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ARCH 331-2

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2 May 2019

The Athenian Agora

Today the Ancient Agora of Athens is known for being a political and cultural center in the Mediterranean world. The Agora, located below the Acropolis Hill, has a long history which began in the Archaic period and ended when the Roman Emperors included their own buildings. The purpose of the Agora is ever changing through history. During the Archaic and Classical periods, the Agora was defined as a public gathering place; all forms of public life including religious, commercial, social, administrative, and political gatherings took place there (Travlos 1). Looking at plans of the Agora in 500 BC, during the Archaic period, as well as the end of the 5th century (Classical period), there is evidence that religious, social, and administrative buildings already existed, including the Temple of the 12 gods. The Royal Stoa was a simple rectangular building used for public settings such as the Archons and the Areopagus council to meet. These simple architectural buildings were meant for the purpose of public life. The Tholos was yet another simple circular house important for the bodies of democratic. Many of these spaces were sacred, including the center space of the Agora.

Unfortunately, after the Classical period in 323 BC, Athens hit an economic decline. This economic decline affected the Agora and caused a change in its function, specifically its meaning and simplicity. Alexander the Great and the Roman Empire were beginning to grow, and admired and were being influenced by Greek culture. The Agora completely lost its purpose as a civic

center by the Roman period, and instead became the center for education, intellectual life, and culture with the addition of new buildings such as libraries, lecture halls, gymnasiums, and schools (Camp 184). One important event that changed the meaning of the Agora was the death of Socrates, after which Plato opened the first Western university in his honor. Athens then became a university influential enough to have students such as Cicero, famous for oratory, and Ovid for poetry (Camp 180).

Not only did famous Roman figures visit the Agora, but Roman empires also built elaborate buildings in the sacred center of the Agora. As the meaning of the Agora changed, so also the meaning of sacred space and architecture. An example is the Odeion, the theater for Agrippa. These additional buildings changed the purpose of the Agora over time. Only after the influence of external power such as Macedonia and Rome, the Agora emerged again wealthy but this time as a center for intellectual, educational, cultural life. In order to come to this conclusion, an analysis of four buildings built in the Agora: the four buildings that will be analyzed are the Heliaia, the Stoa of Zeus, the Middle Stoa, and the Odeion.

The Heliaia was built during the Archaic period, probably in the 6th century BC. The Heliaia is a large triangular building with no roof - similar to several courts in Ancient Greece in the Archaic period (Camp 47). At first, the archaeologists thought the Heliaia was built for religious purposes from the architecture, but later concluded it was instead for political public use from the lack of religious material inside the building. The Heliaia was the earliest court in Athens and held the first court trials (Camp 47). A Council of 500 was chosen by lot and resided inside the building. Because the Heliaia had no roof, outsiders could overhear the proceedings. The inside of the Heliaia held only one room and had no internal divisions. The Heliaia

architecturally has a simple build, intended only for political use. The Athenians did not embellish this building but rather is used only for the purpose of civic benefit. Perhaps the reason for building a simple open aired building is because the Greeks did not have a reason to show off to external cultures or influenced by external cultures. Unfortunately, after the Persian wars in 449 BC, there is evidence of repairs on the walls of the Heliaia (Camp 108). After the Greek defeated the Persians, the Golden Age began. During this period Athenians were politically and economically superior to the rest of the polis in Greece. This Golden Age was when the Stoa of Zeus was constructed in the Agora.

The Stoa of Zeus is located under the Kolonos Agoraios and was built at the end of the 5th century BC. This temple was not the original temple, the first temple was a small one-room temple to Zeus that existed in the Archaic age but was destroyed by the Persians (Camp 106). After the Periklean building program, the Classical Temple of Zeus was finally built. Architecture in this period changed, rather than the Athenians building religious buildings, they began to build civic buildings. Architecturally, the Stoa of Zeus is more elaborate than most of the buildings in the Agora with ends that appear like a temple with six columns. The temple is of the Doric order with two projecting wings with painted figures of the twelve gods and famous Athenian figures upon the pediments (Camp 106-107). This temple is dedicated to Zeus Elutherious. Archaeologists found evidence that this Stoa was used for five different public functions: informal meeting places, house administrative boards, judicial functions, war memorials, and people memorials. During the Classical period, Athens was at its highest economic and political height. This explains why temples, like the Stoa of Zeus, are architecturally elaborate, unlike buildings in the Archaic period. Unfortunately, Athens at the end

of the 4th century hit an economic decline from the Peloponnesian War, plague, and continuous fighting between polis.

During the Hellenistic period, there is evidence of the Agora's slow decline until it assumed its final form (Travlos 3). In the 2nd century BC, the Middle Stoa is built in front of the Heliiaia running east to west, dividing the Agora into two unequal parts. The Middle Stoa is one hundred and sixty meters long but modest in its building material; the columns and entablature are limestones and the metopes in the frieze and the soma of terracotta are marble (Camp 175). The Stoa is the Doric order, but the columns remained unfluted, and the upper part of the Stoa is painted (Camp 175-176). Although the architecture is not elaborate, it shows clear differences from Stoa in the past. The Stoa is located in the center of the Agora and has columns on all four sides so Athenians can walk through the building. The Middle Stoa is used for public space and is simple in its architecture. On the other hand, the Stoa of Zeus is architecturally complex and painted for the many heroes of Classical Athens. This displays how Athens was quickly gaining affluence. However, by the end of the Hellenistic period, the Agora unexpectedly rose again as one of the most important centers in the Mediterranean world with the influence of the Roman Empire.

Roman civilization admired and was influenced heavily by Greek culture. Following the death of Socrates, Plato built a university in Athens which drew famous Romans to Athens. The Romans, by the rise of the Roman empire, began to build in the Agora to pay homage to the Greeks and to show they have the dominant culture. The Odeion, also called the Theater of Agrippa, located in the center of the Agora displays the changes in the Agora. The Odeion is very large, surpassing all the other buildings in the Agora. The purpose of this massive building

was to be a concert hall to hold musical performances; after the second phase it became a space for philosophers to study. The architecture is very different from all buildings in the Agora, the Odeion was roofed, unlike Greek theaters which were open to the sky (Camp 184). The roof had no internal support and was glued together by concrete. The semicircular orchestra was paved with marble slabs and the stage was decorated with sculptures. The original Odeion had a small four column porch which after the second construction was made larger to hold sculptures (Camp 184). The inside of the Odeion was covered in multicolored marble. The Odeion is extravagant compared to past buildings. The use of the Odeion changed the meaning of the Agora, from political and civic uses to educational and cultural. The Romans also built in the center of the Agora, changing the idea of sacred space, something that the Athenians held in the past. The architecture became elaborate from the Romans who built in the Agora and built the Odeion to show Roman power rather than for a singler use. This new meaning for the Agora brought Athens out of its economic decline, although changing the Agora indefinitely, and brought new life in the Agora and Athens.

The Agora is very important to Athens and Greek culture, present through Greek and Mediterranean history as an important political and cultural center. Looking closer at the history of the Agora, the Greek definition changed through the Archaic, Classical, Hellenistic, and Roman period. In the Archaic and Classical period, the Agora was defined as the center for all forms of public life such as religious, commercial, social, administrative, and political gatherings. This is evident in the Heliaia and the Stoa of Zeus. Beginning in the Hellenistic period, Athens hit a noticeable economic and political decline. However, in the Roman period the Agora completely lost this civic center purpose, and instead became the center for education,

intellectual life, and culture. This further changed the meaning of the Agora, sacred space, and architecture, evident in the creation of the Odeion. The Agora began as a center for all forms of public life, but in the late Classical period began to decline economically. Only after the influence of external power such as Macedonia and Rome, the Agora emerged again wealthy but this time as a center for intellectual, educational, cultural life.

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