

A Commentary
 on
The Excavation of the Athenian Agora

Archaeologists say that almost the first question put to them by the average man is "Why do you dig?" and that the answer takes several hours or an instant. This is an attempt to answer for them. It covers only the more significant reasons for what some of our American archaeologists are doing to an area of about twenty-two acres in the heart of modern Athens. They began by removing the closely packed buildings, and they will carry on until they reach bed rock anywhere from six to thirty feet below. If there is a well in the rock, they go to the bottom of that. Always they sift the soil, at the rate of about seventeen hundred tons in a working week. When the job of digging is done, they will take time to total up data holding the right answers to countless questions. In a general way, this is what a layman would say first off to sum up this ten-year project of excavating, recording, and interpreting the objects that accumulated on the site of the Athenian Agora between 1800 B.C. and the present day.

Nine years ago, when proposals of the American School of Classical Studies in Athens to undertake this work were approved, the area of the ancient market place was a crowded slum, its buildings generally in bad order because of a decree restraining owners from extensive improvements on their buildings. It had long been marked as a future "archaeological area," and the government was simply keeping down for some future excavator the cost of buying in land and houses. At the time of the formal agreements

between the Greek Government and the American School, only fringes of the total area had been removed. This had been done partly by the Greeks themselves, partly by a German group that held a concession several years earlier.

Today the American School has sole responsibility for completing this operation, the most extensive and complex archaeological operation now going forward on any single site. The task is complicated by being set in the heart of a modern city. The digging and all essential processes of preservation will be finished in ten years, on funds from Mr. Rockefeller. Something like ten per cent of that large total will have been added by the Foundation to pay the fellowship stipends of junior staff members. First and last it will be an American project up to the time when the site has been cleared and the valuable objects from it securely housed. Then the entire property will be turned over to the Greek government for permanent maintenance under the Ministry of Education.

Significance of the project for popular education

The completed project will in itself be an answer to this question of the average man, for it will give him excellent means of learning what the archaeologist gets for his digging. From the center of the Agora site he will see on the northwestern boundary the Theseion, still the most perfectly preserved classical temple in Greece. Turning in the opposite direction, he will see high above him on the Acropolis the outlines of the Parthenon against the sky. All about him on the gradually rising slope will be the foundation outlines of Greek and Roman structures, occasional monuments and parts of facades in their original locations, and the roadways traversing the area. Within the small museum at the southwestern edge he will find smaller objects of stone, ivory, pottery, terra cotta, and bronze arranged

to illustrate the development of Greek art. The largest sculptured figures will be in the cloisters of a central courtyard. All the material will be displayed in historical sequences to define the progressive changes in fine and useful arts from prehistoric times to the end of the period of Roman occupation, so that even casual visitors will leave with clear ideas on the changing life of the eastern Mediterranean before modern times.

When the Director of Antiquities becomes responsible to his Minister of Education for the Agora site, he will have funds from his annual budget and from admission fees of visitors to meet all expenses of operation. This will include maintenance and guarding of whatever structure the American School gives under its agreements to house all objects having special value. By its treatment of its finds at Corinth the School has implied what it will try to do for those of the Agora, in order that the general public may realize from even brief visits the meaning of life in Greece from prehistoric times to the beginning of the Middle Ages. Only objects found on the site will be used to illustrate growth or change in the practice of the arts.

Today the American School has abundant material from the Agora site to demonstrate how the Near East converged for centuries on this focal point to build up and then to break down its own successive patterns. For purposes of popular education this material is more important than the few fine art objects that have been found in virtually their original condition. But among these are several to give those sensations of wonder and admiration that Greek art can inspire. There are the ivory statue of Apollo Lykeios, the portrait head of Alexander, the Spartan shield, and the terra cotta boy made in prehistoric times. They will give greater pleasure to the observer because he

will see them surrounded by scores of other objects giving them proper sequence and creating a sense of proportion that will increase his appreciation of the exceptional. It is because the American School has once demonstrated at Corinth its skill in using fundamental and unusual objects to give ready understanding of all, that one can confidently expect that and more from their greater opportunity with the Athenian Agora.

Its significance for archaeological research and classical scholarship

The complex character of this excavation is but slightly implied by statements of its magnitude in acres of land and tons of dirt to be moved without interruption of the daily life of the city. Fortunately Athens is in a building period. Soil, stone, and good timber can be sold. Also, from this point on much stone will be kept on the site to be recut for use in the museum, and the soil will be shifted down the slope in the landscaping of sections now completely excavated. The genuinely complex task is to solve the riddles that day by day come up out of the ground. They must be dealt with at once, as objects are found in location with the surrounding evidence undisturbed. To meet the full requirements of interpretation, one needs to know life in the Mediterranean from the prehistoric Greek period until the end of Turkish occupation of the peninsula.

The men of the American School realized this when they secured Mr. Rockefeller's first grant nine years ago. They had as carefully devised plans for the work as are needed in fabricating a modern skyscraper. Their techniques for work in the ground and in their laboratories had been tested on other major sites in Greece. Out of that experience they calculated the time and the cost with some speculation in their estimates on two major factors - fluctuations in exchange rates and in political conditions touching

their operations. After a seven-year test of their diplomacy and their dollars, the director, Professor Shear, reports that they are within their original estimates of expense and are on schedule in time.

This is a very significant fact bearing on the future of archaeological research. It has been proved that all important questions can be met in advance of opening a site that must be finished in a continuous operation. Even more important, in the mind of the director, is their demonstration of method. He has had at hand constantly an adequate staff to meet every type of problem when it arises. More than that, not satisfied to have future critical scholars depend on interpretations of evidence by his staff, he has saved the evidence.

Later scholars will find stored in the basement of the Agora museum rows of boxes as carefully classified as books in a library, each holding the essential source materials for review or for further investigation. The present hoard of 64,000 coins will be available, with all still to be found, each marked as to place of discovery. The same will be true of the pottery. These two collections - coins and pottery - will make the Agora museum a scholar's encyclopedia on the history of art for the Eastern Mediterranean. Then there are to be counted in, for similar values, the sequences of articles and objects in metal work and the collection of over fifteen hundred stones having inscriptions.

All this conservation of circumstantial evidence arises from knowledge that excavators of the past have destroyed more proof than they have saved. The present director of the School sums up the previous course of scholarship on art history, by comparing the stock of facts to the apex of an inverted pyramid and the mass of repetition and speculation to the stonework spreading to the limits of its base. In contrast to that, he sees the future building of some four-square structures of knowledge.

The kind of generalization that can come from massed details of evidence is not now clear, but the answers that have been found for many specific questions prove that new generalizations will come. The way in which excavation at times gives new facts immediately was demonstrated twice during my ten-day visit. The discovery of considerable prehistoric pottery, including a number of complete vases, proved that Athens was a town of some size in 1800 B.C. The other find gave proper dating for the damage done by fire to the western end of the Theseion, the temple still standing at the northwest corner of the site. A flat stone carved in relief was found among other objects that are known to have been deposited at the place of discovery not later than 396 A.D. From its figures and its burnt condition it was at once recognized as a metope of the frieze on the west end of the Theseion. This disposed of the standard surmise that the firing of the Theseion occurred some six hundred years later than the demonstrated terminal date of the incident.

By such matching of facts and saving of evidence the staff at work on the Agora is setting new standards for excavation. That purpose is constantly in the minds of the twenty American workers when watching their two hundred laborers on the site or when doing their own assignments in the laboratories. Random digging for art objects is now deplored by all reputable archaeologists, and it is certain that random guessing from evidence immediately destroyed or only partially seen will become equally unpopular as the merits of complete conservation are more commonly understood. That understanding will be vastly increased through such demonstrations as are being completed in the market-place of ancient Athens.

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