The urban development of Athens
from the first inhabitance until the present day
An amazing exploration through time

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For the tutors

This work comprises a short presentation of the urban history of Athens. It aims to reconstruct in an easy and intelligible manner the changes the urban landscape of the city experienced over the centuries from the incipient inhabitance on the Acropolis outcrop through to the creation of the vast megalopolis we live in.

The urban phases of Athens are ‘unfolded’ step by step with the aid of maps that illustrate the form of the city in the various time periods, spotted on the ‘timeline’. The text has been embellished with pictures and ‘windows’ with motivating pieces of information and literary sources that shed light over undisclosed facets of life in the region.

Foreword

The story of Athens is an exhilarating adventure that goes on for five thousand five hundred years. The buildings and their traces reveal stories –some of them well-known some others undisclosed– that reach us from the glorious times, but also from the years of hardship, of war and plunder. Until this very day the heart of the city ceaselessly beats across the same land, which spans the Acropolis, the Agora and the Olympeion.
An enduring history begins

Neolithic Age (3500-3200 B.C.) and Bronze Age (3200-1050 B.C.)

At the outset of history
It would be very hard to imagine what Athens looked like in the distant past because continuous building effaced earlier edifices, with the exception of tombs, which are better preserved, as they are underground structures and, because they correlate closely with human inhabitance, they can provide evidence on the size of the city.

The first inhabitants made their huts on the North and South Slope of the Acropolis and, possibly, near the Olympeion. In case of emergency people found protection in the caves around the hill, which wild fig and fruit trees veiled.

The high ground of the fortified citadel was the ideal location for permanent settlement compared to the neighbouring hills because spring water was easily accessible. This gave the inhabitants a great advantage considering the fact that they could not use the water from Cephissus and Iliissos rivers as they were not perennial streams, but raging torrents. Furthermore, the wilderness that surrounded the rock had plenty of game, which was vital.

A dominant Mycenaean city is born
In the Bronze Age Athens was sparsely populated with dwellings being scattered across the North and South Slope of the Acropolis, on the top of the outcrop, to the southeast of the Hill of the Muses (Philopappos Hill), around the Olympeion and the Agora site. Legend has it that the designation ‘Athens’ (Athinai), which was possibly given by the mythical king Theseus, is in the plural to denote precisely this dispersed configuration of the settlements.

The sovereign of the Mycenaean society was the mighty king (‘anax’); he ruled his land from the palace, which was located on the top of the rock, where the Erechtheion was built after several centuries. On the South Slope lived the nobles.
The ‘Pelargian’ or ‘Pelasgian’ wall (2nd half of the 13th c. B.C.), a robust defensive structure made of oversized blocks of stone, was erected on the Acropolis. This was the first fortification ever to be built in Athens and enclosed the springs that gave the city the potable water that was so precious. The west entrance of the wall, which was on flat terrain, and therefore more vulnerable, was reinforced by a second outer enclosure that was called ‘Enneapylon’, as it had nine gates. This additional defensive structure that consisted of transverse walls on the inside and a steep ascent was indeed a trap for anyone who was brave enough to approach the citadel.

**Did you know that?**
People drew potable water not only from springs, but also from shallow wells, which they had excavated on the northwest side of the Acropolis. Much later, in historic times, the famous Klepsydra fountain house was sited on the area.

‘The city consisted of the present citadel and the district beneath it looking rather towards the south. This is shown by the fact that the temples of the other deities, besides that of Athena, are in the citadel; and even those that are outside it are mostly situated in this (south) quarter of the city, as that of Olympian Zeus, of Pythian Apollo, of Earth, and of Dionysus in the Marshes ...’

(free rendition)

Thucydides, ‘Historiae’ II 15, 4-5
The centuries that nurtured the ‘miracle of Athens’

Athens in the Geometric period (1050-700 B.C.) and the Archaic period (700-480 B.C.)

From decline to resurgence

The demise of the Mycenaean world was followed by a sinister and turbulent period that resulted in depopulation. Progressively Athens recovers and the settlements now spread over the hill of the Nymphs (Observatory), west of the Acropolis. It is quite possible that the legend concerning the civic union (‘synoecism’), which Theseus instigated by incorporating the various communities under one authority reflects the political circumstances that were established in Athens at the end of the 9th century B.C.

People continue to use the ancient cemetery of prehistoric times. Kingship is abolished, the Acropolis is no longer used as a fortress and from the 11th century B.C. onwards it becomes a sanctuary, while the ‘Market (Agora) of Theseus’ contains all aspects of public life. At the end of the 8th century Athens is confronted by new troubles; the city’s population declines due to droughts, plagues and famine.

Establishing the hegemony of Athens

Athens gradually takes on the form of an ordered city and each section has a designated use. The city’s public space and edifices become impressive. The populated areas were enclosed by a defensive wall, which was possibly wiped out by the Persians (480 B.C.). Pnyx Hill was the official site of the democratic assembly (Ekklesia). The ‘Market (Agora) of Solon’, which becomes the heart of public life, is on the east side of Agoraio Kolonos between the Areopagus and Eridanos River, where the city’s cemetery lay since the Mycenaean times. The name of the area, ‘Kerameikos’, derives from the quarter (deme) where potters (kerameis) lived, which formed part of the vicinity.

For many centuries the Agora was the nucleus of public life. A number of public buildings designed for administrative, political and commercial activities as well as small shrines filled in
any clear space. The Panathenaic Way (‘Dromos’) was the major artery that crossed the city centre and led to the Acropolis.

The grand procession of the Panathenaia festival, which was celebrated every four years, carrying the sacred veil (‘peplos’) of the patron goddess Athena moved along this route on its ascent to the Acropolis. Inscribed boundary stones (‘horoi’) demarcated the Agora district. All rituals took place on the Acropolis in monumental temples of unprecedented magnificence.

The majority of the population lived in overcrowded neighbourhoods that stretched between the hill of the Nymphs and Pnyx Hill. These districts were labyrinthine, with alleys instead of regular street plan, and lacked drainage and water supply systems. The Academy, the Lyceum and the Cynosarges gymnasium—places of physical exercise and scholarship—were also located outside the city’s walls.

**Did you know that?**

In their devastating incursion in 480 B.C. the Persians set fire to the imposing edifices of the Acropolis. The ‘ancient sanctuary’ and its ancillary buildings were destroyed. The Pre-Parthenon and the Archaic propylon, which were under construction at the time, suffered the same fate.

‘… Hippias, son of Peisistratos, the tyrant of Athens, imposed a levy on the doorsteps, the fences, even on the doors of the houses that opened outwards’ (free rendition)  
Aristotle, ‘Oeconomica’, II, 2, 4

**Did you know that?**

Only scarce evidence of buildings of the Geometric period survives for the reason that continuous inhabitance obliterated their traces. Usually tombs continue to exist since they are protected under the ground. Quite often, their location was indicated by oversized ceramic vessels (‘sema’) which are decorated with stylized forms and figures. Today these artefacts are on display at the Kerameikos Archaeological Museum and the National Archaeological Museum.
The Golden Age

Classical Athens (480-323 B.C.)

Following the decisive victory against the Persians (479 B.C.) the devastated from the enemy raids city is rebuilt and grows steadily into a dominant power. Because the Athenians are under threat from Sparta they fortify the city with the ‘Themistoclean wall’ that is hurriedly built up of the ruins of the buildings, which the Persians had torn down – even of gravestones. This circular structure with its 13 gates enclosed the whole Asty and for many centuries it was the first line of the city’s defense.

The wall divided the Kerameikos area in two parts: the ‘Inner Kerameikos’ district that was a residential neighbourhood with public buildings, houses and workshops, and the ‘Outer’ Kerameikos’ that comprised the necropolis. There, amongst the graceful funerary monuments, lies the ‘Demosion Sema’; this was the honoured public burial site of eminent statesmen and those citizens who lost their life in battle.

The main entrance of the city was also in the Kerameikos area, the ‘Thriasiae Gates’ or ‘Dipylon’ (this name prevailed from the 4th century B.C. when a reinforced double gate was constructed). The Panathenaic Way ran through the gates and went on towards Plato’s Academy. To the south the ‘Sacred Gate’ was built through which the ‘Sacred Way’ continued towards Eleusis. The procession of the Eleusinian Mysteries made its way along this route on the day of the festivity.

Finally, two additional fortifications, the Long Walls and the Phaleric Wall extended the city’s defense to Piraeus and Phaliron respectively. Thirty years on after the Persian invasion, the Acropolis had not changed because the Athenians kept their vow to leave the ruins in full view as reminiscences of the catastrophe they endured.

Thereafter, the city’s prosperity enabled Pericles to launch an unprecedented building programme that placed emphasis on the Sacred Rock of the Acropolis. On the South Slope art
and culture flourished in theatres and odeia and around the outcrop the Peripatos walkway was planned, which became the favourite promenade of the Athenians.

Extensive building interventions were implemented also in the Agora, which thus turned into a great complex. Public buildings, temples, altars as well as a considerable number of statues were arranged around a central open square. In several parts of the Agora there were public fountain houses and trees in clusters, plane trees planted by the great Athenian army leader Cimon, olive and oak trees that offered shade and coolness during the hot days of the year.

The residential areas spread around the Acropolis and the Agora. The largest segment of the population lived in the southwestern municipalities of Koile and Melite, which were indeed packed.

The Athenians built their houses in their very own ‘attican’, as it is called, way, namely in an unregulated and unplanned manner. Their dwellings looked like crude structures compared to their public buildings, which were particularly attractive. It seems that the citizens were mainly interested in public life and disregarded any kind of luxury in their private life.

Evidently, there must have been some sort of traffic congestion in the crammed neighbourhoods. Travelling through the narrow dirt tracts would surely be difficult and the available space would not suffice to fit even two carriages together! Like today, the districts had very few green spaces due to water scarcity, which has always been a predicament.

**Did you know that?**

Ever since the Archaic period the clear space between the buildings on the top of the Acropolis rock was embellished with statues of female youths mainly (kores). These were votives, namely offerings of the faithful to please goddess Athena. Today they are exhibited at the Archaic Gallery of the Acropolis Museum.

**Did you know that?**

When the Peloponnesian War ended in 404 B.C., the Spartans forced the defeated Athenians into
demolishing the walls of the city and of Piraeus as well as the Long Walls. The city had never encountered such disgrace … When democracy was restored (394 B.C.) the Athenians rebuilt a large part of the city’s fortification.

‘… In such hurried fashion did the Athenians build the walls of their city. To this day the structure shows evidence of haste. The foundations are made up of all sorts of stones, in some places unwrought, and laid just as each worker brought them; there were many steles too, taken from sepulchres, and many old stones already cut, inserted in the work. The circuit of the city was extended in every direction, and the citizens, in their ardour to complete the design, spared nothing. Themistocles also persuaded the Athenians to finish the Piraeus wall, of which he had made a beginning in his year of office as Archon’ (free rendition)

Thucydides, ‘Historiae’ I 93, 1
New building programmes in the city of the great patrons

Hellenistic Athens (323-86 B.C.)

Despite the fact that Athens lost its political preeminence during the Hellenistic period, it preserved its supremacy as artistic and cultural centre. A new defensive wall was erected in the area spanning the Hill of the Nymphs and the Hill of the Muses; it was the ‘Diateichisma’ that separated the municipality of Koile from the civic area. The open space on the Pnyx was rearranged.

By the 2nd century B.C. Athens had radically changed. Affluent kings from the East, such as Attalos and Eumenes II of Pergamon, endow the city with overwhelming public edifices, thereby transforming it. For the first time the city is organized based on systematic urban planning, open-air spaces are incorporated into rectangular alignments and communal areas are defined.

The civic centre of Athens competes with the grand capitals of the East in splendour. The most important of the great stoae the Agora is embellished with is the enormous Middle Stoa, which due to its location separates the commercial undertakings on the south side from the political and social functions on the north side. The splendid stoae of the city, which included, apart from the Middle Stoa, the imposing two-storey Stoa of Attalos were frequented by the Athenians on a daily basis; their favourite leisure was to argue under the shady colonnades and pass the time in the stores. At the Panathenaia festival these stoae must have been full of people who tried to secure unobstructed view to the sacred procession.

The Acropolis retained its position as the city’s main sanctuary and therefore there was no need for building new temples. Many areas of the city were dominated by gigantic statues, which were points of reference for the citizens as well as the visitors of the city.

Contrary to the city’s monumental public face, its neighbourhoods hardly underwent any changes. The Athenians preferred to repair their old houses instead of building new ones, whereas only a few lived in comfortable residences. The deficiency of drainage system continued
to be a serious hindrance to people’s routine putting at risk public health, particularly during the summer.

Upon his visit to Athens in the 3rd century B.C. the author Dicaearchus being shocked by the complete absence of any sort of order in the neighbourhoods describes the city as ‘a very bad example of street plan in antiquity.

Did you know that?
Under the threat of the army of King Philip II the Athenians erected the outwork to strengthen their defense (338 B.C.). It was a low enclosure, built approximately 9-10 metres away from the Themistoclean wall. They also dug a moat in front of it and filled it with water in case of emergency.
Athens, ‘a close ally and friend of the Roman rule’

Roman Athens (86 B.C. - 323 A.D.)

Athens enjoyed several privileges granted by the Romans who revered the city’s glorious past and cultural prestige. But when the Athenians formed an alliance with Rome’s rival Mithridates VI of Pontus the Romans without the slightest hesitation punished the city harshly. In 86 B.C. Roman General Sulla commanded his soldiers to tear down the fortifications of the city with battering rams, which they made out of timber from the woods nearby. They invaded the Asty from the west part of the wall, which was more vulnerable and caused unutterable devastation.

Athens was left defenseless for two whole centuries and the Romans made sure that no one enemy of Rome would find shelter in the city. Nevertheless, the Athenians kept on using the shattered Dipylon gate, which stood amongst the wreckage, as the main entrance for the official guests. The residential areas across the hills west of the Acropolis were deserted.

Gradually the city was revived thanks to the support of the Roman emperors and wealthy individuals. During that period the Agora, despite the fact that it had lost its political significance, was enriched with notable edifices such as the Odeon of Agrippa that dominated the centre of the square and the Library of Pantainos.

During the reign of the Emperor Augustus (31 B.C. - 14 A.D.) the building of a new market to the east of the old one gave new and vital space to the merchants and craftsmen who resettled their stores and workshops in a new building complex.

The two sites were interlinked via an impressive marble-paved street named ‘Plateia Odos’. The new commercial centre, the Roman Agora, became the busiest place of the city with numerous merchants and customers trading a variety of goods every single day.

In the 2\textsuperscript{nd} century A.D. Emperor Hadrian repaired the walls and honoured his beloved city in which he had received education with abundant generosity. He implemented a vast building
programme, thereby utterly transforming it. The Library and the Gymnasium were erected, the
temple of Olympian Zeus was completed and the surrounding area of the Olympeion was
reorganized. Hadrian expanded the city eastwards, thus increasing its size, by establishing a new
prominent district (‘Hadrianoupolis’). It was a totally new world the residents of Athens had
never experienced before, with lavish villas, bath-houses and gymnasia. Unquestionably, the
contrast with the houses that had fallen into disrepair and the grimy streets of the old city must
have been striking. The Athenians honoured the patron emperor by dedicating to him an
imposing arch that separated the old from the new city. Hadrian also administered public utility
works that facilitated the daily life of the citizens by establishing for the first time an aqueduct,
street network, bridges and drainage system. The Demosion Sema site fell into disuse.

Nonetheless, when the ferocious Heruli from Scandinavia raided the city in 267 A.D. the ancient
fortification proved practically useless. The Valerian wall, which was built in 253-260 A.D. by
Emperor Valerian upon the ruins of the Themistoclean wall, was not sufficient enough to avert
the invaders. Only the Acropolis remained unharmed. Ashes covered up everything and all you
could see was the blackened ruins of the city. Athens was thenceforth circumscribed to the north
of the Acropolis, around the Roman Agora, being reduced to 1/6 of its original size. Ten to
fifteen years after the invasion the few remaining citizens built the ‘Post-Herulian’ fortification
wall out of the ruins to protect their households.

The west entrance to the Acropolis was fortified anew with robust towers (‘Beulé’ gate), whereas
houses of the garrison were built on the top. The largest part of classical Athens, even the ancient
Agora, was left outside the walls.

‘So Athens, that had endured such devastation by the Romans, blossomed in the reign of
Hadrian’.

Pausanias, ‘On Attica’, I, 20, 7
Did you know that?

It took nearly seven hundred years to complete the temple of Olympian Zeus. Construction began in the Archaic period during the rule of Peisistratus the Younger (515 B.C.). The project was suspended with the end of Tyranny and re-launched by Antiochus Epiphanes (174-163 B.C.) who provided the necessary funds. The temple was eventually inaugurated in all its glory by the philhellenic Roman Emperor Hadrian (131-132 A.D.). It was one of the greatest temples in the ancient world!
Living ‘in a castle’

Byzantine Athens (323-1204)

Progressively life in the city returned to normal. By the 4th century Athens had regained its position as academic centre. In the famous philosophical schools and universities of late antiquity, which were mainly located around the Areopagus, renowned philosophers and scholars lectured to young students, regardless of their place of origin or religion, coming from all over the empire. This last flowering of the classical spirit coincided with the emergence of the first Christian community.

The fiery sermon of Paul the Apostle at the Areopagus in 51 A.D. concerning the one and only God was initially greeted with tepid emotions by the city which was ‘filled with heathen idols’. The ancient deities were still worshiped and the first Christian parishes were established on the city’s outskirts.

The imprint of the new religion on the urban nucleus of Athens only just becomes evident in the 5th century when the first Christian churches are built within the fortified areas. One of them was the enormous ‘Tetraconch’, which was erected in the centre of the court of the Library of Hadrian.

From this time on, the faithful dedicate to the new religion those temples which are better preserved making the necessary conversions. As a result, the Parthenon, the Erechtheion and the temple of Hephaestus become Christian churches.

The Decree of the Emperor Justinian (529) that prohibited the operation of the philosophical schools damaged irreparably the cultural and economic life of Athens. The glorious city turned into a minor provincial town and its ancient name was consigned to oblivion. Everyone referred to the city as the ‘castle’; this was a common designation for the fortified towns of the middle Byzantine period that denoted their character, which consisted in providing protection to the inhabitants against threat.
The fact that Byzantine Athens consisted of three parts was dictated by the city’s fortification, and this urban articulation is frequently found in the fortified towns of the time.

The upper town, beneath the fortified Acropolis, consisted of administration buildings and wealthy neighbourhoods along the edge of the Post-Herulian wall. The lower town gradually spread across the wall through to the ruins of the Themistoclean wall, where many ancient monuments were still in evidence. The city’s ancient urban tissue was preserved almost unaltered.

At the end of the 6th century the city was captured by the Slavs and a little later the Agora was abandoned with the exception of a few rough artisanal establishments and workshops. In the 10th century, which was a period of great urban expansion and population growth, this area was densely inhabited.

However, even during the ‘dark ages’ (end of the 6th – mid-9th century) Athens was never deserted because its fortress offered shelter and had a perfect natural harbour. The city became ‘Episcopal See’ in 733 and retained its stature amongst the scholarly. The church of Panagia Athiniothissa (the Christian conversion of the Parthenon) was a well-known pilgrimage, which was visited by Emperor Basil II following his triumph over the Bulgarians to praise the Virgin for the victory.

In the middle Byzantine period (9th c. - 1204) Athens had a great number of Byzantine churches that were discernible from dwellings due to the elaborate masonry, the graceful octagonal domes and the marble pillars on their corners.

In the mid-12th century the Arab geographer Muhammad Al-Idrisi describes Athens as a busy city surrounded by gardens and cultivated fields. A little later though, in 1204, the ‘castle’ will change hands after its surrender to the mighty Latin knights.
Did you know that?

Athens was widely admired for being centre of scholarship and as such it attracted young academics. Basil of Caesarea and Gregory of Nazianzus who later became Fathers of the Church were amongst the students of the celebrated schools of the city. So was Julian, who was later crowned Emperor in the early Byzantine period and intended to restore the splendour of the ancient religion.

Did you know that?

Only a few remains of Byzantine houses live on today. Excavations bring to light mainly their cellars that contained jars for storing food buried in the ground.

‘This land has preserved its exceptional gentleness, the mild climate, the fertile soil. It has Mount Hymettus, where honey abounds, the serene Piraeus, the ever mystical city of Eleusis, the plain of Marathon and above all the Acropolis; every time I am there I feel as if I walk on the edge of heaven’.

Michael Choniates, Archbishop of Athens
When Athens was renamed ‘Cetines’

Latin Athens (1204-1456)

The Latin rule stayed in Athens for two and a half centuries. As they did not speak Greek, they called the city ‘Cetines’ (‘Castell de Cetines’) out of misapprehension of the ancient name of the city. The size of the city was significantly reduced; it was thus circumscribed between the Post-Herulian wall and the Rizokastro enclosure which was built by the Frank dukes around the Acropolis in the first half of the 13th century. The city resembled a village compared to its past times, with a population of five or six thousand. Outside this depressing environment the reminiscences of the past were ubiquitous. The ruins of ancient buildings, the wreckage of the remarkable walls and the Byzantine churches pervaded. The ancient Agora found itself outside the limits of the city and from the 13th through to the 17th century it was sparsely populated.

The Acropolis turned into an unconquerable medieval stronghold that contained the garrison, the seat of administration, the apartments of the Latin duke and lodgings for the official guests of the city. The garrison sealed the great gate on the west, so entrance to the fort was via a small gate under the temple of Athena Nike.

Two structures were added to the Propylaea, the Frankish Tower, which for centuries was the tallest building of the city, and the Belvedere Tower on the east side. From these spots, the defenders of the fortress were able to control the entire basin through to the sea.

Belfries were added to the Byzantine churches by the Latins. In 1456 the castle was captured by the Ottoman Turks.

Did you know that?

According to the estimates of an Italian notary in 1395 there were approximately one thousand houses in Athens.
Did you know that?
In the 15th century the antiquary Ciriaco de’ Pizzicolli (Cyriacus of Ancona) arrives in Athens and produces drawings of the ancient monuments. After many centuries of oblivion he is the first who employs again the designation ‘Acropolis’ instead of ‘Castle’. Being a great admirer of the Parthenon, which was still intact at the time, he describes it as the ‘temple of Athena Pallas, an exquisite work by Pheidias’.

‘There I saw ... the shattered massive walls ... and in the city and the fields an indescribable richness of buildings, temples and houses all made of marble, and every sort of sculpture of exquisite craftsmanship. And all this lies within heaps of debris and wreckage. The most remarkable monument is on the Acropolis. It is the magnificent, astounding marble shrine of Pallas, the divine work by Pheidias that rests on 58 resplendent columns. It is adorned with the finest reliefs that have ever been carved by a sculptor’s highest touch ...’

Cyriacus of Ancona
A mosaic of nationalities and cultures

Athens under the Ottoman dominion (1456-1833)

The Ottomans did not cause much damage to the city. Sultan Mehmed II who spent four months in Athens granted some privileges to the city as an expression of his contentment for the conquest of a place with such legendary monuments. He explicitly forbade the conversion of Christian churches into mosques, except for the Parthenon; hence a number of monuments survived. Nevertheless, the new rulers prohibited the use of belfries in Christian churches; instead, the faithful resorted to wooden semantra. The Acropolis became the seat of the Turkish commander and a great number of houses were built on the Acropolis tightly packed. The Christians did not have access uphill unless they had special permit. During the conflict between the Ottomans and the Venetians (1684-1697) the monuments of classical antiquity encountered the most severe devastation in their age-long history.

In September 1687 the cannons of the Venetian army leader Francesco Morosini were targeted at the Acropolis damaging irreparably the Parthenon. During the Ottoman rule the size of the lower town increased six-fold compared to the Latin period. It was divided into eight districts ('platomata').

The city did not have any cemeteries; the Greeks were laid to rest in churchyards and the floors of parishes, while the Ottomans were buried near mosques. Land use was not specified: houses, workshops and graves were mixed up, and the street network did not deviate from the configuration of ancient times. Hadrian’s aqueduct was no longer in use, thus increasing the problem of water supply.

The heart of Ottoman Athens throbbed in the locality of the Library of Hadrian. There lay the seat of the rulers, and kept its position as the economic, cultural, social and commercial centre (pazar) until 1884, when a great fire swept numerous workshops and stores. The Ottoman city was indeed a mosaic of cultures and religions. Churches, monasteries, mosques, monasteries of other denominations, pazar and hamams coexisted forming a single entity.
For three whole centuries the city was exposed. The ancient walls were in ruins and the Rizokastro could only protect the area around the Acropolis. In the rest of the neighbourhoods the masonry and stone fences of the houses formed an outer enclosure, which, of course, did not provide security. In 1778, under the threat of the Albanians, Hadji Ali Haseki, the city’s governor, built a new enclosure that followed the tracks of the ancient Themistoclean wall. During the Greek War of Independence, the Acropolis became the epicenter of warfare. On March 31st 1833 the last remaining Ottoman soldiers left the fortress for good.

The houses of Athens make a total of seven thousand –all of them roofed with tiles and they are robust stone structures indeed. There is no way you can stumble upon a house that is made of timber or bricks and mud or covered with clay. All buildings have perfect masonry bound with crushed-tile mortar, lime and gypsum. The houses have cisterns that collect the rainwater (that runs off the roofs and balconies). Because the earth is dry they need not make cobbled streets’.

Evlia Çelebi, ‘Travel to Greece’

Did you know that?
The wall of Haseki was built within just three months, as the city was in fright of the invasions. It was a makeshift structure, three metres high and less than one metre thick. Unquestionably, it could not possibly provide protection to the inhabitants if the city were under siege.

‘The city has two lodgings and a hundred and five retail shops. Despite the absence of bedesten, it has a rich and beautiful market, where you can purchase frocks of luxury and rare commodities’.

Evlia Çelebi, ‘Travel to Greece’
From being ‘village’ of the Ottoman era … a ‘Royal Seat and Capital City’:

Modern-time Athens: a familiar stranger

Modern-time Athens (1833-1945)

At the outset of the Greek War of Independence in 1821, Athens was the largest city of Central Greece with a population of about 10,000. The fierce battles that followed left nothing but heaps of debris and dilapidated neighbourhoods. Even so, in 1834 the ravaged city, which the Europeans described as ‘village’ was chosen to play a new historic role as capital of the nascent Greek state. The criteria for this selection were based on ideology, which the new Bavarian rulers imposed, and they were inspired by the perished glorious city of the classical epoch rather than by modern Greece.

Under the influence of Romanticism the vision of a ‘new Athens’ was born; it was a West European conception that combined the qualities of a European metropolis with the prestige of the ancient heritage. Undoubtedly, the discrepancy between the disheartening image of the modern city and these ideological priorities was great.

Even prior to the final decision to change the capital, the architects Stamatis Kleanthis and Eduard Schaubert were commissioned by Ludwig I, father of Otto, Greece’s first king, to elaborate an urban plan that would suit the needs of a modern capital.

Their proposal entailed the building of the new city north of the Acropolis in a triangular configuration formed by Ermou, Pireos and Stadiou streets, while the palace was to be sited at Omonoia. Their plan also included boulevards and large squares whose planning followed the paradigm of the great European counterparts and the integration of archaeological sites into demarcated areas.

In practice, this plan proved unrealistic for the weak economy of Greece. What was at issue was to house immediately public services - which were contained in mosques and churches even – and the increasing population. Moreover, land owners reacted to the planned expropriations and excessive demands. Then Leo von Klenze, architect of Ludwig I, put forward a much more
‘realistic’ version of the original plan, which to a large extent formed the basis of the urban planning of Athens that was finally implemented in the mid-19th century.

The city expanded in the same direction, but in a much smaller scale, like a ‘closed monolithic settlement’; it preserved the street layout of the Kleanthis-Schaubert proposal, but with fewer thoroughfares and limited open-air spaces. The residential areas spread over Pireos and Panepistimiou streets, while the old city was intensely rebuilt. Imposing public edifices financed by Greek benefactors who lived abroad emerged in various spots of the city. Architecture in Athens of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century adheres to the neoclassical style, which the West had espoused, but articulates the qualities of a less ornate vernacular, which is known as ‘Athenian classicism’.

In contrast to the massive structures of West European cities, the neoclassical buildings of Athens are closer to the human scale, have relatively low height, two or three storeys, whereas the influence of antiquity is more pronounced.

The original vision of a unified archaeological park looked good on paper only as modern building was an obstacle to large-scale excavations. Even so, the ancient past of the city left its mark on the way the historic centre was formed. Excavation and restoration work was carried out on the existing archaeological sites, the ancient Agora and the Kerameikos cemetery came to light, trees were planted on the Hill of the Muses, the Pnyx as well as on the Slopes of the Acropolis and the outcrop was demarcated by the ‘Acropolis boulevard’ (today’s Dionysiou Areopagitou and Apostolou Pavlou streets). Quite often, the ancient buildings were integrated into medieval and Ottoman structures and, based on the prevailing attitude at the time, emphasis was placed on the classical monuments by removing any medieval additions.

Up until 1880 the population had increased beyond the initial estimates, and at the turn of the century, it reached 120.000. Major infrastructure projects took place –street asphalting, lighting, water supply– the ‘Attica Railways’ that connected Athens to Phaliron, Kifissia and Lavrio were established, while from 1908 the tram launched its routes. At the time of the 1896 Olympic
Games the city had expanded beyond the projected planning from Kolonos and Kallithea through to Ampelokipoi and from Patisia and Kipseli to Pagrati.

Athens was a beautiful city of low-rise building on human scale, which amalgamated the monumental ‘polite’ face of architecture with that of the bourgeois and the ‘folk’ buildings designed for the middle class. The Royal Garden, the Park of Theseio and the Zappeion Garden were true oases of calm; traveling through the city was made easier due to the new avenues that were planned towards the new districts and the suburbs. The influx of refugees from Asia Minor in 1922 resulted in the creation of new habitation zones on the outskirts of the city, with settlements stretching all over the basin and particularly towards the west ‘industrial’ districts.

During the Interwar years, under the influence of Modernist architecture, the first apartment buildings are constructed making mass housing possible for the first time ever. The new multi-storey structures, which Athens had never seen before, ‘stood out in a low city’ and became dominant landmarks of the urban landscape. Their distinguished aesthetics opposed the formal elements of neoclassicism and emphasized on utility. As they had common areas that facilitated social interaction between the tenants, they constituted a sophisticated variant of the traditional neighbourhood. The great schools and hospitals that were built in the years after stick to similar aesthetics and in the course of time they underwent modifications to suit the increased needs.

‘Athens is nothing more than a massive pile of ruins; an amorphous and gloomy mass of debris and soil upon which grow some date palms and cypresses that survived the desolation. No one would have possibly presumed that this was Athens indeed if the temple of Hephaestus and the enduring Acropolis with its ruins had not been witnessed’.

Ludwig Ross

Did you know that?

Athens took a long time to occupy the expanse which the urban plans had initially predicted. Districts, which today form the nucleus of the historic centre, such as Omonoia and the neighbourhood to the north of Pireos Street remained uninhabited until 1880!
‘To build for Athens today is a European affair …’
Leo von Klenze

Did you know that?
In the mid-19th century Athens acquired its very own ‘island’ on the North Slope of the Acropolis. It was Anafiotika, an ‘autonomous’ neighbourhood where builders from Anafi and other Cycladic islands who had come to work in the rebuilding of Athens lived. Until today the residents enjoy a tranquil life away from the hectic pace of the vibrant city.

Did you know that?
In the 19th century, the Acropolis looked much different to what we are used to. The ancient buildings were embedded into later structures, thus making an entity that revealed the many different ‘layers’ in the history of the rock. The west gate was sealed up to the mid-century, when the Beulé gate was re-opened and remains ever since the main entrance to the monument.

The Frankish Tower which had been erected at the Propylaea was still maintained, and from the Odeon of Herodes Atticus through to the Theatre of Dionysus there was the Ottoman bastion of Serpentzes. The way the Acropolis site looks today results from the demolition of later edifices and the extensive restoration work that was carried out on the ancient monuments.
‘Our’ Athens

Present-day years (1945 - today)

The face of contemporary Athens is deeply rooted in the post-war years and relates inextricably to the uncontrolled increase in population. A growing number of ‘newcomers’ flowed into the city whereas the practice of valuable consideration of land paved the way for the mass construction of apartment buildings that, like ‘deus ex machina’ gave an answer to the urgent need of housing.

‘Overnight’, the low neoclassical buildings with the elegant balustrades and the courtyards gave their place to ‘aggressive’ cuboid multi-storey structures that disfigured irreversibly the cityscape, with the fortunate exclusion of Plaka.

Very few examples of the Athenian classicism live on today, which make an interesting exception in the unvarying ‘patchwork’ of modern building. Urbanization culminated in the 1960s and the 1970s enforcing an unregulated standardized expansion of the urban fabric in every direction, which was characterized by rapid implementation and, quite often, the efforts of construction companies to maximize profit.

This ‘relentless feast’ on behalf of building contractors that was supported by the tolerance of the state reduced the aesthetic pursuits of the past, the creation of common areas and the consideration of the human factor to romantic luxury.

Inevitably Athens turned into an unfriendly buzzing city with scarce green, insufficient public spaces, congested traffic and, most importantly, polluted atmosphere as a result of the polluting industrial facilities being set up near the city centre. The Athens Metro, which was inaugurated in 2000, was a breath of fresh air for the citizens. It was a huge technical undertaking considering the city’s circumstances that improved significantly traffic and literally opened new itineraries towards the city centre and the neighbourhoods.
The 2004 Olympic Games gave the opportunity for the partial redevelopment of the historic centre. The ‘Unification of Athens Archaeological Sites’ created an extended ‘archaeological promenade’ with pedestrian precincts and benches following the tracks of the old ‘boulevard’ and providing immediate access to the archaeological sites that act like ‘islands of historical memory’.

Today Athens is a metropolitan conurbation that tends to spread all over Attica with heterogeneous population due to the influx of economic migrants. Once again, in its age-long history the city has become a mosaic of cultures and peoples and seems to seek urgently for a new identity. Its turbulent past is revealed to us step by step and remains one of its most enchanting facets. It is up to us to discover it and set about our own journey.

**Did you know that?**
The construction of the Athens Metro gave the opportunity for conducting the largest excavation ever to have taken place in the city! Until then dense building was an obstacle to extensive archaeological research. Entire neighbourhoods, ancient and Byzantine, as well as more than 50,000 antiquities came to light. The work is in progress …

‘Surely Athens is the epitome of the modern city in that the exemplary neoclassical city of the 19th century was progressively superseded and spread, after the early 1950s, by an equally distinct modern typology, which even today is being reproduced in practically the same forms as in the 1930s ... The typical apartment buildings of Athens that usually do not exceed six storeys and adhere to a standard size and shape demonstrate a close affinity to the criteria of the industrial city ...’

Kenneth Frampton, architect

‘They look as if they have been placed on the shelves of an imaginary supermarket, arranged in groups and ready for consumption. The entire city is an assortment of boxes’.

Anastasios Papaioannou, architect, professor at the National Technical University
**Did you know that?**

The idea of creating an ‘archaeological park’ existed already in the first urban plan of the new capital. It became reality after one and a half century with the implementation of the Unification of the Archaeological Sites project around the Acropolis.

In the mid-20th century architect Dimitris Pikionis plans new walking routes around the Acropolis. The stone-paved paths, which fuse together epochs and materials, lead to monuments and plateaus with breathtaking view.
Timeline

‘Athens: a diamond through time’ 6,000 years of history at a glance

3500 B.C.
The first inhabitants
They build their huts on the Acropolis and possibly at the Olympeion.

2000-1300 B.C.
Expansion and growth
The prehistoric city occupies the Acropolis, the South and the North Slopes, the Agora site and the Olympeion.

1300-1200 B.C.
Superhuman endeavour
The Acropolis is fortified with the ‘Cyclopean wall’

1050-900 B.C.
The ‘dark ages’
The city is in trouble and the population is dramatically decreased.

566 B.C.
A festival to honour the goddess
The Great Panathenaea are instituted and the Athenians construct a monumental ascent to the top of the Acropolis.

562-510 B.C.
Works of the tyrants
Peisistratus and his successors embellish the city with imposing edifices.
534 B.C.

Theatre ‘instruction’
The first theatrical festival is institutionalized in Athens.

480 B.C.

Days of despair
The Persians burn down the city and the Acropolis.

479/8 B.C.

A guardian angel made of stone
The citizens shield the city with the ‘Themistoclean wall’.

476-461 B.C.

United with Piraeus
The Long Walls link the Asty with the harbour.

467 B.C.

Supernatural goddess
The Athenians dedicate on the Acropolis the bronze statue of Athena Promachos to celebrate their victories against the Persians.

447-438 B.C.

Nine years for all eternity
The Athenians build the Parthenon in just nine years.

334 B.C.

Royal offerings
Alexander the Great sends three hundred Persian shields as votive to the Acropolis after his victory at Granicus River.
Circa 160 and 150 B.C.
Stoae with a royal touch
The kings of the faraway Pergamon Eumenes II and Attalos II build magnificent stoae on the South Slope of the Acropolis and the Agora.

86 B.C.
The brutal face of Rome
Roman General Sulla plunders Athens to inflict punishment for the alliance which the Athenians formed with Rome’s opponent Mithridates VI of Pontus.

Circa 51 A.D.
Word of God
Paul the Apostle preaches the Christian faith on the Areopagus.

117-138 A.D.
The emperor’s city
The philhellene Hadrian implements major architectural works in his beloved city.

150 A.D.
An incomparable guide
Pausanias produces accounts of the monuments of Athens

160-174 A.D.
In memory of …
Herodes Atticus builds on the South Slope of the Acropolis the renowned Odeon in memory of his beloved wife Regilla.

267 A.D.
Barbarian hordes
The atrocious Heruli devastate the city.
276-282 A.D.
A wall made out of ruins
The Athenians build the late Post-Herulian wall with material coming from shattered buildings.

Mid-5th century
Glorious houses of God
The first magnificent Christian churches are built within the city’s walls.

6th - 7th century
New customs upon the old ones
The ancient pagan temples are converted into Christian churches.

529
Oblivion and decline
In his attempt to buttress the Christian religion Emperor Justinian shuts down the philosophical schools in which idolaters taught.

733
Diocese City
Athens becomes Episcopal See and revives its glory.

1018
A pilgrim-Emperor
The Emperor Basil II the Bulgar-slayer goes on a pilgrimage to Panagia Atheniotissa church (the Parthenon).

1204-1456
The Latin era
Athens is under Latin rule that converts the Parthenon into a Catholic church and sets up a palace at the Propylaea.
1456-1833

The time of the Crescent
Mehmed II the Conqueror captures the city and the Acropolis turns into Turkish settlement.

1687

Incurable wound
The Venetians bombard the Parthenon causing irreparable damage.

1778

The wall of a tyrant
The despicable governor Hadji Ali Haseki builds a new enclosure on the tracks of the ancient Themistoclean wall using ancient building material.

1833

Every end becomes a new beginning
The urban plan of the new city was elaborated soon after the last Ottomans left the Acropolis.

1834

Prime city once again
Athens becomes capital of modern Greece.

1839-1902

Monumental Trilogy
The University, the Academy and the National Library comprise some of the best examples of neoclassicism.

1896

Fair play
The city hosts the first modern Olympic Games at the Kallimarmaro.
1900-1910
City lights
Athens is electrified.

1904, 1908
Communication lines
Electric trains, trams and telephones make their first appearance in the city.

1922
Broken lives
Thousands of displaced refugees from Asia Minor find shelter in Athens.

1940-1944
The Nazi Occupation
The ominous days of the German oppression.

1975 - present day
Back to where they belonged
Restoration work on the Acropolis is still in progress.

2000
Underground itineraries
The first metro lines in operation.

2004
Days of joy and celebration
Athens hosts the 28th Olympic Games.
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