

The centre of any Greek city was its agora or market place; Athens was no exception. Although the Acropolis contained the sites of greatest religious importance, the focus of everyday life was the agora. This is where a large part of the city's commercial activity took place; here too the business of day-to-day government was conducted, law courts deliberated and on occasion the whole assembly of the people might meet. It was also a place just to pass the time away: to meet friends, to catch up on political gossip or read the public notices.

The history of the city is therefore closely reflected in the history of its agora, and it is not surprising that it has been a keen object of archaeological interest since archaeology existed at all. It is only since the 30's of this century, however, that comprehensive excavations have been conducted. The latest of the American excavations, carried out in 1980-82, finally revealed the location of the famous Stoa Poikile or Painted Colonnade on the northwest corner.

If we were approaching the agora from that angle (see Figure), we would have passed through the city walls by way of the impressive Dipylon or Double Gate some 500 metres behind us. The street we are following is the broad Panathenaic Way, a bustling commercial avenue also used for the great parade of the Panathenaia, the Athenians' annual festival in honour of their goddess Athena. The street angles across the agora to the southeast on its way to the Acropolis. Before entering the agora proper (identified on the map by the orchestra in the middle - a space reserved for the performance of sacred rites

by dancing choruses), we see the already mentioned Stoa Poikile to our left and two others to our right. The stoas (porticoes or colonnades) had the function of providing shaded areas where citizens and public officials could retire to conduct business or just relax. The Royal Stoa, for example, was where the official called the King Archon held his court of law. The Painted Stoa, so called for the masterpieces by great artists like Polygnotus which decorated its interior walls, was where the philosopher Zeno preferred to meet his pupils; so characteristic was this association that his brand of philosophy came to be called 'Stoic'.

The central part of the agora was a holy place and was carefully marked by boundary stones (those on the southwest corner are preserved). Persons entering would perform a small rite of purification; but if they were seriously polluted (for instance, by a major crime) they were banned from the site. As we proceed to the south, we notice first on our left the sanctuary of the Twelve Gods with an altar in the middle. Modern scholars still wonder about who these twelve were; we only know they were not the twelve Olympians, since that is a later grouping. This altar marked the exact centre of the city; like the London Stone or Toronto City Hall, distances were measured from it. In front of it an altar for a god of uncertain identity originally served as a finishing point for the race track, a pattern found also in Olympia. (In its early days the agora was also the site of Athens' athletic and dramatic competitions.) Further to the south we find some buildings of importance to government: the old and new Bouleuteria, where the Boule or Council of Athens

met; next to it, the Tholos where the Executive Committee of Council (the "prytaneis") met and where some Committee members, in particular the epistates or President (a different person every day), slept along with the Seal of State and the key to the treasury. Beyond the Tholos to the southwest is the possible location of the Strategeion, where the ten generals (the "strategoi") met to discuss strategy; directly to the south is the earliest of Athens' democratic law courts, the Heliaia, established by the statesman Solon in 594 B.C. Nearby too you can see the statues of the ten Eponymous Heroes, after whom Athens' ten tribes were named.

Other buildings are identified for you in the figure. At any time, how-

ever, the real essence of the agora was its busy hubbub of people - hawking anything from fish to slaves, gawking at one another or at passing curiosities, speculating on the outcome of a sensational trial, or just resting in the shade, waiting for something interesting to turn up (still a solemn activity in Greek town squares). The modern visitor is bewildered by the confusion of rubble spread between the two landmarks of the well-preserved Temple of Hephais-tos (fifth century B.C.) and the reconstructed Stoa of Attalos (second century B.C.); but with a little perseverance and a good guide book sense can be made of the ruins, and something of ancient Athens brought back to life.