

Tripods, Wreaths, Amphoras of Oil: Patterns and Motives in Greek Athletic Prize-Giving

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The awarding of a variety of prizes for athletic victory was an old and enduring tradition in ancient Greece. For the Greeks, etymologically and historically, athletics could not exist without athletes, spectators, prizes, and prize-donors. In the funeral games for Patroclus in the Iliad the announcement and awarding of prizes form a regular and essential part of the narrative; and the earliest known Greek inscription is found on an Attic vase which probably was a prize in a dancing contest. Much later, although he had strong reservations about contemporary training and athletics, Plato still suggests that an ideal state should have (military) athletic competitions complete with prizes. The most famous athletic prizes of antiquity, of course, were the simple wreaths or crowns of foliage given at the Panhellenic games. Beyond the Panhellenic games and closer to the life of most Greeks, however, there was a large number of “local” or “chrematitic” games offering material prizes of various types ranging from cloaks to shields to money. Among the most valuable and most artistically significant prizes from local games were the Panathenaic prize amphoras introduced at Athens in 566.

The ancient custom (and, in time, the state institution) of awarding athletic prizes has received some but not enough scholarly attention. We must appreciate that the emphasis in early Greek athletic prize-giving, unlike that in modern athletics, was on the *donor* as least as much as on the *recipient* of the prize. Greek athletic prizes were regarded as “gifts” rather than wages, and we can gain a deeper understanding of Greek athletics by comparing their prize-giving traditions with other Greek gift-giving paradigms (e.g. *xenia*, euergetism).

A historical survey of known athletic prizes from the Bronze Age to the early Archaic era, this paper suggests that Panathenaic prizes, primarily the amphoras of oil, represent a culmination of various traditions in athletic prize-giving. By considering the role of writing as well as oral or



iconographic communication in relationship to athletics, it presents Panathenaic amphoras as “self-declaratory” prizes, a fairly recent phenomenon and one mastered by Athens.