

Athens: An Introduction

JENIFER NEILS

O glorious Athens! violet-crowned, worthy of song, bulwark of
Greece, city of the gods.

Pindar, fr. 76

Inhabited from the Stone Age to the present, Athens is one of the oldest continuously inhabited cities in the world. We know it best from the Classical period (500–300 BC), because in addition to its impressive archaeological remains, such as the Parthenon, a vast variety of informative inscriptions and texts, from philosophical dialogues to comic jokes, attests to its importance. The names of its most famous citizens – Aischylos, Aristophanes, Perikles, Plato, Sokrates, Solon, Themistokles, Thucydides – are not unfamiliar to the educated public. Long after Pindar (fr. 76), Athens remained well known in European history as the “bulwark of Greece,” having routed the Persian menace not only once at Marathon, but also a second time at Salamis. Many of the institutions invented by the Athenians – democracy and theater being the obvious ones, but also practices such as jury pay, impeachment, and a ‘tomb for the unknown soldier’ – are still with us today.

Like all cities, Athens was and is in a constant state of evolution. With its succession of native Greek and foreign overlords, its alternating periods of population explosion and severe contraction, its modern infrastructure projects resulting in the exposure of ancient urban structures, and its periodic inflows of foreigners and exoduses of locals, both seeking new horizons, it has been ever changing over time. And yet in many ways much remains the same – and this continuity is striking. With its steep cliffs and mighty walls, the Akropolis remained a citadel for thousands of years, from which Athenians defended their city beginning in the Late Bronze Age until the successful conclusion of the Greek War of Independence in 1830. The fourth-century BC marble stadium used for the ancient games at Athens is now the end point for the running of the modern ‘authentic’ Marathon every year. Today one reads XAIPE (“greetings”) on festive cards and on doormats, the same expression carved on marble gravestones and painted on ceramic drinking cups in antiquity. The Greek language

continues to be read and spoken, not only in churches, as was the fate of Latin, but also in everyday life.

While scholars, both in this book and in general, privilege the Athens of the Classical period, the city went through many iterations before becoming the capital of Greece in 1834. Ruled by so-called tyrants in the sixth century BC, it was the first Greek city to establish a democracy, in 508 BC. After being conquered by Alexander the Great's father, Philip II, in 338 BC, the city lost much of its independence but gained stature as a university town, a locus of culture and learning. That reputation in turn inspired admiring Romans, especially the emperors Augustus (27 BC–AD 14) and Hadrian (AD 117–138), to embellish the city with temples, arches, a forum, concert hall, library, and aqueducts. While the city shrank considerably in the subsequent Byzantine and medieval periods, churches were added to the cityscape, which retained many of its antiquities either in situ or embedded as spolia into new structures. Even during the four centuries of Ottoman domination (1458–1833), many of the ancient structures retained their integrity, while a building as revered as the Parthenon was converted into a mosque.

Athens was fortunate in having many chroniclers in antiquity, from the historian Herodotos to its own native son Thucydides. Less well known but also important are the so-called Attidographers, whose works survive only in fragments; from the late fifth century to the middle of the third, they wrote about local history in texts called *Attides*.¹ In the Classical period the city was chock-full of inscriptions on stone, many of which survive, mostly in fragments that epigraphers have painstakingly pieced together. More than 7,000 have been found in the excavations of the Athenian Agora alone. These constitute a mine of information about civic life, law, property, treaties, religion, and finances of all kinds. The many references in this volume to the publication abbreviated as *IG* (*Inscriptiones Graecae*) clearly demonstrate the indispensability of inscriptions to the study of all aspects of Athenian life.²

While we know a great deal about the city, an essential question is why Athens, and not another *polis*, became the epicenter of Greek civilization. There were certainly many diverse factors that converged at the right time in the right locale. One of the most telling myths of the ancient Athenians is their staunch belief in their autochthony – the notion that they were

¹ See Harding 2008.

² A useful online source for Attic inscriptions is that compiled by S. Lambert beginning in 2012: www.atticinscriptions.com.

literally born from Attic soil, and were not invaders. This belief was consistent with a particularly patriotic attachment to their land, such that they would actually desert the land in order to save it, as they did before the famous sea battle of Salamis.³ The early Athenians were not great colonizers on the scale of other Greek city-states. They were well protected by the surrounding mountains and had substantial natural resources (water, fertile soil, silver mines) to make them relatively prosperous at home. They emphasized education for their male youth so as to become informed citizens; Plato's Academy could be called the first institution of higher learning. Citizens also had civic lessons in the Theater of Dionysos, where tragedies and comedies were not simply entertainment but political commentary of a high order. Religion, including a belief in the special patronage of the goddess Athena as expressed in the city's name, sanctuaries, and coinage, was also a unifying factor, since it permeated all aspects of life from birth to death.⁴ These and many other topics constitute the contents of this *Companion*, whose purpose is to elucidate the cultural and social institutions of one of the most remarkable cities of the ancient world, and the marks they left both in texts and on the ground.

The opening chapter (Shapiro) demonstrates what we can glean about the life of an ordinary Athenian citizen in the late sixth century BC from extant inscriptions, imagery on vases, and Herodotos. Part I (Chapters 2–10) surveys the physical nature of Athens, beginning with its emergence in the eighth century BC, and then presents its surrounding countryside, urban plan, sacred spaces, civic center, natural resources, and structures for both the living and the dead. Part II (Chapters 11–14) deals with the inhabitants, both human and animal, of ancient Athens. The institution of slavery, common to all ancient societies, is not treated in a single chapter but is referred to throughout the book, given the challenges of documenting the life of slaves archaeologically, even though they were a fact of life in ancient Athens. The business and commercial activities that took place, from the port of Piraeus to the marble quarries of Mt. Penteli and the silver mines of Laurion, comprise Part III (Chapters 15–20). Classical Athens is known for its legendary contributions to culture, namely theater, competitive sport, religion, the *symposion*, and philosophy; these topics are covered in Part IV (Chapters 21–26). Finally, the political institutions that also made Athens famous in antiquity – civic associations, the rule of law, and the military training that led to the victories at Marathon and

³ For more on this topic see Meier 1998.

⁴ See Meyer 2017.

Salamis – are described in Part V (Chapters 27–29). A coda (Chapters 30–33) introduces more recent visitors who made an indelible impact on the cityscape: Roman conquerors, travelers from Western Europe who first documented the antiquities of the city, the nineteenth-century architects who transformed it, and the archaeologists who have laid bare the buried past. In every chapter an effort has been made to link the texts to the antiquities still visible in the city, so that the visitor, armchair or on-the-spot, can relate these customs and institutions to the physical remains.

Nearly two hundred years of archaeological exploration continue to add to our portrait of ancient Athens. Surprises still pop up, like a Late Bronze Age gold ring with a bull-leaping scene suggestive of the hero Theseus' adventure in Crete. The excavations for the Athens Metro, the new airport, and the Akropolis Museum, and most recently the cultural center at Phaleron, have uncovered buildings, artifacts, and burials which will continue to occupy scholars for decades to come.⁵ Such finds suggest that there is still much to learn about this city, its history and monuments. A city truly “worthy of song” and worthy of this new volume.

Note to the Reader

This edited volume is the second in a series of Cambridge Companions to ancient cities.⁶ Many of the authors generously met together in Athens with the editors to share ideas and improve the content of the volume. Ancient Greek orthography has been followed as much as possible to spell proper names as the Greeks would have, except in instances (e.g. Thucydides) when such spellings might be unrecognizable to the general reader. Suggested readings and a select bibliography follow each chapter. The various maps of Attika, the city, the Agora, and the Akropolis should be consulted throughout for locating features mentioned in the text. Owing to the constraints on printing illustrations here, readers will find additional figures in the text (indicated as Web Fig. or Web Map) on a companion website, with further digital resources for studying and understanding ancient Athens: www.cambridge.org/NeilsRogers.

⁵ Publications of these finds can be found in Parlama and Stampolidis 2000, Kaza-Papageorgiou 2016, and Eleftheratou 2019.

⁶ The first is *The Cambridge Companion to Ancient Rome*, edited by Paul Erdkamp (2013). In various ways, notably its organization, it served as a model for this *Companion*.

The editors thank Beatrice Rehl for initiating this project and for providing much sage advice along the way. The Blegen Library of the American School of Classical Studies at Athens served as our editorial base camp, and we dedicate the book to two important denizens of the School, Pandora and Atticus.

Further Reading

Histories of Athens dealing with specific periods are: Anderson 2003 for the Early Classical period and the emergence of democracy; Meier 1998, Munn 2000, and Samons 2007 for the Classical period; and Habicht 1997 for the Hellenistic and Roman periods. An overview of the major monuments in their historical context can be found in Camp 2001 and Goette 2001. Topographical studies include Travlos 1971 and Greco 2010–2015 (with more to come). A thorough study of the Akropolis monuments is Hurwit 1999. For religion in ancient Athens see Parker 1996. The institution of slavery is thoroughly explored by Wrenhaven 2012 and Lewis 2018.

Bibliography

- Anderson, G. 2003. *The Athenian Experiment: Building an Imagined Political Community in Ancient Attica, 508–490 BC*. Ann Arbor.
- Camp, J.M. 2001. *The Archaeology of Athens*. New Haven.
- Eleftheratou, S. 2019. *Μουσείο Ακρόπολης: η ανασκαφή*. Athens.
- Goette, H.R. 2001. *Athens, Attica and the Megarid: An Archaeological Guide*. London.
- Greco, E., ed. 2010–2015. *Topografia di Atene. Sviluppo urbano e monumenti dalle origini al III secolo d.C.* 5 vols. Athens.
- Habicht, C. 1997. *Athens from Alexander to Antony*. Cambridge, MA.
- Harding, P. 2008. *The Story of Athens: The Fragments of the Local Chronicles of Attika*. Oxford.
- Hurwit, J.M. 1999. *The Athenian Acropolis: History, Mythology, and Archaeology from the Neolithic Era to the Present*. Cambridge.
- Kaza-Papageorgiou, K. 2016. *The Ancient City Road and the Metro beneath Vouliagmenis Avenue*. Athens.
- Lewis, D.M. 2018. *Greek Slave Systems in Their Eastern Mediterranean Context, c. 800–146 BC*. Oxford.
- Meier, C. 1998. *Athens. A Portrait of the City in Its Golden Age*. New York.
- Meyer, M. 2017. *Athens, Göttin von Athen: Kult und Mythos auf der Akropolis bis in klassische Zeit*. Vienna.
- Munn, M. 2000. *The School of History: Athens in the Age of Socrates*. Berkeley.
- Parker, R. 1996. *Athenian Religion: A History*. Oxford.

- Parlama, L., and N.C. Stampolidis, eds. 2000. *Athens: The City beneath the City: Antiquities from the Metropolitan Railway Excavations*. Athens.
- Samons, L.J. 2007. *The Cambridge Companion to the Age of Pericles*. New York.
- Travlos, J. 1971. *Pictorial Dictionary of Ancient Athens*. New York.
- Wrenhaven, K.L. 2012. *Reconstructing the Slave: The Image of the Slave in Ancient Greece*. London.

1 | #Leagros: An Athenian Life

H.A. SHAPIRO

On a summer afternoon in the year 520 BC, a teenage boy wandered into a potter's workshop in the center of Athens. Leagros had grown up in the neighborhood, which went by the name Kerameis, a reference to the potters who made it the center of their thriving industry. A dozen years later, when the statesman Kleisthenes reorganized all of Attika into a democracy, Kerameis, located just to the northwest of the Agora, would become one of the 139 official demes or townships which made up the confederated city-state of Athens. In the standard practice of the democracy, Leagros would be officially known as "Leagros son of Glaukon from Kerameis" (*Leagros Glaukonos ek Kerameion*).

The boy was already well known to the potters and painters in the workshop from many earlier visits, but this time they were struck by how he had grown into an exceptionally handsome youth of fifteen. He especially caught the attention of the youngest painter in the shop, Euphronios, who was at the beginning of his career and perhaps not much older than Leagros. After perfecting his skills decorating a few red-figure drinking cups, Euphronios had started work on his most ambitious project to date, a large calyx-krater for mixing wine and water at the *symposion*, the elite all-male drinking party (Fig. 1.1).¹ His choice of subject was equally ambitious: a scene of young athletes in the *palaistra* that would stretch across both sides of the broad vase. The two panels would comprise five young athletes, a trainer (the only clothed figure), and four small slave boys helping out in various ways. One could imagine Euphronios sitting in a corner of the *palaistra* making sketches of the male figure in a whole range of poses, sketches he would later transfer into the new medium known as red-figure. There are also touches of cheeky humor: one athlete on the far left is caught in the act of tying up his foreskin with a strip of leather (a practice known as infibulation, perhaps intended to protect the penis like a jockstrap), as one of the slave boys observes him with fascination, while the trainer points directly at another athlete's genitalia, perhaps advising him that he needs to do the same.

¹ Berlin, Antikensammlung F 2180; BAPD no. 200063.



Fig. 1.1 Detail of Leagros inscription, Attic red-figure calyx-krater attributed to Euphronios, ca. 520 BC, Berlin, Staatliche Museen, Antikensammlung F 2180. © ArchaiOptix, Wikimedia Commons/CC-BY-SA 3.0 DE

This is not just some idealized or anonymous gathering in the *palaistra*, for Euphronios has written names beside six of the figures that identify real Athenians of the period: the athletes Polydamas, Hegesias, Antiphon, and Lykos; the trainer Hipparchos; and a slave boy, Tranion. Above the youth infibulating himself, the painter has written *Leagros kalos* (Leagros is handsome). (This phenomenon is known as a “tag-kalos,” and it could be considered the ancient equivalent of the hash tag.) This figure has no inscription naming him, as the other athletes do, so perhaps the inscription *Leagros kalos* does double duty, both naming and praising him. Over the next ten years or so, Euphronios would continue to praise Leagros on at least a dozen more vases, almost half of all the surviving works signed by or attributed to the painter. It appears that a friend and rival of Euphronios named Smikros noticed his fascination with Leagros and poked fun at it on a different vase by depicting the two as an amorous couple, the somewhat older Euphronios wooing a young Leagros.

This fictional vignette of Leagros wandering into the shop of Euphronios is partly inspired by a scene in the novel *The Praise Singer* (1978), by Mary Renault, the British writer who drew a huge following for her updated retellings of Greek myths.² A scene in *The Praise Singer*, which is a retelling of the life of the poet Simonides (ca. 557–467 BC), takes place in a potter’s shop a few years earlier than our encounter of Leagros and Euphronios,

² Her books include *The King Must Die* and *The Bull from the Sea*, both about the hero Theseus, and *The Persian Boy* and *Fire from Heaven*, both about Alexander the Great, all of them set in a milieu that often recalls Oxford in the 1920s and, not incidentally, with a keen eye for the homoerotic ambience that is palpable in Euphronios’ *palaistra* scene and the *kalos* inscriptions.

ca. 525 BC. It is narrated by Simonides recalling a *symposion* he attended hosted by Hipparchos, brother of the Athenian tyrant Hippias. The potter's shop belongs to Exekias, the greatest master of the earlier black-figure technique:

“I was in Exekias' shop [says Hipparchos]. He painted me that wine-cooler, which I don't think will displease me however fashions change. That day, however, I was there to order a small dedication to Eros.” The handsome youth (a new one) who shared the couch returned his glance with charm, but no vulgar simpering, and touched his wine-cup, doubtless inscribed with “The Beautiful” [i.e. *kalos* in Greek] and his name. “I had attended to that, and was idling about the shop when I heard the master roaring at a pupil who'd been working, it seemed, industriously in his corner. People say my curiosity will be the death of me someday.” He turned on us his winning smile. “So I went over, in time to hear the culprit told that if he thought he had all day to spend in foolery, he had better make room for someone else who'd value his place. By now I was craning over Exekias' shoulder. The young man was holding an oil-jar, on which he'd drawn a Greek and a Phrygian dueling. As you'll have guessed, he amused himself by painting the background black, and reserving the figures. It was the very best Ilissos clay, that bakes a soft glowing red. Seeing Exekias just about to dash it to the ground, or maybe at his pupil's head, I caught back his arm crying, “Fire it! Fire it, my friend, and let me see.” (Renault, *The Praise Singer* 107)

Thus was the red-figure technique invented, with assistance from the tyrant, who then shows off to his guests a set of red-figure *kylikes* (drinking cups), and in so doing, starts a trend. The inventor is identified in the novel as Psiax, who was indeed among the earliest painters we know by name who worked in red-figure.³ And he was most likely not a young apprentice, but an experienced artisan who came of age working in the black-figure technique, perhaps even alongside Exekias, as Renault suggests. A few years later, Euphronios and a small circle of painters referred to as the Pioneers would bring red-figure to a peak of grandeur and technical perfection that was rarely if ever matched in the long history of the technique.

Renault imagines that the youths named as *kalos* on the vases were in attendance at the *symposia* of the rich and powerful and even shared a couch with their older admirers. If so, Leagros would have been an unusually popular *symposion* guest, and everything we know about him

³ Though an Athenian artist known to scholars today as the Andokides Painter (after two vases by his hand signed by Andokides as potter) probably made the discovery a few years before Psiax.

from the vases does suggest as much. Given the paucity of attestations in the literary sources, the vase inscriptions naming Leagros, with or without *kalos*, take on an outsized importance in our attempts to establish the contours of his life. Even that most fundamental fact of an individual's biography – the year of his birth – is largely an inference from the assumption that he should have been entering adolescence at the time he is first named as *kalos* on early works of Euphronios, ca. 520, yielding a birth year of ca. 535.⁴

If, however, we follow the traditional chronology, Leagros came of age in a period – the 520s and early teens – that was remembered as a kind of Golden Age in Athens (or Age of Kronos, as Aristotle put it in the *Constitution of the Athenians* 16.7). The tyrant Peisistratos had died in 528, ensuring a smooth transition in power to his two sons, Hippias and Hipparchos. The word *tyrannos* in Greek does not have most of the negative connotations of the modern word and basically refers to the means by which a man seized power in a *polis* – by force of arms – and not to the nature of his rule. In the case of Peisistratos, after two short-lived attempts to take power in Athens, starting in ca. 561, on the third try, in 546, he succeeded in consolidating his power and held it until his death almost twenty years later. It was a period marked by largely peaceful relations with other Greek states and prosperity at home, thanks in part to the thriving pottery industry and massive exports to Etruscan and other buyers.

While Hippias held the reins of power in the same benevolent spirit as his father, his younger brother served as a kind of Minister of Culture (Plato, *Hipparchos* 228b–229d). Among his many initiatives, he reorganized the musical competitions at the Panathenaic Festival, so that the professional bards, known as rhapsodes, would perform the Homeric poems in the correct sequence. In the same spirit of edifying the populace, he commissioned large numbers of herms, marble shafts topped with the bearded head of the god Hermes (Web Fig. 1.1), to stand as milestones throughout the Attic landscape and adorned them with gentle exhortations of his own composition (“Don't deceive a friend”). He once displayed his passionate commitment to poetry by staging a daring rescue. In 522,

⁴ It should be noted, however, that in recent years a growing minority of scholars have argued for lowering the date for the introduction of red-figure by about ten years, on the basis of pottery chronology derived from material found in the Athenian Agora. Such a shift would not actually affect anything we know about Leagros' later life and would even make his death in battle at a rather advanced age somewhat less implausible (see below).