

THE CLASSICAL AGORA

by Brian Clark

In 1980 the discovery of a marble stele and its inscription challenged the widely held belief that the centre of ancient Athens was west of the Acropolis. The decree, commending a priestess from the sanctuary of Aglauros, was found nearby its original base on the eastern slopes of the acropolis. The inscription was found near a natural cave facing the city's north-eastern quarter. This discovery confirmed the location of the sanctuary of Aglauros, an important touchstone for reconstructing archaic Athens. Using Pausanias' description of the archaic city centre, the oldest buildings could now be placed east of the Acropolis, with reference to the cave of Aglauros. Original suggestions had placed these buildings west or southwest of the Acropolis. This discovery challenged previous scholastic attempts to locate Athens' ancient buildings and monuments, as well as brought the issue of why the Agora was relocated to the northwest into focus. Jeffrey Hurwit reiterates this dilemma:

'how and when the area northwest of the Acropolis was removed from private tenure and transformed into a new civic space –a civic arena for shrine, processions, athletic competitions, military training and even theatrical performances- is a matter of debate'.¹

The Tyrant Period: *The Spirit of the Agora*

*'The low-lying area to the northwest of the Acropolis, where the lower slopes of the Areopagus descend gently into the stream-bed of the Eridanos, developed gradually in the course of the archaic period into the Agora of classical Athens.'*²

According to Pausanias, the Prytaneion was located near the Cave of Aglauros. Since the Prytaneion was the core building of a *polis*, the city centre grew up around its 'hearth'. Pausanias confirms he saw Solon's laws inscribed in the Prytaneion, as well as an image of Hestia, both central images for the Athenian *polis*. The civic life of the *polis* was focused in this area. However by the mid sixth Century another area northwest of the Acropolis was being reshaped. During this period Athens was controlled by the tyrant regime, the Peisistratids. Peisistratos first seized control in 560/1 but was not completely successful at securing his tyranny until 546. Near the same time the Panathenaic festival, Athens' celebration of its community, was reorganized. Whether Peisistratos was responsible or not for the reorganization, public festivals began focusing attention on this new area. Cult activities also prospered in the new space. Throughout the 6th Century cult activity became more apparent and was placed under state control. Cult activities were often instigated, controlled and manipulated by the tyrants as a political tool. The Eleusinion was built to house the Eleusinian cult of Demeter and Persephone in Athens and two small shrines for the cults of Apollo Patroos and Zeus Phratrios (or Agoraios) were built.

Throughout this period land in this area was gradually reclaimed from private use. This was evident in the closing of household wells on the periphery of the open square. Recent archaeological studies have revealed that the Eridanos River was re-channelled during this period to provide a more favourable building site. The re-channeling of the Eridanos River contained the overflow, minimizing swampy land and creating more public space. John Camp suggests four possibilities why the tyrants began to

¹ Jeffrey M. Hurwit, *The Athenian Acropolis*, Cambridge University Press (Cambridge: 1999), page 120.

² T. L. Shear, "Tyrants and Buildings in Archaic Athens" from *Athens Comes of Age: From Solon to Salamis*, Princeton University (Princeton, NJ: 1978), page 4.

consciously define the public space: theatre, athletics, military use and perhaps even the seeds of a democratic urge were being sown. Whatever the intention, the northwest corner of the Agora was being reshaped into a public space by a 'deliberate effort to enlarge the area of the public square'.

Architectural developments (Buildings C & D) in the southwest corner of the Agora also occurred during the tyrant period. A larger and more complex building known as Building F was 'specifically associated with the closing of wells elsewhere in the Agora' due to the grading, filling and levelling necessary for its foundation. Building F's use during the tyrant period is conjecture. Later it was remodelled at the same time the Old Bouleuterion was built. The Fountainhouse in the southeast of the Agora, also built on expropriated private property during the Peisistratid regime³, attracted more traffic into the Agora. As Camp suggests its presence indicated 'the growing significance of the Agora Square and the need for a ready supply of water for the many people congregating there.'⁴

The Panathenaic Way was reshaped throughout the course of the 6th Century becoming part of the 6th Century Agora and the main processional ascent to the Acropolis. This well travelled route, beginning at the Dipylon Gate, cut diagonally through the Agora. By mid 6th Century, the temenos walls of the City Eleusinion had been constructed next to the Panathenaic Way. The Eleusinion not only represented the growth of cult activity in the Agora, but also the centralization of cultic activity in Athens. Politically Athens was becoming the centre of Attica while the Agora was becoming the heart of Athens. In 522/21 Hippiarchos, Peisistratos' younger son, erected the Altar of the Twelve Gods in the open area of the Agora. From here all distances would be measured and marked by the herm, a distinctively Attic monument. Attica was becoming Athens-centric with all roadways now being measured from the centre of Athens. Political centralization was now focused on the altar in the Agora, not on the Acropolis. The civic centre of gravity had gradually begun to shift from the Acropolis and the archaic city to the northwest. "That the tyrants gave initial impetus to the growth of the Agora there can be little doubt."⁵ The Agora had now become the centre of communal life, the poet Pindar referring to the Altar of the Twelve Gods as the *omphalos* of Athens.

From Kleisthenes to Marathon: *The Birth of the Agora*

*'Thus, it was now that the area northwest of the Acropolis, first given shape by the Peisistratids, first became a true Agora, lined by public buildings and defined by boundary stones.'*⁶

By the time of Hippias' expulsion from Athens in 510, the classical Agora had begun to be shaped. While the birth of the Agora would parallel the democratic reforms of Kleisthenes, the spirit of the Agora had already been conceived.

Two powerful events contributed to defining Athens at the end of the 6th, beginning of the 5th Century: the reforms of Kleisthenes in 508/7 and the Battle of Marathon in 490. These events, which spanned the turn of the new century, were catalysts for the birth of the Agora. The democratic reforms of Kleisthenes, which redistributed political power, forged a new civic identity. Buildings erected by the tyrants were rebuilt and the Agora laid out by the tyrants was reshaped. The reconstruction and new

³ Suggestions for the date of the Fountain House are in the last quarter of the 6th Century. Shear suggests 520; Ammerman suggests 525; Camp 530-520.

⁴ John M. Camp, *The Athenian Agora, Excavations in the Heart of Classical Athens*, Thames and Hudson (London: 1986), page 48.

⁵ T.L. Shear, "The Agora and Democracy", page 231.

⁶ Jeffrey M. Hurwit, *The Athenian Acropolis*, page 121.

buildings that arose at the turn of the century suggested that the Agora was now the centre of civic and political activity.

Two boundary stones, which read ‘I am the boundary of the Agora’, were discovered in 1938. While they cannot be dated with confidence, John Camp suggests that ‘in the years around 500 BC the Agora was formally defined by means of boundary stones’.⁷ Shear also suggests these two pillars, ‘signposts that guard the limits of the Agora’, were erected at the turn of the 6th Century when the Agora ‘had now become effectively the seat of the Athenian government’.⁸ Near the same date Building C was replaced by the Old Bouleuterion, at the latest by 500 BC. Building F was also reconstructed around this period and may have been used as ‘the place where the archons came together and where they took their meals in common’.⁹ Reconstruction of Buildings C & F suggests their purpose was civic administration; the old Bouleuterion to provide a meeting place for the members of the new Senate and Building F to accommodate the archons. These new buildings in the Agora were intended for governmental use and represent the consolidation of a democratic *polis*.

While the old Bouleuterion suggests that the Agora was becoming formalized, it is the construction of the Royal Stoa (the Stoa Basileios) that best signifies the political function of the area, hence beginning of the Agora. Dating the construction of the Royal Stoa is difficult due to conflicting evidence. However T.L. Shear suggests *ca.* 500 which places its construction in the same period as the old Bouleuterion and the remodelling of Building F. The Royal Stoa was the headquarters of the king archon or the magistrate, the *basileus*, and was built to house the inscribed *kyrbeis*, Solon’s laws. Of all the buildings then in the Agora this would be closest in character to the Prytaneion, the hearth of the city. In fact Shear suggests that the *Lithos*, a stone near the Prytaneion on which the archons swore their oath in Solon’s time, may have been removed from its original site and placed in front of the Royal Stoa. Athenians had shifted the focus onto this new precinct by transferring the civic offices from the old area east of the Acropolis to the northwest. The Agora’s character began to change as thousands of citizens began to converge on the Agora from all over Attica for political and judicial purposes.

TIME LINE: Buildings and Monuments in the Agora

Building/Monument	Approximate Date	Source
Building C	¾ 6 th Century	Shear
Building D	¾ 6 th Century	Shear
Building F	550-525	Camp
	540’s	Shear
City Eleusinion	ca. 550	Miles
Southeast Fountainhouse	530 – 520	Shear, Ammerman, Camp
Altar of the Twelve Gods	522/21	Camp
Old Bouletarian	ca. 500	Shear
Royal Stoa	ca. 500	Shear
Boundary Stones	ca. 500	Camp
Painted Stoa (Stoa Poikile)	460	Thompson and Wycherley
Tholos	470-460	Camp

⁷ John M. Camp, *The Athenian Agora*, page 48

⁸ T. L. Shear, “The Agora and the Democracy”, page 245.

⁹ *Ibid.* page 241. After the Persian Wars, Building F would become the Tholos.

After the Athenian defeat of the Persians at Marathon a new annual civic meeting occurred in the Agora which suggested it was now functioning as the civic centre of Athens. Citizens would meet in the Agora to determine whether a potentially powerful individual who threatened the democratic process should be ostracized. Athenians were committed to not repeating the history of tyranny.

After the Persian Occupation: *The Early Life of the Agora*

*'By the end of the 5th Century all major aspects of civic activity were appropriately housed in the Agora.'*¹⁰

A decade after the Athenians claimed victory at Marathon the Persians revenged their defeat by occupying and sacking the city, plundering and burning the buildings even the temples and sanctuaries. When the Athenians returned in 479 they rebuilt their city. However the sacred precincts were not rebuilt in order to constantly remind the Athenians of the Persian's barbarity. Athenians chose to rebuild the Agora in the northwest. The Royal Stoa and old Bouleuterion were rebuilt, while new and innovative buildings like the Painted Stoa (Stoa Poikile) and Tholos appeared. An example of the new, innovative building style was visible in the Painted Stoa. Doric columns were used for the outer columns while the internal colonnade was Ionic, one of the 'earliest appearances of order-mixing'.¹¹ The Agora had been brought back to life and would continue to flourish and develop throughout the classical period.

Dating the commencement of the Agora cannot be certain due to conflicting dates of buildings as well as confusion in literary sources, etc. However the nodal points are evident: the Altar of the Twelve Gods, the old Bouleuterion and the Royal Stoa. Throughout the course of the 6th Century the gradual appropriation of private land led to the enhancement of the public square and surrounding space. Festivals, religious and other events brought life to the region and by the end of tyranny the Altar of the Twelve Gods marked the Agora as the centre of Attica. During the Peisistratids the focus had been redirected from the Acropolis and old area onto the northwest. With the triumph of democracy the Agora was born. The old Bouleuterion marked the dawn of the democratic process. The Royal Stoa and the Boundary Stones, close in date to the construction of the old Bouleuterion, suggested the emergence of the Agora as the civic centre of the *polis* at the beginning of the 5th Century.

Why the Agora became located in the northwest is a mystery, open to speculation. The tyrants had already created a new civic space through reclaiming private land. By celebrating religious, military and athletic events here the tyrants shifted the focus off the old centre, perhaps as a means to promote a new civic order. During the period, the Panathenaic Way became the major processional route to the Acropolis, again redirecting the focus. While space may have been a factor, the shift helped the Peisistratids demonstrate that tyranny was a positive and progressive change for the community.

With democracy and the formalizing of the Agora, a threshold had been crossed. The democratic reforms were a paradigm shift for Athens and this needed to be consciously validated and demonstrated. The triumph of democracy and the banishing of tyranny could now be displayed through architecture. To claim the space that the tyrants opened up and to rebuild this civic space for all citizens seems appropriate. The new, innovative architecture that would arise in the Agora reflected the beauty, even sacredness, of the new system of democracy. And to have the foundation of these

¹⁰ John M. Camp, *The Athenian Agora*, page 63.

¹¹ John Griffiths Pedley, *Greek Art and Archaeology*, Laurence King (London: 1998), page 215.

building upon the space cleared by the tyrants may have been a continuous reminder of the triumph and power of the democratic process. While the classical Agora may not have been consciously planned, it seems appropriate that it developed away from the old centre. The new buildings reflected the dynamic changes and the Agora could now mark and contain this. Citizens and visitors who would fill the Agora were given a new view of the Acropolis and Athens, a new view resonant with the new system of democracy. Athenians needed a new space to let the potentiality of their *polis*, under democracy, take shape and flourish.

TIME LINE: Athenian Milestones

594	Solon becomes Archon
594/3	Solon's reforms: new law codes, social, political and constitutional reforms
560	Peisistratos' first attempt at becoming tyrant of Athens by storming the Acropolis
546	Peisistratos re-establishes tyranny
527	Peisistratos dies. Son Hippias, along with his brother Hipparchos, continue tyrant rule
514	Harmodios and Aristogeiton murder Hipparchos.
510	Hippias is expelled from Athens. Tyranny ends
508/7	Constitutional reforms of Kleisthenes
490	Battle of Marathon
480/79	Persian Sack and Occupation of Athens