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Looking at ancient public space

The Greek agora in Hellenistic and Roman times

The Classical Athenian Agora is seen as an idealized form of public space – a bustling square where the citizens came together to haggle, philosophize and discuss politics. Athens was only one among hundreds of Greek poleis and these cities long outlived the Classical period, yet historians have shown little interest in the agoras of the agoras of these other cities. This article explores what looking at the Hellenistic and Roman period agora can tell us about ancient society and culture.

Introduction

The agora, a public square on which politics and administration, religion and commerce were all concentrated, has sometimes been called the heart of the Greek polis. Government buildings, temples and multi-purpose porticoes, known as stoas, framed a central open area where temporary market stalls were erected and where the Greeks gathered to barter and to discuss the issues of the day. In studies of modern urbanism the agora is often discussed as the quintessential public space. its emergence seen as a defining moment in the history of the city.¹ It is, inevitably, the agora of Classical Athens that has influenced this view.² On the Athenian Agora stood buildings that housed some of the most important political institutions of the celebrated democracy: the council house, the Tholos and the lawcourts. The open space was where the Athenians conducted their famous ostracisms, a procedure by which potential tyrants were exiled from the city by having their names scratched into potsherds, or *ostraka*. Amid the hustle and bustle of daily life on the agora, Socrates pestered the Athenians to think more about knowledge and justice.

We know far more about the agora of Athens than that of any other Greek city, largely because so many literary sources have survived from Athens.

The site of the Athenian Agora (see Figure 1) has also been extensively excavated by the American School of Classical Studies at Athens for over eighty years. That investigation has unearthed a tremendous amount of evidence – architecture, sculpture, inscriptions, pottery and other sorts of finds – that has cast much light on the use and development of the square throughout its long history.³ Athens, especially in the Classical period (the fifth and fourth centuries BC), was, in terms of its size, political system and cultural achievements, an exceptional polis. Yet, the importance of the agora was something it shared with the many hundreds of Greek poleis that could be found throughout the Mediterranean world in Antiquity.

I am interested in what happened to life on the agoras of Greek cities, including but not exclusively Athens, after the Classical period, when the Greeks were first forced to contend with the rise of the powerful kingdoms founded by the successors of Alexander the Great and then with their incorporation into the Roman Empire. Many agoras have been excavated throughout the Greek world but there has been surprisingly little comparative research into the transformation of the Greek agora in Hellenistic and Roman times. When scholars have considered the post-Classical agora, their conclusions have tended to be very pessimistic. Excavations have established that agoras became more monumentalized in these centuries, surrounded by ever larger and more splendid stoas. At the same time agoras became more cluttered with honorific statues and other types of monuments. These developments have been pointed to as symptoms of a decline in public life: stoas cut agoras off from the rest of the city, thereby limiting freedom of movement and causing public life to stagnate; statues left little room for human activities and made agoras primarily spaces for representations of power.⁴ Such interpretations can be traced back to a view, popular among historians until fairly recently, that all aspects of political and cultural life within the poleis must have declined because of the reduction in freedom brought by foreign conquest. In the last few decades, many historians have moved away from this ‘decline-paradigm’ and have argued that the Greek poleis enjoyed a remarkable level of local autonomy well into the period of Roman rule.⁵ However, the negative assessment of the post-Classical agora remains widely accepted.

My research into the transformation of the post-Classical agora was born out of a dissatisfaction with this vision.⁶ Archaeological discoveries of monuments and buildings are here being made to fit preconceived ideas about changes in Greek society rather than being used as evidence to arrive

at new interpretations. This view also completely overlooks a vast range of literary and epigraphic evidence for life on the post-Classical agora. Furthermore, the emphasis in previous agora scholarship has been on the impact of outside powers with little attention for society and culture at the local level. Researchers of modern public spaces are able to visit plazas and



Figure 1. View of the Athenian agora. Photograph by the author

piazzas and observe their users firsthand. Their research has shown that interactions of different groups in such settings play an important role in cementing and challenging social and political relationships.⁷ By combining a range of evidence relating to agoras throughout Greece, it is possible to come close to carrying out such an anthropological investigation of the way in which polis society and culture was shaped by public life. In this article I want to share my fascination with the agora, and highlight some of the main insights that looking at the agora provides into the nature of the post-Classical polis. I will do this by discussing three themes connected to the use of the agora: day-to-day behaviour, political violence and public legal hearings.

A bustling public square

In *The Politics*, written in the fourth century BC, Aristotle recommended that the ideal city should have two agoras, one for politics and religion, the other for commerce.⁸ The idea was to keep the vulgar trading classes away

from the centre of government. No such explicit discussions about the use of the agora have survived for later periods. Scholars have made much of comments by the second-century AD travel writer Pausanias about certain agoras that he saw but, for the most part, literary sources for the use of the Hellenistic and Roman period agora have been ignored.⁹ In fact the extant literature from these centuries contains hundreds of references to life on the Greek agora. These passages provide an enormous wealth of information on the types of activities and people that could be found on the agora and offer great insights into the attitudes of their authors regarding the appropriate use of the agora. The fact that these references are often made in passages probably why they have been ignored, but this, if anything, makes them more useful in this respect because it gives them an unguarded character. The picture that emerges from this evidence is that, well into the period of Roman rule, agoras remained vibrant places where people of all walks of life rubbed shoulders a sharp contrast with the current consensus regarding the decline of the agora.

A well-known problem in using ancient literary evidence to write history is that ancient authors, almost without exception, are high status individuals and therefore give us a decidedly elite perspective. These sources are, however, invaluable in illustrating the range of people frequenting the public space of the polis. A recurring theme is a disdain for the people of low socio-economic status who frequented the agora. The adjective *agoraios* (of the agora) is nearly always used in a pejorative sense. Traders, vagabonds and travelling soothsayers all come in for scorn. Even though some cities in Hellenistic and Roman times, in line with Aristotle's recommendation, did have separate commercial and political agoras, the division of function was never complete. We hear of sword-swallowers entertaining crowds in the old political agora at Athens and the first century orator Dio Chrysostom complains of prostitutes soliciting trade outside a council-house in one Greek city.¹⁰ These sources also provide valuable information as why the local elite were so worried about these groups. An important concern was that these people had too much time on their hands and therefore constituted a potential threat to the political stability of the city.

It is in this light that a second category of references to life on the agora must be understood – critiques of the public conduct of fellow members of the elite on the agora. Individuals who actively courted the popularity of the masses on the agora come in for attack but even apparently innocuous aspects of behaviour and dress could provoke derision. The agora emerges

as a public stage on which the local elite were both actors and audience, constantly judging each other's behaviour and exerting peer pressure to uphold standards of decorum. The fear was that individuals who deviated from the norm were trying to draw too much attention to themselves and might be aiming at tyranny. The literary sources must represent only a small fragment of a continual and ongoing elite discourse concerning correct public behaviour. It is no wonder that Plutarch expresses sympathy with those who occasionally felt the need to flee the agora and the demands of public life to spend time in their country homes.¹¹ However, he also insists on the constant pressure to return to the agora. In spite of the stifling pressure of public scrutiny and in spite of their dislike of the lower classes, local elites felt an obligation to be seen in public in order to justify their privileged political status. They clearly had to walk a very fine line between being maintaining visibility in public and drawing the wrong kind of attention there. This puts a rather different perspective on the social position of local elites in the Hellenistic and Roman period polis, which considered in institutional terms, as historians have up to now tended to do, looked a good deal more comfortable.

An arena for bloodshed

When political violence broke out in the Greek polis, as it frequently did before Greece became part of the Roman empire, the agora was often the stage on which it played out. Particularly prominent in the literary sources are stories of tyrants rising to power through coups staged on the agora or being assassinated there by aristocrats aiming to restore the status quo. The template for this pattern of behaviour was arguably set by the sixth century BC Peisistratid regime at Athens. Peisistratos, founder of that short-lived dynasty, first came to power through a ruse in which he rode into the agora on a wagon pretending to have been beaten up by his enemies and thereby convinced the Athenian people to provide him with a personal bodyguard.¹² Years later when his son Hippias had succeeded him, Hippias' brother Hipparchos was murdered during a religious festival somewhere on the outskirts of the agora.¹³ Even in antiquity much controversy surrounded the two assassins' motives and the extent to which their action contributed to toppling the regime. However the two tyrannicides Harmodios and Aristogeiton were celebrated with a pair of statues at the very centre of

the agora, a monument that was profoundly associated with the birth of Athenian democracy (see Figure 2).

Throughout much of the third century BC the kings of Macedon struggled to maintain the stranglehold on southern Greece that had weakened after the death of Alexander the Great. One of the devices that they used was to install puppet tyrants in various cities of the Peloponnese. Accounts survive of attempts to overthrow these tyrants at three separate cities, two successful and one not.¹⁴ Plutarch's account of the assassination of the tyrant Aristotimus of Elis, a tale of religious sacrilege and righteous vengeance, is most rich in detail.¹⁵ After ordering the beating of a group of priestesses who had tried to persuade him to tone down the worst excesses of his regime, he was hacked down in full daylight on the agora by three conspirators from among the local elite.



Figure 2. The Athenian tyrannicides. Roman copy of the original statues.

The tyrant's body was then displayed in the public square and a crowd called to witness the event. The people proceeded to bedeck the murderers with ribbons and garlands in honour of the service they had done the city.

Plutarch explicitly states that the conspirators saw the agora as an auspicious place to kill the tyrant and a clear sense emerges from his story that the setting was important in legitimating the murder. The openness of the killing allowed the people to judge whether it was justified. In effect they were brought on board as accomplices. This same pattern can be seen in accounts of tyrant-slayings from Archaic to Hellenistic times. Although

political murders were a rare occurrence and therefore not strictly part of day-to-day life on the agora, the association between the agora and such events was strong enough to have become something of a literary trope. The trope in turn probably affected how such events played out in reality. Interestingly several of the accounts that we have, like Plutarch's, were written down in the Roman period when such things belonged to a distant past. Such stories continued to resonate with contemporary elite fears of the emergence of local tyranny and with the self-image that the elite

had of themselves as public benefactors, safeguarding their communities against repression. Age old monuments that stood on some agoras, such as the tyrannicide statues at Athena which for over half a millennium after their erection were famous throughout the Greek speaking world, helped to keep such stories alive.¹⁶

A public court house

Scholars have long assumed that by the Roman Imperial period the agoras of old Greek cities had become too cluttered up with statues and other monuments to serve as the venue for public meetings of any kind.¹⁷ This vision is largely derived from the situation at Athens where several imposing buildings of the Augustan age, erected either by or with definite connections to the imperial family, did indeed take up a lot of what had been open space (see Figure 3). The Augustan connection means that the Romans have been blamed for bringing an end to one of the agora's age-old functions. However, the Romans had a strong tradition of holding legal hearings in public space and there is good evidence that in conquering Greece they brought this tradition with them. From the second century BC, the period when Rome was first establishing a foothold in Greece, come the first indications for *bemata*, or speaker's platforms, appearing on Greek agoras, arguably in emulation of the famous *Rostra* on the Roman Forum.

Polybius tells us that in the mid second Century BC Antiochus IV of Syria, a king raised in Rome and ridiculed by contemporaries for his Romanising ways, passed judgement from a platform on the agora of his capital city Antioch.¹⁸ An inscription from Argos attests to a local magistrate setting up a *bema* on the agora there at around this time.¹⁹ Plutarch describes how

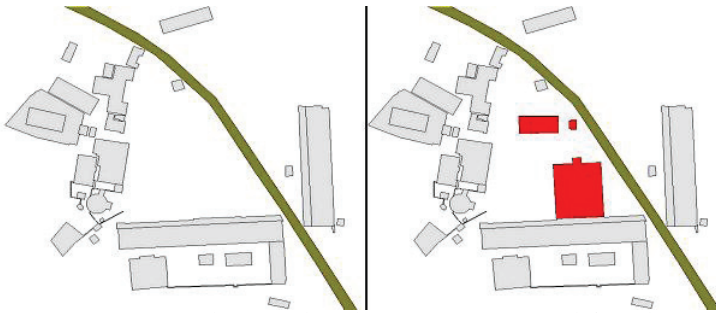


Figure 3. Comparison between the Athenian agora c. 50 BC (left) and 50 AD (right) to show the Augustan period infilling.

Marc Antony, a hundred years later, sat on a speaker's platform at Ephesus arbitrating over local disputes.²⁰ The foundations of a speaker's platform have been found in a prominent position on the eastern side of the Athenian agora and identified thanks to a reference in the third century AD author Athenaeus (see Figure 4).²¹ It is odd, considering that Athenaeus explicitly states that this platform was erected "by (or for) the Roman generals", that it has sometimes been pointed to as proof of the tenacity of democratic traditions in the city.²²



Figure 4. The remains of the Athenian bema. Photograph by the author.

In fact, even in Classical times the Athenians had rarely used their square for political gatherings. Their assemblies were held in the specialised building called the Pnyx. Furthermore, the infilling of the square has been grossly exaggerated; there was still room where a crowd of over six thousand people could have gathered around the platform in Imperial times (see Figure 5). Both of the colonies the Romans founded in Greece at Corinth and Philippi had speaker's platforms in a prominent location on their main public square, the forum, which hardly suggests that the Romans were keen to drive all kinds of public gatherings out of the agora. Several literary sources provide images of speaker's platforms in agoras being used in legal hearings in imperial times. Saint Paul was hauled before magistrates at both of the Roman colonies just mentioned and at Philippi the hearing certainly took place on the forum.²³ Apuleius, admittedly in a fictional narrative but one rich in realistic detail, stages a trial before a platform on the agora of a small town in Thessaly.²⁴ Plutarch gives an eye witness account of attending a hearing on the agora of a city in Asia Minor.²⁵

If more speaker's platforms have not been found archaeologically that is probably because archaeologists have not been looking for them, so ingrained has the idea of the political decline of the agora become. Foundations for speaker's platforms could very easily be mistaken for large statue bases. I suggest that serving as the venue for Roman-style legal hearings was an important function of Greek agoras throughout the period of imperial rule. Such events might not have been democratic assemblies of

the sort associated with Classical Greece but they were occasions for mass participation in civic business. As such they suggest a far higher degree of mass participation, and a far more important role for the agora, in civic life in the Roman period polis than has up to now generally been appreciated.

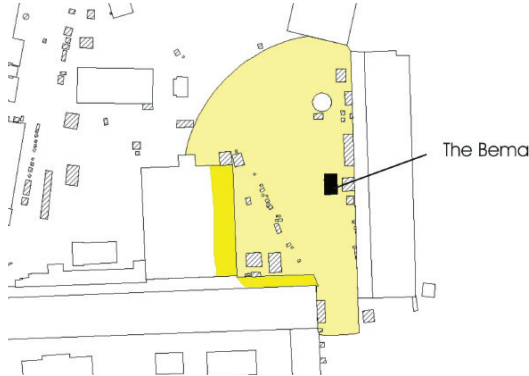


Figure 5. Room for 6,000 people to have gathered around the Athenian bema in imperial times.

Conclusion

We have looked briefly here at three aspects of the use of the Greek agora in the Hellenistic and Roman periods. We might not be able to observe the agora in the way that modern ethnographers can contemporary squares, but the surprising wealth of surviving evidence affords a great many glimpses of agoras being used. Combining these snapshots it is possible to build up a coherent picture that the agora remained a vibrant public space throughout Hellenistic and Roman times. This vision undermines the prevailing view that the increasing monumentality and enclosure of the agora in post-Classical times must be read as symptoms of agora decline. The agora deserves the attention of historians because it offers a new perspective from which to investigate the important issue of how local power relations were shaped in the Hellenistic and Roman period polis, as I hope to have shown. Looking at the agora brings us as close as we can come to standing in the heart of the ancient polis – to witness the jostling crowds and to listen to the clamour of haggling merchants, local orators and wandering soothsayers all competing to be heard. For that reason the pull of the agora felt two thousand years ago by Plutarch should therefore still be felt today.

Notes

1. E.g. Sennett, Richard, *The Spaces of Democracy* (1998 Raoul Wallenberg Lecture) (Michigan, 1998).
2. For examples of discussions of "the agora" which really only talk about Athens see: Hartley, John, *The politics of pictures: the creation of the public in the age of popular* (London, 1992), 29–30 or Lefebvre, Henri (1991) (1974). *The production of space*. (Oxford 1991 [1974]), 237–241.
3. For a good overview see Camp, John Camp, *The Athenian Agora: Excavations in the Heart of Classical Athens* (London, 1986).
4. See most recently Hoepfner, Wolfram. "Die Griechische Agora Im Überblick" in *Die Griechische Agora-Bericht Über Ein Kolloquium Am 16 März 2003 in Berlin*, edited by Wolfram Hoepfner and Lauri Lehmann (Mainz, 2006), 1-28.
5. See van Nijf, Onno and Alston, Richard, "Political Culture in the Greek City after the Classical Age: Introduction and Preview" in *Political Culture in the Greek City after the Classical Age. Groningen-Royal Holloway Studies on the Greek City after the Classical Age. Vol.2.*, edited by Onno M. van Nijf (Louvain, 2010), 1–26.
6. The ideas discussed here can be found in expanded form in Dickenson, Christopher Paul, *On the Agora - Power and Public Space in Hellenistic and Roman Greece* (Groningen, 2012).
7. E.g. Low, Setha *On the plaza: the politics of public space and culture* (Austin, 2000), Whyte, William *The Social Life of Small Urban Places*, (New York, 1980).
8. Aristotle *Politics VII* 1331a 30–1331b3.
9. E.g. Wycherley, R.E., "The Ionian Agora" In *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 62, (1942), 21-32.
10. Apuleius *Golden Ass* 1.4 and Dio Chrysostom 7.134.
11. Plutarch *On Exile. Moralia*–603 E and *On the tranquillity of Mind–Moralia* 466 C.
12. Herodotus 1.59.
13. Herodotus 5.55; Thucydides 6.56-9; [Aristotle] *Constitution of the Athenians* 18.
14. Apart from the two discussed in the main text the other two were Abantidas at Sicyon (successful- Plutarch Aratos 3.4) and Aristomachos at Argos (ibid 25.3).
15. Plutarch *On the bravery of women, Moralia* 251 F–253.
16. The statues are discussed as a symbol of freedom in the early third century AD by Philostratus–*Life of Apollonius* 8.16.2.
17. E.g. Wolfram Hoepfner "Die griechische Agora im Überblick" in *Die Griechische Agora-Bericht über ein Kolloquium am 16. März 2003 in Berlin*, edited by Wolfram Hoepfner and Lauri Lehman (Mainz am Rhein, Kolb, Frank (Tübingen). "Agora." *Der Neue Pauly*. Herausgegeben von: Hubert Cancik und, Helmuth Schneider (Antike), Manfred Landfester (Rezeptions- und Wissenschaftsgeschichte). Brill Online, 2013.
18. Polybius 26.1.
19. Philippa-Touchais, Anna, Gilles Touchais, Marcel Piérart, Patrick Marchetti, Maria Marchetti-Lakaki and Yvonne Rizakis. "Rapport Sur Les Travaux De L'école Française D'athènes En 1999–Argos." *Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique* 124, no. 2 (2000),

- 489–498.
20. Plutarch Antony 58.6
 21. Athenaeus 5.212.e-f.
 22. Especially in the highly influential article: Shear, T. L. Jr. "Athens: From City-State to Provincial Town." *Hesperia* 50, (1981), 356–377.
 23. Acts of the Apostles 17 and 18.
 24. Apuleius *Golden Ass* 3.2–9.
 25. Plutarch *Whether the affections of the soul are worse than those of the body. Moralia* 501 E–502.