When you are next in Athens, having duly paid your respects to the Parthenon, take the path leading down to the north, into the ancient ‘ agora’ or marketplace. There you will be able to trace the outlines of the ancient civic buildings, though it takes a bit of imagination.

The Agora, like the centre of any Greek city, was not a secular space: it has a sacred boundary, it is watched over by the temple of Hephaistos (the best-preserved temple in Greece) and it straddles the ancient Sacred Way leading down from the Acropolis. Many visitors, content with a brief review of the religious and political heart of ancient Athens, turn back into the modern centre in search of refreshment and souvenirs; but where does the Sacred Way go when it emerges from the Agora?

To find out, you can take a short detour to a very pleasant archaeological site, and one that stimulates the imagination rather more than the Agora.

Just a block away from the north exit from the Agora runs the dusty highway of Odos Ermon. Cross over and turn left along it. If you can stand the roar of the traffic for only a couple of minutes, you will find yourself looking down into the Kerameikos excavations, an oasis of greenery in the concrete jungle of modern Athens and something of a well-kept secret as far as traditional tourist haunts are concerned.

The Kerameikos, of which this part has been uncovered by excavators from the German Archaeological Institute, was an early potters’ quarter, the water of the river Eridanos being valuable for that craft. It was well placed for trade, standing at the point where two main roads entered the town. As a meeting-point of roads, a river, and the city boundary, this spot was full of sacred meaning. It is also full of significance for the history of democratic Athens.

Below to your right as you enter the excavations is a stretch of the ancient city wall, preserved up to 5 metres high. The upper courses of masonry are Roman, from a period of foreign invasion; but the lower courses recall warfare among Greeks. After the rout of Xerxes’ invasion, the Athenians, inscribed in the block their threat to invade, had chosen a new site. The Thyrsites erected a city wall on a new line, recycling old buildings and monuments in the process. The irregularity of the blocks confirms their haste; grave stones have been found whose sculpted surface was hacked flat for re-use in the wall. Recent research has also revealed the core of mud-brick still intact within the wall, allowing several rebuilding phases to be identified. Variations in the masonry styles also point to several renovations during a century-and-a-half of warfare among Greek cities.

A city wall must not only keep out the enemy; in peacetime it must let citizens and foreigners pass through. The line of the wall is broken by the substantial remains of two principal fortified gates of Athens. The Sacred Gate is where the Sacred Way leaves the city on its westward journey to Demeter’s sanctuary at Eleusis. The Dipylon or ‘Double Gate’, further north, bestrides the road known simply as the Dromos (roadway), which likewise carried sacred processions into the Agora. Both gateways enclose court-
The Dipylon amphora from one of the 8th-century BC tombs in the cemetery.

A grave relief of a youth from the City Wall south of the Sacred Gate with its surface hacked-off for re-use.

refuge from the arid concrete of modern Athens. The greatest visual impression, however, is made by the remaining part of the site. If we follow either the Sacred Way or the Dromos away from the gates we see, under shady cyprresses on either side, many tumuli and raised embankments adorned with grave monuments. This was one of the main cemeteries of Athens. Here the aristocratic clans of early times marked the tombs of their dead with giant urns, like the famous Dipylon Amphora (now in the National Archaeological Museum at Athens).

As time went on and democracy gave political power to more of the male population, a wider spectrum of society buried their dead here and the area came to be seen as belonging to the whole citizen body. Thus it was here that the Athenian commander Pericles delivered his Funeral Oration (recreated in Thucydides, book 2) commemorating Athenians killed in the first year of the Peloponnesian War.

Since the excavated site is only part of the ancient Kerameikos, the grave-monuments are mainly of one period, namely the late fifth and fourth centuries BC. Look out for the tombstone list to the thirteen Spartan commanders killed at the end of the Peloponnesian war, and for sculptural highlights like the unique monument to Desiles, a young aristocrat killed in action in 354 BC: the original is in the site museum, which incidentally is not to be missed. Other sculptural highlights express the idealisation of citizen’s wives, typically shown bidding farewell to their children or slave-girls.

Part of the excavation has been laid out so as to evoke an ancient Street of Tombs, lined with some of the prize sculptures; this was, after all, a place where the rich commemorated themselves. More typical of the monuments, however, are the many one- and two-handled marble vases, replicas of those often left in graves, which can be seen dotted about. There are numerous undecorated miniature columns from the period after Greece was conquered by the Macedonian kings, when a repressive government clamped down on aristocratic ostentation. If you search among the trees you can find whole plantations of these touching little monuments, which give something of a real social context to the spectaculur monuments along the main avenues.

Within the small area of the Kerameikos excavations many aspects of ancient Athens are brought to life. Such a rewarding site deserves to be better known.

Graham Shipley is Head of Ancient History at the University of Leicester. He is currently writing a history of the Greek world after Alexander and is one of the editors of the forthcoming Cambridge Guide to Classical Civilization.

Competition Results

December 1995
Companion to British History

Answers:
1. Horatius, 2. 3. 5. 29 May each year, 4. 1740 by Anne, 5. 1859, 6. 1975, 7. Yule.
Winners: E.T. Noddall, Cambridge CB5 8EB, Mrs N.E. Harris, Exeter, EX2 4SY.

2. Nick Robbins, Wells, Somerset, GB22 9DA.

3. John Jackson, Leicester, LE2 5HL, Mrs J. Dayson, Chester, CH1 3QR, Mrs B. Barker, Gilleshall, M18 5HF, Alan Simpson, London E11 4HJ.

4. M. Wilson, Falkirk, FK2 1EF, Stephen Terry, London, E11 2TH, Mrs S. M. Malin, Essex, SS4 1HY.

5. Robin Chadwick, Leeds, LS9 2RQ, G. Kerr, Glasgow, G13 1RR, Peter Williamson, Lancaster, LA1 1HB, F. D. Ryder, Guildford, GU1 3JP, Anna Robbins, Exe Greatcoed, RH19 3SH.

6. Mike Goske, Wells, Somerset, PO22 6DA.


8. Mr M. Sparks, Cardiff, CF1 1RF.

9. Mr Jonathan Hopson, London, SW6 5SN, Helen Howkins, Exeter, EX4 7EX.

March 1996
Tyrol Competition

Answers:
1. Killed in a hunting accident. 2. After he had killed his death rival in a cock-fight.

Winners: Miss J. Loring, Pontefract, £10, Miss J. P. J. and Mr J. P. J., £5.

Winston Churchill, London, SW1 2DP.

Runners-up: Mr. S. Crone, Ipswich, £5; Mrs E. J. P. and Mr E. J. P., £5.

First Prize Winners: Mr T. J. and Mrs J. T., £10; Miss J. L. and Mr J. L., £5; Miss J. P. J. and Mr J. P. J., £10.

The Oxford Illustrated History of Europe Prize Draw

Winners: M. Leavy, Edinburgh, £5; Mrs E. J. P. and Mr E. J. P., £5.

The Oxford Illustrated History of Europe Prize Draw

Winners: G. Leavy, Edinburgh, £5; Mrs E. J. P. and Mr E. J. P., £5.

The Oxford Illustrated History of Europe Prize Draw

Winners: G. Leavy, Edinburgh, £5; Mrs E. J. P. and Mr E. J. P., £5.

The Oxford Illustrated History of Europe Prize Draw

Winners: G. Leavy, Edinburgh, £5; Mrs E. J. P. and Mr E. J. P., £5.

The Oxford Illustrated History of Europe Prize Draw

Winners: G. Leavy, Edinburgh, £5; Mrs E. J. P. and Mr E. J. P., £5.

The Oxford Illustrated History of Europe Prize Draw

Winners: G. Leavy, Edinburgh, £5; Mrs E. J. P. and Mr E. J. P., £5.

The Oxford Illustrated History of Europe Prize Draw

Winners: G. Leavy, Edinburgh, £5; Mrs E. J. P. and Mr E. J. P., £5.