

Commerce and Crafts around the Athenian Agora

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Much attention has been lavished on the political character of the Agora of Athens, and certainly the primary motive for undertaking the daunting task of excavation in the middle of the modern city was the identification of the site that hosted Europe's first democracy. Ancient authors mention the Agora and its surrounding public buildings time and time again as the venue of important historical events and political activities. But the space had another function as well, and one that was equally important for the well-being of the city: it was a center of commerce. This role survives in the modern Greek language; if you hop into an Athenian taxi and give «agora» as your destination, you will find yourself in the central produce markets of the city, some 600 meters to the northeast of the ancient city center that you perhaps had intended to visit.

By the Hellenistic period this commercial aspect had been formalized, and around the middle of the 2nd century B.C. King Attalos, ruler of the wealthy kingdom of Pergamon in Asia Minor, presented Athens with a large and lavish shop building, known as the Stoa of Attalos. Marble-faced and some 116 meters in length, it housed 42 shops on two floors, fronted by wide colonnades for shelter from rain and sun. It was a very useful gift: the people of Athens could enjoy convenient covered shopping, and the rents that the city charged to shopkeepers contributed to the public coffers.

The arrangements of the Classical period (5th–4th centuries B.C.) were less imposing, but there is

no doubt that buying and selling had a long history in and around the public square. Writers of the 4th century B.C. tell us that a wide variety of goods were hawked from temporary structures – tables, wicker booths, and the like – set up within and on the fringes of the square, and the practice undoubtedly goes back to earlier times. These authors also make it clear that the neighborhoods immediately adjacent to the Agora were packed with more permanent commercial establishments. Here, in buildings of various forms, goods were both sold and manufactured. Commodities attested by the ancient writers include meat, sausages, fish, vegetables, fruit, nuts, barley groats, bread, wine, wreaths, ribbons, slaves, pottery, items made of bronze and leather, figurines, and books. You could also find money-lenders and barbers near the Agora. Shops offering the same commodity were clustered together, and these concentrations served ancient Athenians as landmarks: when the comic poet Menander (4th century B.C.) wrote, «Wait for me at the olive oil», everyone knew what he meant.

We are not so lucky today, but over the years considerable evidence about the commercial activities of the city has come to light. Beginning in the 1970s, the excavation of substantial commercial buildings outside the northern and eastern sides of the square has focused attention on this aspect of the space, encouraging a review of objects and structures found much earlier in the project.

Identifying Commercial Buildings

Sometimes we can pinpoint the location of particular merchants by studying the broken and discarded objects they left behind. Thus, a heavy concentration of large clay amphoras (vessels designed for the long-distance shipping of liquids, which are described in more detail by Mark Lawall in Chapter 5) spread over a large area just outside the southeast corner of the square tells us that wine importers did business there in the 5th century B.C. Nearby, a similar collection of perfume bottles, thrown into wells and cisterns of the 5th to the 2nd century B.C., reveals that here was the perfume market, described by the 5th-century comic poet Aristophanes as the haunt of gossips and feckless young men.

A more concrete picture emerges from the remains of Classical buildings that clearly served commercial purposes: places not only where objects were sold but also where they were manufactured. Without exception, and as we would expect, these lay outside the Agora proper, but often as close to it as the builders could manage. They are nestled among dwellings, and some are indistinguishable from private houses in their plans. In these cases, the owner or tenant simply devoted part of his living space to his profession. For example, a hearth and deposits of marble and metal waste show that crafts-

men worked in house D, a dwelling located along a road running south from the southwest corner of the square (Fig. 39 #10). In the larger house C, next door and to the south and, in one phase of its history, connected by a door to house D, an isolated room opens directly onto the street and probably served as a shop, where items manufactured inside were offered to the public. In another house, part of a block of dwellings just to the south of the public square (Fig. 39 #9), large containers (pithoi) set into a plastered floor bear witness to industrial or commercial activity (dyeing? felting? laundering?), while the profits are attested by the many lost coins – including two rare silver ones – discovered in the successive floor levels of one of the house's rooms. The same cheek-by-jowl arrangement of living and working space is evoked in a 4th-century B.C. Athenian inscription found at the Agora (I 1749), describing property confiscated from Philokrates of Hagnous, a prominent citizen who, indicted for treason by his political enemies, had left town rather than stand trial. The accused had owned two workshops (ergostasia), bounded on the north and east by two houses (also his property), on the west by a workshop owned by someone else, and on the south by a road leading to the square.

The North Side of the Agora

Beginning just after the Persian Wars of the 480s, Athenians began to erect buildings that were specifically designed for use as shops and workshops. We can point to more than a half dozen structures, located at practically every entrance to the Agora, that share a common plan. The recurrent, identifying feature is a row of rooms of uniform size, much like the row of shops behind the colonnade of the Stoa of Attalos, but – as we shall see – there is considerable variety in the pattern.

The simplest form is illustrated by a building north of the Agora (Fig. 39 #1), right behind a

large stoa that faced onto the public square and is probably to be identified as the Painted Stoa known from literary sources. The shop building has not yet been completely excavated, but as so far revealed, it has at least four rooms, side by side and opening onto a street at the west. Although its plan is simple, it was well constructed. The lower part of the south wall was built of fine limestone masonry, while elsewhere in the building polygonal masonry and rubble foundations preserve the floor plan. The upper walls were built of mud brick, a remarkably durable material when protected by a good roof.

⇒ Fig. 39

Plan of the Agora before the erection of the Stoa of Attalos in the middle of the 2nd century B.C.

Buildings specifically designed for commercial and industrial activity are shaded. Numbers are referred to in the text.

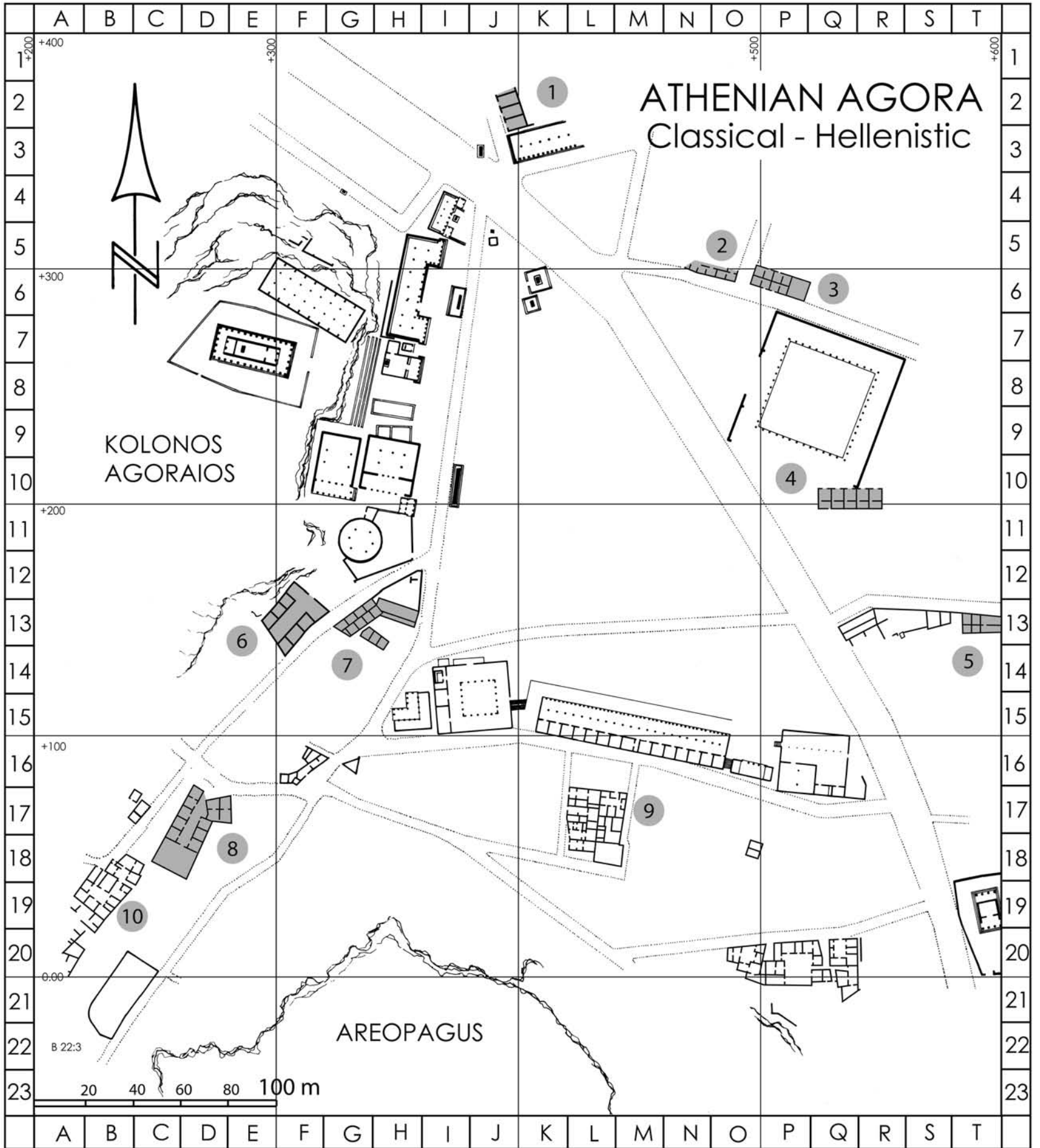


Fig. 40

Clay impression of a fragment from a large bronze vessel (T 4461) (with modern cast), found in the commercial building behind the Painted Stoa.

This provides evidence that workers in metal were among the tenants of the building.

Fig. 41

Pyre in the southernmost room of the commercial building behind the Painted Stoa (pyre J 3:7; ca. 325 B.C.).

The building was erected close to the year 400 B.C. and was occupied for many centuries thereafter. In the manner typical of simple Classical buildings, floors were periodically replaced by bringing in and tamping down a thin layer of clay over the old, worn surface; small pieces of pottery inadvertently incorporated in the floor help date the sequence. Ten clay floors in the south room of our

building record occupation down into the 1st century A.D. The building may have stood for as much as a millennium, until the Slavic invasions of the 6th century A.D., but we have only the rebuilt walls, not the floors, of that later phase.

The plan alone gives us a clue to the function of the building. It cannot be a dwelling, for its layout is utterly different from that of the Classical houses revealed by excavations around the Agora and elsewhere in Athens and the Greek world. Its location outside the square argues against an official, political function, and it certainly is not a shrine or a temple. Fortunately, the tenants were careless housekeepers, and abundant evidence of their activities has been found in the fabric of the floors. Shallow depressions contained iron and bronze slag and bronze filings; patches of pigment stained floor surfaces; and marble dust and chips and fragments of lead and pumice were embedded in the floors. A clay impression (Fig. 40) taken from a piece of bronze relief work, an artisan's record of an object to be recreated in the future, was found in the second room from the south. In the southernmost room, a Y-shaped clay drain had been installed to channel water from the floor out through the street door. From all this we can conclude that workers in metal and marble made up some of the tenants of the building, though other crafts that leave less durable testimony could also have been practiced here.

The floors also revealed intriguing evidence of these workers' religious practices: small collections of drinking cups, lamps, miniature saucers and cooking pots, and burned animal bones that had been buried beneath them in shallow pits (Figs. 41 and 42). The bones (primarily of sheep and goats) tell us that these are the remains of sacrifices, in which part of the victim was burned as an offering to the gods, as was the universal Greek custom. Several of these deposits were found in each room of our building, with the total number now standing at twelve. These so-called saucer pyres are a regular feature of private buildings around the fringes of the Agora square; more than 50 have come to light in the course of the excavations. Although the purpose of the sacrifices they document is unknown, saucer pyres are most commonly found in buildings that were devoted, at least in part, to craft and industry. A craftsman would have good reason to seek the favor of the gods. He needed their help to insure the success of the often complex and unpredictable industrial processes upon which his livelihood depended. His work could be dangerous, and he needed their protection to insure his personal safety. If the work went awry, or if he or his coworkers suffered an accident, he might need to avert malign influences by ritual means. Alternatively, sacrifices may have accompanied renovation of a space or a change of tenants. But whatever the reason, the association with craft activities is clear from the distribution of saucer pyres around the Agora.

Another shop building on the north side of the Agora illustrates a more complex version of the plan (Fig. 39 #3), where the row of rooms is doubled. Each row faces outward — on the south onto a street, on the north either onto a street or a courtyard — and there is a large courtyard at the building's eastern end. (A poorly preserved twin [Fig. 39 #2] stood just to its west). As in the simpler structure discussed above, the building was long-lived (from just after the Persian Wars of the 480s down to the early 2nd century A.D.), and here, too, saucer pyres were buried under the floors: three of them, dating in the 4th and 3rd centuries B.C.

There is little evidence for what went on here during the first 150 years of the building's history. Metal waste, tools, and molds, however, attest the presence of bronze-workers from the later 4th to the 2nd century B.C., replaced in one shop by masons in the later 3rd and 2nd centuries B.C. High concentrations of bronze coins reflect commercial activity, and a deposit of 3rd-century B.C. amphoras in one shop points to a merchant in wine and foodstuffs. Thus there is evidence of a variety of operations, industrial and commercial, side by side and changing through time. Precisely the same picture of changing tenantry is painted by the 4th-century B.C. orator Aeschines, in his speech against Timarchos (1.124):

If a physician moves into one of these shops on the street, it is called a clinic. But if he moves out and a smith moves into this same shop, it is called a smithy; if a fuller moves in, a laundry; if a carpenter, a carpentry-shop; and if a pimp and his whores move in, we call it a brothel.

The passage also points to challenges for the archaeologist. The activities of a smith may leave durable traces, a fuller's shop may be furnished with vats, and a carpenter may leave a trail of nails; but clinics and brothels are unlikely to leave evidence of their short occupation of rented quarters.

Fig. 42
Pottery from another pyre in the building (pyre J 2:9, in the third room from south; ca. 300 B.C.).

Other Shop Buildings around the Agora

Common sense tells us that a location near the public square, where citizens had occasion to go on a daily basis, would be advantageous for a small businessman; and, indeed, the orator Lysias, in a speech written around 400 B.C. in defense of a shopkeeper (24.20), observes that most customers frequent the shops nearest the Agora, many fewer those establishments that are farther away. If we look around the edges of the Agora, and especially at the points where roads enter the square, we find those shops. One of these lay along a road that led eastward toward the area that would later be occupied by the Roman Agora (Fig. 39 #5). Rich debris from its courtyard shows that in the 4th century B.C. workers in bone and horn and a maker of clay figurines shared these facilities with a butcher, a wine shop, and a tavern. Another shop building stood on the site of the later Stoa of Attalos (Fig. 39 #4) in the second quarter of the 2nd century B.C.; here a larger front room was paired with a smaller back room – shop and storeroom? Tavern and service area? Debris outside and behind the building

testifies to occupancy by metalworkers and another tavern. And just outside the southwestern corner of the square, three shop buildings are arranged around an open area (Fig. 39 #7), their sequential occupancy spanning the years from the 5th to the early 1st century B.C.

A road leads southward from this complex into the heart of an industrial neighborhood. Rodney Young, excavating here in the late 1940s, found so much marble waste that he dubbed this thoroughfare «the Street of the Marble Workers». It leads down to houses C and D (Fig. 39 #10), mentioned earlier as the workplaces of marble- and metal-workers, and on the way it passes another building that we might add to our collection of shops: the Poros Building (Fig. 39 #8; Fig. 43), so named for the large limestone blocks that were used in its walls. Margaret Crosby, who carried out excavations here from 1947 to 1950, filled more than 15 notebooks with observations of this building. A generation later, John Camp devoted another season to further work here. Even so, the Poros Building remains something of a mystery.

Sections of wall and cuttings in bedrock make the plan clear: two rows of same-sized rooms and a courtyard, like the more complex shop building plan discussed earlier. Here, however, the rooms probably turn inward on an unroofed corridor (though we cannot be sure; long stretches of the western wall are missing, and some rooms may have had doors opening to the street). Four rooms at the northeast have a different orientation and may belong to a different structure. The building was constructed around the middle of the 5th century B.C., and debris and fallen roof tiles show that it was badly damaged around the end of that century. Remodeled sometime thereafter, it probably survived until the 1st century B.C., when it was utterly destroyed by the soldiers of the Roman general Sulla, who sacked the city of Athens in 86 B.C.

Although its plan and history are now known, the function of the Poros Building has never been established with certainty. The same-sized rooms have suggested to some that it might be an apartment building, but the lack of a water supply in its first phase would have made these spaces unappealing as living quarters. The large size and good

Fig. 43
Aerial view of the Poros Building, so named for the large limestone blocks that were used within its walls.

construction shows that its builders had considerable resources; was the Poros Building built by the Athenian state to serve some official purpose? It is unlikely to have been a law court: its courtyard is too small for most Athenian juries and its small rooms unsuited to Athenian legal activities. It may have served as offices for public officials, but what need did such functionaries have for a large courtyard? Ingenious but ultimately unconvincing arguments have been deployed to identify it as the state prison — a structure most vividly known from Plato's account of the death of Sokrates. It is Athenian shop buildings, however, that furnish the closest parallels to its plan, and heavy deposits of marble chips and dust show that masons worked in the northern part of the building in the late 5th and 4th centuries B.C. Other remnants of industrial activity include a basin, an enormous jar (*pitthos*) and an amphora sunk into the floor of the northwestern room (Fig. 44); a deposit of bronze-casting molds in fill of the second half of the 4th century B.C., just north of the entrance to the building; and massive amounts of slag in the destruction debris over the building's northeastern parts. Furthermore, at least three saucer

pyres were buried under its floors in the course of the 4th century B.C. It may be, then, that the Poros Building was built to provide working space for artisans and shopkeepers; if, as its substantial construction suggests, it was built at public expense, it may be a forerunner of the Stoa of Attalos, bringing in income for the state in the form of rents.

Fig. 44
Industrial installations in the northwest room of the Poros Building. The industrial character of these discoveries suggests that the building served as a working space for artisans.

The Strategeion (?)

A very poorly preserved building located on the same street, farther to the north and closer to the square (Fig. 39 #6) also poses a puzzle. It too included large limestone blocks in its walls, and, as far as its disturbed state allows one to judge, its plan was not unlike that of the Poros Building, with which it is about contemporary. Its footprint is an irregular square, with a courtyard at the north and perhaps two rows of rooms and a corridor at the south. As with the Poros Building, size and construction hint at public sponsorship; not only does its fabric include some large poros blocks, but a very considerable amount of bedrock was cut away to make a level space for its construction. The building is labeled «Strategeion?» — Office of the Generals — on plans of the Agora. Literary sources

tell us that the 10 generals of Athens had offices in a building of that name, and it was probably located in or near the public square. Fragments of at least four inscriptions that once stood in front of the Strategeion have been found on the west side of the square, hinting that the office was in this general region. This is the sum of the evidence; we know nothing about the likely plan of such a building, except that it had to provide space for 10 generals and at least sometimes for the storage of military equipment.

Unfortunately, even the lowest floors of the building are missing, robbing us of potential clues to its function. Two fascinating things have come to light below the level of those floors, however. In 1935 Rodney Young discovered a small saucer pyre

that had been buried there in the 3rd century B.C., remnants of the ritual so frequently associated with workshops – and never, so far, attested in Athenian public buildings. Seventy years later, in the summer of 2005, a spectacular hoard of about 400 silver coins (Figs. 45 and 46) was found just centimeters below the level at which the earlier excavations had stopped. Whoever occupied the building had occasion to deal in large sums of money, but we do not know whether these were public or private funds, or whether the person who buried them was a general, a banker, or a thief – or all three. But searching for parallels elsewhere, we may recall that scattered coins – and even silver ones – are regularly found in the floors of commercial buildings and houses where crafts were practiced. Excavation continues in the building; during the last days of the 2006 season large deposits of marble chips began to appear, adding another piece of evidence for the presence of craftsmen here. A more detailed description of the coin hoard by Agora conservator Amandina Anastasiades is provided in Chapter 9.

Through the work of the excavations some meat has been put on the bones of ancient descriptions, and we can better visualize the workplaces crowded around the public square of Athens. Imagine walls rising from the recovered foundations; add the rhythmic clink of the mason's mallet, the cries of vendors, the pungent smell of the smith's charcoal fire and the dyer's vat, and the bustle of customers and craftsmen in the narrow streets leading to and from the square – and you can recover a small but spicy slice of ancient Athenian life.

Fig. 45 (above)

Hoard of about 400 silver coins emerging from the earth in the «Strategeion», the building sometimes identified as the Office of the Generals.

Fig. 46

Detail of the coin hoard.