

# Historical Accounts of Athens

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## **Introduction**

In the southeastern region of Balkan Peninsula lies a greek city-state of the name Athens, one of the most well known and significant of its kind that has made drastic impacts throughout history. Athens was simply the largest and most powerful of any Greek state, not to mention being filled with beauty throughout, from its vibrant buildings to shops and even public baths. During the early portion of the middle ages, Byzantine Empire controlled Athens, it was later controlled by the Frankish Duchy. However, since the year of 1833, Athens has been the capital city (*Byzantine Athens*, N/A). During the time of the ancient Greeks this was the centre point to not only power but all of the arts, sciences, and philosophy in the world. Although that time is long past and their way of life would be as drastically different from today as you could imagine, Athens was behind the development of ideas that influenced many of the systems we use today. One of the most notable accomplishments of Athens, was their impact on their legal system, where democracy was first used, the newly found idea of everybody being equal. The architecture was like nothing else ever seen before, the medicine and philosophy would too go down in history. As you may imagine, with such a powerful state, peace may not come with ease, nor will a foundation of this great nature come to fruition with ease. Throughout this paper, I'll be diving deeper into the history, the major features, and the overall composition of the Greek city-state of Athens.

## **Location of the City**

Throughout history, we have seen many different variations of maps of this greek state. While they do differ, the location of Athens has stayed put throughout time. As mentioned above, Athens is located in the southeastern part of Balkan Peninsula, which is approximately five miles away from the bay of Phaleron, which connects to the Aegean Sea (Geography of the Ancient Greek World and Aegean Map. 2003). The city lies in the center

of the Attica plain, while three sides of the city face mountains while the fourth lies along the sea.

Before a unique Attica state was formed, it was merely independent towns filling said area. With the coast facing the Aegean Sea, ample opportunity became available for additional maritime and trade to occur. Piraeus can be seen just below Athens in Figure 1, which is one of the most important harbours in Greece. Only around five miles from Athens, in addition to that, in Piraeus many businesses existed and often found great deals of success (Cartwright, 2020). This example goes to show the importance of geographical location in the development of cities, especially in the times of Ancient Greece and Athens. In figure 1 and 2 below, you'll see a better illustration of these areas.



Figure 1. *Early Athens* (2015). By Short Story Website      Figure 2. *Ancient Athens* (N/A). By Alamy

### Major Features of Athens

Throughout a large part of Athens history, war had been a significant concern whether preparing, during war, or dealing with the aftermath. However, when looking at the time period in ancient Greece, a city-state was essentially what acted as a community structure. Where it would be organized with an urban centre, while the surrounding area remained as the countryside. The urban centre would be built up of temples and

government buildings, and public spaces where other infrastructure would be built. These city centres would often be built with walls surrounding them, when ideally the centre point is at the highest point of land, such as a hill, cities would place their temples and governments there (National Geographic Society, 2019).

Between the years of 440 and 430 B.C. after a failed attack on Egypt, a time where war was a very prominent issue. Pericles would push to have their treasury transferred from Delos to Athens, in order to fund a wide array of cultural projects (History.com Editors, 2009). Most notably some significant structures such as; the Acropolis, the temple of Athena Nike, the Parthenon, and the Erechtheum appeared on the city's hilltop. These were built to the absolute highest standards of this time. The engineering and mathematics going into said planning were believed to be the best. The era's greatest sculptors were put to work, marking these structures with statues and friezes carved to excellence (History.com Editors, 2009).

By now, it's easy to think Athens has been the birthplace of many significant ideas in the world of arts, philosophy, and science. Athenians embraced their ideals and built thousands of temples, symbolizing that very beauty (Rise of City-States: Athens and Sparta, N/A). Looking back at today, we view a lot of this symbolic architecture, some of which still stand today, as such outstanding classical pieces. However, one common misconception when it comes to such historically significant places like Athens, where reality is, it's not as elegant as it may seem. Although in a much different time, the streets were very narrow and filthy, crowded and noisy much of the time. It would be an absolute ease to differentiate between the rich and the poor, with so much infrastructure built of just wood and clay, the vulnerability was an issue (Weiner, 2018). Especially in a time, where the effects of war were prominent so often, the simplicity it took merely to destroy or break into property.

While ancient Athens had several very crucial buildings within the makeup of their cities, some of which even still stand today. Agora is one very significant building from this time era, it was viewed as the heart of Athens in many ways, playing a vital role in the lives of many Athenians. All religious activities, festivals or special events of any kind and of course where government affairs took place here. Many more could be listed, like Acropolis, which is located at a hilltop, however, it is not a building rather a series of buildings looking down on Athens from above (*Famous Historical Buildings*, N/A).

Figure 5 below is a map made by the American School of Classical Studies at Athens, documenting the approximate layout of the ancient agora of Athens. The different coloured outlines represent contributions from different time periods. Where a green outline represents the Archaic period, purple the Classical, orange the Hellenistic, and red the Roman.



Figure 4. The Ancient Agora (N/A). By The Athens Key

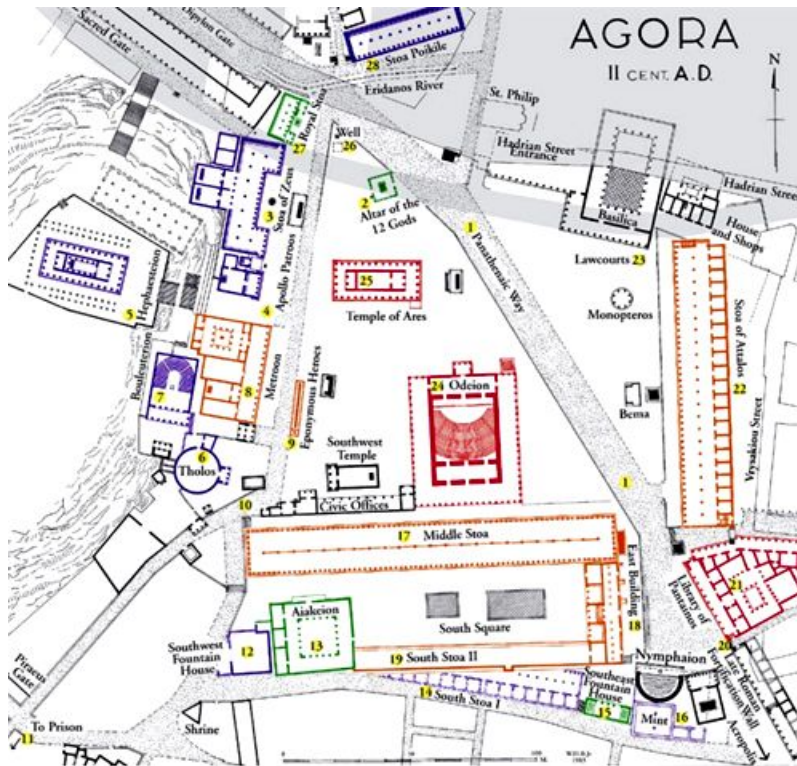


Figure 5. The Agora of Ancient Athens (2020). By Classical Then Goldenage

## Urban History of Athens

Athens hasn't always been the large, powerful Greek state which we know it for today. Initially, Athens wasn't much more than a small town, as a civilization first arrived as early as 7000 BCE (*History of Athens*, N/A). The location of Athens allowed trade to be made by sea, which helped propel the growth. Initially, it was often wealthy aristocrats who would control the Greek government and most of the land. Where poor landowners would become enslaved to the wealthy, in addition to the lack of consistency in laws within the city, it was evident change would take place down the road.

In 594 BCE, after the Athenian Revolt, a new legal system was established, the new system made by someone named Cleisthenes. It was celebrated as, for the first time, a fair legal system was at their disposal, a legal system which was a huge step towards democracy. Although what we define as modern-day democracy would be drastically

different, the step towards a society with adequate rights was met. Government workers would be selected by a random lottery, while officials were voted upon. All citizens would be able to partake in official government meetings and even encouraged to do so. The legal system now in place is like nothing Athenians would have ever seen before (Cartwright, 2020). A legal system that would help this very society propel themselves into a better future, ultimately paving the pathway to the many advancements made in the fields of literature, philosophy, and sciences. Under this new system, for the first time, male citizens would have equal political rights, freedom of speech, and of course, the right to participate within a democracy.



Figure 3. Athenian democracy (N/A). By the School of Historical and Philosophical Thinking (University of Queensland)

During the fourth and fifth centuries of BCE, Athens male population ranged from around 30000 to 60000 people depending on the exact time frame. This newly formed assembly would gather up to once a month, in a dedicated location, often accommodating up to 6000 citizens (Cartwright, 2020). Anyone of these citizens had the opportunity to

speak and vote on the raised issues, where the majority would be used to make a final decision. There were a total of nine presidents that were elected and would be responsible for holding said meetings, organizing the proceedings, and assessing the voting. Athens eventually reached what we refer to as its golden age, which was dated in the range of 449 to 431 B.C., where relative peace was found between the Peloponnesian and Persian wars. Where afterward, where the intellectual culture as a whole rose dramatically.

### **Conclusion**

In summary, after discussing in-depth ancient Athens city-state, major features, and urban history, it has become evident in ancient Greece, the city-state of Athens have explicitly left a large dent in history. Between the art and literature and classical culture formed throughout this time to the newly introduced legal systems. In a new age for philosophy, where culture wasn't the same, where a community was closer together than in previous instances, now the community members had a voice and more power than ever before.



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