

## Greek festivals

### Festivals in the lives of the Greeks

The Greeks had many ways of worshipping the gods and goddesses who they believed were important in their lives. For some gods, for example, Zeus, Apollo, Dionysos and the patron gods of cities, the Greeks held large festivals in which many people took part.

At every festival, there were prayers and sacrifices of animals to the god or goddess. A festival was also a holiday, a chance for rest and relaxation from normal work and a time for people to enjoy themselves. The religious ceremonies were usually followed by competitions of various kinds. These included music, dancing and drama competitions, but most popular of all were the athletic contests.

### Athletic festivals

In athletic contests, young men competed with one another in events such as running, throwing the javelin and discus, wrestling and boxing. Often there was also chariot racing. There was just one special athletic contest for women that happened every four years.

Several places in Greece became famous centres for athletics festivals. The best known was Olympia where the Olympic Games were held every four years in honour of Zeus; another important festival took place at Delphi in honour of Apollo. At these festivals, athletes came together from cities all over the Greek world to take part in the events.

Of all the festivals held in ancient Greece, we know most about those held in the city of Athens.



### Festivals in Athens

Every year the Athenians held a festival called the Panathenaia to celebrate the birthday of their patron goddess Athena. Every fourth year the Panathenaia included a beauty contest for men, musical contests and athletic events like those in the Olympic Games.

The main part of the festival was a magnificent procession. The procession started at the edge of the city and made its way to Athena's temple on a hill called the Acropolis. Here, the priests dressed the ancient wooden statue of the goddess in a new robe. Hundreds of cows were sacrificed and a great feast took place for all the people.

The Athenians also held festivals in honour of Dionysos, when specially written plays were performed. The largest of these festivals took place in early spring and was called the Great Dionysia.