stone starting sills (*balbides*). Similar sills were also found at the opposite end of the track. Holes for turning posts (*kampteres*) set into these sills indicate lanes for up to 20 runners at Olympia. For centuries the start was auditory, and, as Herodotus mentions, athletes who committed a false start were flogged, but by c.300 many stadia, including that at Olympia, had a starting mechanism (*hysplex*). Best known from Nemea, the *hysplex* used tensioned ropes to drop lane gates simultaneously, ensuring fair starts (see Figure 18.2). (For further discussion of the *hysplex* in particular and ancient stadia in general, see Chapter 18.)

The pentathlon combined five subevents: discus (*diskos*), javelin (*akon*), broad jump (*halma*), running (a *stadion* race), and wrestling. Running and wrestling existed as independent events, but the other subevents were held only as part of the pentathlon. Debate continues about the origin, status, operation, and scoring of the pentathlon and about the techniques of the subevents, but this composite event was probably created as a way to test excellence in three events (the discus, javelin, and jump; see Figure 1.1). Running and wrestling were perhaps added to help determine an overall victor.

Usually of bronze, discuses varied in size and weight throughout Greece. Olympia kept three identical discuses for official use (Pausanias 6.19.4). Debate on the technique of the throw continues, in part fostered by Myron's famous fifth-century sculpture of a discus thrower (the Diskobolos). Rather than a full rotation like the

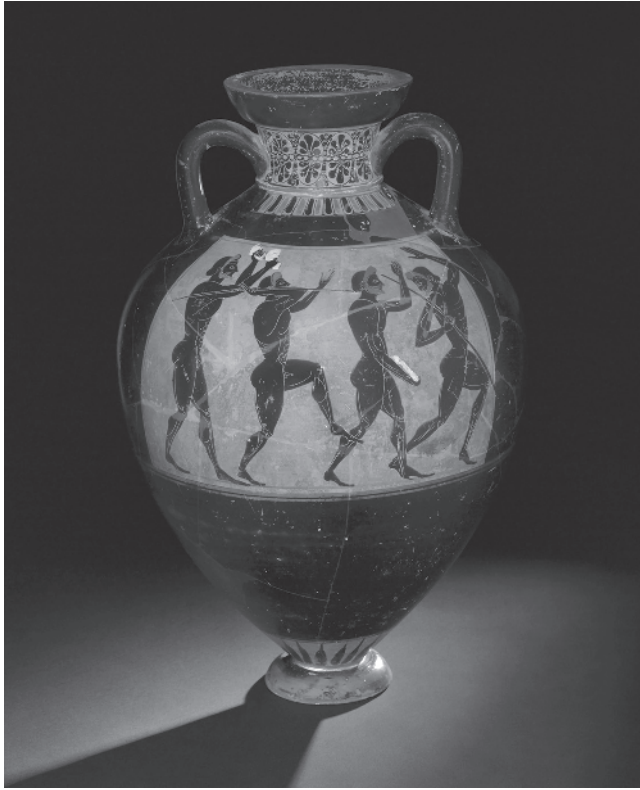


Figure 1.1 Panathenaic prize amphora showing events from the pentathlon, c.530–520 BCE.
Source: British Museum 1842, 0314.1, © Trustees of the British Museum.

modern “free throw,” the ancient throw was probably an underhand pitch of the right arm as the left leg was advanced forward. In throwing the javelin athletes used a leather thong (*ankyle*), held by the fingers and wrapped around the middle of a light javelin but not fastened to it, to impart a rifling effect to improve distance and accuracy. Pentathletes used metal or stone weights (*halteres*) (shaped rather like dumbbells and varying in size and weight) during their jumps to improve distances. Running up to the starting sill, the jumper swung the weights forward at the take-off to aid his momentum and then thrust them backwards for added distance, dropping them before they became a hindrance.

Scholars disagree on the sequence of events and the means used to select victors in the pentathlon. The first three wins by one athlete could produce a winner and end the competition, and the discus, javelin, and jump were nonindependent events, so these three events probably took place first. Xenophon (*Hellenika* 7.4.29) suggests that wrestling was the final event, so the run was probably held fourth. To select the winner, scholars have suggested points systems, comparative victories or relative placements, and systems with eliminations, byes, lots, and rematches. Sport fans in the modern world expect consistency in such technical matters but, again, Greek sport was not perfectly standardized. Procedures possibly varied by place and over time.⁵

Greek combat sports (wrestling, boxing, and *pankration*) were not for the faint of heart. Fouls or clinching to stall a fight brought blows from the judge's stick. Greeks called these three the "heavy events" (*barea athla*), probably because heavier athletes tended to dominate owing to the fact that there were no weight classes or time limits. In uneven fields in combat events byes were allotted, and an athlete might have to face an opponent who had just "sat out" a round (an *ephedros*) and who had thus gained a distinct advantage.

Wrestling (*pale*) took place from an upright position and involved an array of sophisticated holds and throws. Like boxing and *pankration*, matches were held in an area of loosened earth (the *skamma* or pit) in the stadium and were decided by three out of five falls (Poliakoff 1987: 23–53). According to an inscribed sacred law (*Supplementum Epigraphicum Graecum* 48.541) dating to around 525–500 and found at Olympia, finger breaking was not allowed and was punishable by flogging. Perhaps the rules changed later, for the wrestler Leontiskos of Messene won twice at Olympia (456, 452) by bending his opponents' fingers (Pausanias 6.4.3). The most famous Greek wrestler, Milo of Croton, won an amazing seven times at Olympia in the sixth century. At Olympia around 520 no wrestler would face him, so he won *akoniti*, meaning "dustless" or unopposed.

Greek boxing (*pyx*, *pygmachia*, *pygme*) was spectacularly brutal, bloody, and dangerous. Boxers wrapped their hands and wrists with long oxhide leather straps (*himantes*) to protect their hands – not to spare their opponents' faces. Eurydamas of Cyrene supposedly had his teeth knocked out during a match, but he swallowed them so his opponent would not notice, and went on to win (Aelian *Historical Miscellany* 10.19). Most blows were directed to the head, and Greek art graphically depicts bleeding and disfigured boxers with scars, cauliflower ears, and broken noses. Boxers battered each other until one was knocked out or admitted defeat by raising his index finger. Some fighters died rather than submit (Scanlon 2002: 304–7), and states even found it necessary to confirm the legal immunity of athletes who accidentally killed their opponents (Demosthenes 23.53). In 492 Olympic officials denied a victory to Kleomedes of Astypalaia for apparently intentionally killing his opponent in boxing (Pausanias 6.9.6).

The *pankration* was a brutal free-for-all combining wrestling and boxing, with few rules (Poliakoff 1987: 54–63). Only gouging and biting were prohibited; punching, kicking, choking, and blows to the genitals were not. Like boxing, matches went on until someone raised his finger and gave up, was incapacitated, or died.

With notions of "all or nothing" and "win at all costs," combat sports entailed a tension between the desire to win and the risk of injury or death (Scanlon 2002: 274–322). In 564, while expiring in a stranglehold, the pankratiast Arrhichion of Phigaleia is said to have dislocated his opponent's ankle, forcing him to submit to a dead but victorious opponent (Pausanias 8.40.1–2; Philostratus *Imagines* 2.6; Poliakoff 1987: 62–3, 91). The motif of symbolic and sometimes actual death in competition, then, is found in Greek and not just Roman culture.

Many people in the present day are shocked – or intrigued – by the Greeks' apparent insensitivity to violence, dangers, and even death in the stadium. Like people before and after them, Greeks found orchestrated violence alluring, and they admired combat athletes for their toughness, endurance, and fighting spirit.

Greeks saw excellence in athletics and war as analogous (Golden 1998: 23–8; Spivey 2004: 1–29), and combat events seem to suggest surrogate warfare or military training. The *hoplitodromos* may reflect military developments; it came into being at roughly the same time as the Greek armies directly encountered Persian military forces for the first time and may have been intended to help prepare Greek soldiers to deal with a new and dangerous enemy (Sekunda 1998: 31). Pausanias (5.8.10) suggests that it was added to the Olympic program to provide military training, and Philostratus (*Gymnastikos* 7) suggests that this race, the final event in the games, signaled the end of the truce and the return to a state of war. However, in his foundational study of Greek combat sports, Poliakoff argues that combat sports were at best indirect preparation for battle (1987: 94–103), and some scholars have recently argued that the *gymnasion* may not have come into being to train soldiers, as once thought (Christesen 2007b).

6 Hippic Contests

Greek geography was far from ideal for horses or chariots, and maintaining horses for competitions was proverbially expensive, but rich families welcomed the hippic events as opportunities to display their wealth and gain social status through conspicuous consumption. The owners of the horses were declared the winners, and most hippic victors did not actually drive or ride their horses in competitions. Pindar praises two owners who did drive their own chariots, “like the heroes of old” (*Isthmian* 1.15, *Pythian* 5.21, 115). Usually hirelings and slaves, the jockeys and charioteers who risked their lives, were not allowed to enter on their own or to win for themselves, and they received scant recognition (Nicholson 2005: 25–116). Owners did not even need to be present, thus allowing absentee and even female victors (see Chapter 16).

The four-horse chariot race (*tethrippon*) of 12 laps (c.14,000 meters) was the most costly and spectacular Greek contest. The simpler, but still costly, two-horse chariot race (*synoris*) went 8 laps (c.9,500 meters). In both races charioteers, who wore tunics, goaded their horses on and raced their chariots, built light for speed, over a racetrack with hairpin turns. Unlike the Roman circus, the Greek hippodrome (Pausanias 6.20.10 describes the Olympic venue) lacked a central dividing barrier to prevent head-on collisions. Sophocles (*Electra* 681–756) recounts a fictional *tethrippon* at Delphi in which only 1 of 10 chariots finishes the race and in which multiple crashes result in fatalities among the drivers. The bloody wreckage in this race is worthy of the Roman circus, but this poetic account was credible – and entertaining – to Greeks in the fifth century.

Similarly dangerous, the horse race (*keles*) was perhaps 6 laps (c.7,000 meters) long. Slender, youthful jockeys, bareback with no saddle or stirrups but with goads and spurs, are sometimes depicted nude but may not have ridden so. Again, despite the risks and their age, these riders “won” only for their owners.

In time Olympia adjusted to more diversified equestrian events. Perhaps under Sicilian influence, the mule-cart race (*apene*) and a mare or dismounting race (*kalpe* or *anabates*) were introduced in 500 and 496 but discontinued by 444. Later additions included the aforementioned two-horse chariot race (in 408) and three events for colts (in 384, 268, and 256). (On the importance at Olympia of competitors from Greek settlements in Sicily and southern Italy, see Chapter 12.)

7 More Panhellenic Crown Games

During the Archaic period, with colonization, interstate rivalry, ambitious tyrants, and aristocrats' desire for status display, games proliferated and became thoroughly institutionalized in sanctuaries and city-states. The success of Olympia inspired the addition of contests to festivals held at other Panhellenic sanctuaries: the Pythian Games (sacred to Apollo) at Delphi in 586, the Isthmian Games (sacred to Poseidon) at the Isthmus of Corinth in 580, and the Nemean Games (sacred to Zeus) at Nemea in 573. These three games were carefully scheduled around the Olympics, with Olympia and Delphi on off-set four-year cycles and Isthmia and Nemea on staggered two-year cycles. A four-year cycle included six festivals: one Olympic and one Pythian, as well as two each of the Isthmian and Nemean Games. All four had wreath prizes (but of different plants), truces, envoys, and contests open to all Greeks. Becoming a *periodonikes* or "circuit victor" by winning at all four games of the *periodos* was the height of athletic glory (Miller 2004a: 95–112; Valavanis 2004: 162–335).

There was no standardized program even among the four crown games of the *periodos*. For example, Olympia and Nemea were both sacred to Zeus, but Nemea apparently had contests in three age categories (boys, youths, and men). Unlike Olympia, Nemea and Isthmia (and Athens and Argos) had a middle distance footrace of four *stadia* (c.700 meters), the *hippios* (Pausanias 6.16.4). The elaborate programs of the Pythian and Isthmian Games shared elements with Olympia but also with each other. The Pythia had musical events, and it adopted some colts' events well before Olympia. Isthmia had gymnastic events and prominent hippic events but also competitions in music, recitation, and art and, at some point, apparently even a boat race. Although, reportedly, most Greeks could swim, no swimming races are recorded. (For further discussion of the sites of Delphi, Isthmia, and Nemea and of the athletic festivals held at those sites, see Chapter 11.)

8 Local or Civic Games

The Panhellenic crown games show us only part of the world of Greek athletics and not the part experienced by most Greeks. Because of the distance and expense, the average athlete or spectator probably did not regularly attend the great Panhellenic festivals but rather went to games held near his or her home. To appreciate the rich variety and vitality of Greek athletics, and to attempt any athletic social history, we need to look beyond the *periodos* to local or civic contests, which conventionally, as noted earlier, are called "chrematitic" games because they awarded prizes of material worth.

Hundreds of city-states and sanctuaries staged games and built public athletic facilities (Miller 2004a: 129–45; Valavanis 2004: 336–97; Kyle 2007: 148–97). Many cities and sanctuaries displayed athletic sculptures and victory dedications, and some issued coins with athletic images to advertise their festivals. Local games usually included some Olympic-style events, but their programs were quite varied, and unlike the crown games, these games awarded valuable prizes. Pindar (*Nemean* 10.22–48, similarly *Olympian* 7.80–7) mentions prizes of bronze shields at Argos, amphorae (large vases) of olive oil



Map 1.2 Key sites mentioned in this essay.

at Athens, silver wine cups at Sicyon, and cloaks at Pellene (see Map 1.2 for key locations mentioned in this essay). Cities gave numerous prizes, even second-place and team prizes, because prizes both showed off local wealth and products and enhanced participation and civic pride.

Different games reflected the character of their different states or regions. Known as a center of healing, the sanctuary of Asklepios at Epidauros also hosted gymnastic, hippic, and musical games from c.520 on. Like the crown festivals, the Asklepia Games had a stadium, judges, and envoys (Miller 2004a: 129–32; Sève 1993). At wealthy and

ambitious Athens the Greater Panathenaic Games had an eclectic program including contests in male beauty, dancing in armor, and a chariot-dismounting race (*apobates*), as well as team and tribal contests (e.g., torch and boat races). Some Panathenaic contests included three age groups and some were restricted to Athenian citizens (see Chapter 10). From the fifth century on festivals at Larissa and other communities in Thessaly (in what is now northern Greece) included standard events and also local events evocative of a land known for horses and cattle: unusual equestrian contests (e.g., a torch race on horseback, an *apobates* race, and mounting and dismounting competitions) and bull sports (*taurotheria*) in which a horseman pursued a bull, jumped off his horse, grasped the bull by the horns, and wrestled it to the ground (Gallis 1988; Zapheiropoulou 2004). These and other games demonstrate numerous local variations and adaptations within the general pattern of Greek athletics, and their programs and material prizes offered expanded opportunities for athletes.

From whatever class and however mixed their motives, most athletes espoused a traditional, aristocratic athletic value system with themes of effort, virtue, piety, endurance or outlay (*ponos*), and humility (*aidos*) (Pleket 2010: 161–74). Victory brought glorious fame (*kleos*), but it was to be tempered by humility and an appreciation of divine favor (*charis*). Greek athletes, nevertheless, were not opposed to profiting from their victories. Without amateur restrictions, athletes competed freely in both stephanitic and chrematitic games, gathering glory and gains at will. Theagenes of Thasos, Olympic victor in 480 and 476, supposedly won some 1,400 victories (Pausanias 6.11.2–9). Home cities rewarded Olympic victors with cash bonuses, free meals, and honors. Athenian Olympic victors got 500 *drachmai* from the state, worth perhaps US\$340,000 today (Young 1984: 7, 107–10, 128–33). Critics (see Chapter 21), to no avail, condemned the adulation and rewards given to athletes, saying they should go to thinkers and virtuous citizens.

Social analysis of athletics is best attempted by focusing on the mass of athletes who were active only locally rather than the handful of stars who competed at the Panhellenic level. We know at best some 25 percent of Olympic victors (Farrington 1997: 24). Perhaps only 200 to 250 athletes competed at each Olympiad (Crowther 1993: 49) and that was only every fourth year. Discerning the class or social mobility of Panhellenic victors (let alone entrants), who often are known only by name and contest, is problematic. We usually do not know the resources or class of the family, or whether they were well-off before or because of their victories.

We have better evidence for athletes competing at home in states such as Athens and Sparta. As Nigel Crowther (2004: 181) states, “the number of competitors was much larger in local festivals than in the crown games.” Large numbers of youths at Athens participated in team or tribal torch races and in choral dances, which were financed by the state or selected benefactors. Young athletes with familial resources for training and travel might consider pursuing athletic competition at a higher level but only after testing themselves and succeeding locally. Most probably ceased to compete formally and publicly in early adulthood, turning thereafter to exercise in the *gymnasion* for purposes of health, appearance, social interaction, status display, or readiness to assist the state in warfare. Sporting experiences, then, for most Greeks began in and centered on their own community.

NOTES

- 1 All dates are BCE unless otherwise indicated.
- 2 See Chapter 4 in this volume for further discussion of the use of athletic metaphors in Greek literature.
- 3 The terms “stephanitic” and “chrematitic” are based upon fourth-century BCE literary usage, but I acknowledge that these terms may suggest an oversimplified typology for Greek athletic festivals. They imply that the prize given is the criterion of status and categorization rather than the prestige of the games. Also, the terms do not correspond to technical terminology in later papyrological and epigraphic documents for Hellenistic and imperial contests. See Pleket 2004 and Remijsen 2011; but cf. Slater 2012.
- 4 On the ancient Olympics, see Miller 2004a: 11–19, 31–87; Valavanis 2004: 408–41; Young 2004: 24–51; Spivey 2004: 70–124; Kyle 2007: 110–35; Swaddling 2008: 56–89; Potter 2012: 55–88.
- 5 On determining the winner in the pentathlon, see Lee 2001: 40–7; Young 2004: 32–7, 161–4; Kyle 2007: 121–3; Egan 2007.

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GUIDE TO FURTHER READING

For an authoritative, illustrated synthesis on Greek athletics, see Miller 2004a. Miller 2004b is an essential collection of translated documents. Golden 2004 is a handy reference work, and Poliakoff 1987 remains essential on combat events.

Scott 2010 is a recent archaeological study of Olympia and Delphi. Lee 2001 thoroughly examines the Olympic program. Christesen 2007a challenges early Olympic dates. Nielsen 2007 contextualizes Olympia in the wider Greek world.

A social historical introduction, Golden 1998 interprets sport as a means of social differentiation. Pleket 2010 uses inscriptions in his seminal article on games, prizes, and athletes. Young 1984 remains an important revisionist study on professionalism and prizes. Nicholson 2005 applies new historicism to the representation of charioteers, jockeys, and trainers. Scanlon 2002 relates athletics to Greek religion, education, gender, sexuality, and social values.

A richly illustrated volume on Panhellenic and local games, Valavanis 2004 emphasizes ties between religion and sport. Kyle 2007 suggests overlapping athletic and spectacular aspects of sport in a broad context. Recent anthologies include Phillips and Pritchard 2003 and Schaus and Wenn 2007. Crowther 2004 collects his valuable articles on aspects of Greek and Roman sport, and König 2010 makes important articles more accessible.