

The Athenian Agora

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Anyone who visits Athens today is instantly aware of the awesome Acropolis which dominates the city; indeed, the history of the Acropolis, with its Propylaea, Erechtheum, and Parthenon, is well known and appreciated. Yet, Ancient Athens was more than the Acropolis: it was a bustling city, crowded with houses and shops, and while religious activities centered upon the temples of the Acropolis, everyday activities found their focal point in the nearby open and level area known as the "Agora", or "market place".

In its position under the shadow of the Acropolis, the Agora at first had served as a cemetery for the Mycenaean settlement centered upon that hill. By the 6th century B.C., however, the function of this area had changed, and it became reserved for social, commercial, and political activities. As a social centre for the city, the Agora functioned as a general meeting place, where news and ideas could be exchanged; in its commercial role, the Agora contained numerous shops and was organized much like our modern shopping centres; politically, the Agora served as the site of various state buildings: the round structure called the Tholos was the headquarters of the current city executive council, while the Bouleuterion served as the meeting place of the Athenian Council; the Metreon, containing the state archives, was also located here.

The entire site is today in ruins, but from the few foundations still extant much has been discovered about the general appearance of the ancient Agora. Most noteworthy are the remains of numerous colonnades, called stoas, which once surrounded the site. These long, but very narrow structures were most important for the efficient functioning of the Agora: in the first place, the stoas were practical meeting places, providing protection from the sun in summer, and from the rain in winter. Indeed, many of Athens' leading philosophers held their discussions in the stoas, and one, by the name of Zeno, made such great use of the stoa in his teaching that his pupils came to be called "Stoics".