

Around Athens, 2013: Marla Perkins, Ph.D.

There is an interesting project and group in Athens, attempting to renew Athens as an intellectual capital of the world. I went to one of their conferences. It was a conference of especially variable quality, but the location was of especially high quality. Athens (Αθήνα) is a terrific place. I stayed in a hostel for well under my usual budget of \$20/night. It was located on a quiet, pedestrian-only street within walking distance of one of the airport-shuttle stops and, more importantly, the Parthenon (Παρθενών; architects: Iktinos (Ἰκτῖνος), Kallikrates (Καλλικράτης), and maybe Karpion (Καρπιον); total cost of construction: 469 silver talents). Part of what makes Athens terrific is that so much of historical interest is within easy walking distance of anywhere, and there are small pedestrian maps at nearly every intersection showing where one is and where the nearest points of interest are located. Being a pedestrian in Athens is like walking a connect-the-dots game. It's a terrific game.



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The famous Greek columns are justly famous, but as I was walking around, it occurred to me that the amount of space devoted to the columns in the famous buildings limits the horizontal space. The interior areas of these buildings are surprisingly small, given how large the buildings look from the outside. Unless the Greeks were scaling their columns, they weren't using most of the space that appeared to be available. I was left wondering after meandering through and around the Parthenon and the acropolis about people who valued aesthetic principles in practice to this extent. Good for them. No reason to live with hideous structures when other possibilities exist. It is worth noting that some of the most visually offensive structures have been built by totalitarian regimes; I suspect that visual offensiveness is just another way to oppress the populace.



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Athens rewards looking up. The zoning laws in Athens forbid buildings from being higher than eight stories (with stories no doubt limited in height, as well), so that the acropolis is visible from anywhere in the city. But it also rewards looking down. The floor stones from long ago were designed and constructed with the care and capability seen anywhere and everywhere.



In July, the laurels bloom. They are the national flower of Greece. There are many kinds of laurels, and one main story about how they came to be. Daphne (Δάφνη) was fabulously beautiful and attracted the unwanted attention of Phoebus (after phoibos (Φοίβος), radiant, and aka Apollo (Ἀπόλλων)), the sun god (among many other jobs). Rather than starting the #MeToo movement a few thousand years before it actually started, she appealed for help to some of the other gods, Gaia (Γαῖα) of the earth and Ladon (Λάδων) of the rivers and water. The combination of harassment by the sun and help from the earth and the water resulted in laurel—all that remained of Daphne was her beauty. Apollo and the other gods considered this a win for Daphne (a win in that Apollo didn't get what he wanted), and laurel became the symbol for victories of all kinds: athletic, intellectual, and military, to name a few.



Caryatids (Καρυάτιδες) are sculptures of females used as architectural supports. They are not typically as tall as the columns that are just columns. These are holding up part of the roof of the erechtheion (Ἐρέχθειον; architect: Mnesicles (Μνησικλῆς); sculptor: Phidias (Φειδίας)), a temple or mausoleum, depending in the perspective taken by any given archeologist. These caryatids are among the few remaining where they were designed to be. The Greek government of the 19th century paid scholars from around the world to excavate major sites and document findings; the scholars involved helped themselves to the best artifacts they could carry off, which was not part of the deal. The consequence of this theft is that the Metropolitan Museum in New York City and the Neues, Pergamon, and Altes Museums (the holy trinity of storage facilities) in Berlin have better collections of Greek artifacts than the National Archeological Museum in Athens. I've checked, and it's unfortunate.



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I visited rebuilt and leftover stoa (στοά), covered walkways best known for being places where peripatetic scholars such as Zeno of Citium (Ζήνων ὁ κιτιεύς) (not to be confused with Zeno of Elea (ὁ Ἐλεάτης), of paradox fame) walked and thought and discussed. Most of the stoa have collapsed, and this is a picture of one that has been rebuilt. Around the ground, there are stoa that look like very old sidewalks. Stoicism, a philosophy that suggested that the best life could be lived if one avoided extremes, came about in places where people were avoiding the sun. As a pasty white person myself, I do think that the best thinking can be done in the shade and that the sun itself is an extreme. Daphne herself had to protect herself from the solar harassment.



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The Agora (ἀγορά) of Athens was a complex of buildings and walkways, including several stoae. An agora is an open area, which is why agoraphobia is a fear of open spaces, even though it looks like this was a heavily built-up complex, a market, that could accommodate thousands of people doing business—‘open’, as in open for business.



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As in many places, the ruins that are the targets of tourism are the ruins on top of all of the other ruins, the Temple of Hephaestus (Ἡφαιστός) in this picture. I'm skeptical about all of the religious stuff; if one believed interpretive signage like members of religions are supposed to believe their respective religious texts, it would seem that no one ever, anywhere, in the history of the world, had anything to do but pander to their respective deities. Maybe that's the case, but I suspect that most people actually had to make livings, and deities aren't known to pay well except to those at the top of the pyramid—not much difference between a religion and any other power-based economy. I think a more likely theory is that this was a storefront for the metallurgists and potters whose deity provided the name of the place. The Athens agora remains an active archeological site, and I remain hopeful that more information will become available about the places under the structures that have made the agora famous.



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I took a little boat tour of some of the other islands. It's irresponsible to visit a place like Greece, which was a world naval power while most people were still in various forms of the -lithic eras, and which has hundreds of islands, without visiting some of those islands by boat. We visited two in the Aegean Sea: Poros and Hydra. I joined a couple of other women from the conference, a Czech and a Romanian. They provided additional entertainment, even though the additional entertainment wasn't required. The Czech woman was all about sunbathing on the boat and so had peeled back as much clothing as she could, while I sat next to her and covered up with a large hat, sunglasses, a long-sleeved shirt, and a towel for my legs and feet. When we were off the boat, the Romanian took over; she was more interested in having pictures taken of herself than in seeing the place where she was. I walked along on my own when we were on the islands so that I could at least walk. I could admire her self-confidence in thinking that she enhanced every picture she was in, but I was more curious about the islands than about seeing how many pictures she could take of herself.

Hydra (Ύδρα) has had a variable history; during World War II, Hydra was occupied by Nazi Germany, and almost ten percent of the population died of starvation.



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We met up a bit later, after I'd taken a walk, and we went swimming. The Aegean Sea (Αιγαίο Πέλαγος) is the first place in the world where I have experienced floating. As a child, I failed swimming lessons for several sessions running, not because I couldn't swim, but because I couldn't float. Huh. But I could float like a champion in the Aegean, thanks to relatively higher salinity (3.91-3.92%, vs. 3.8% in the Mediterranean Sea, and 3.5% in the Atlantic Ocean). I floated and floated, and I ended up with one of the worst sunburns I've ever had. But I can float—that's the important piece. The sunburn healed.



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Then off to Poros (Πόρος), where I took another walk and had a look around. Poros has been inhabited at least since the early Bronze period. It is thought that Demosthenes (Δημοσθένης) killed himself on Poros, and during the Greek Revolution (Ελληνική Επανάσταση) of 1821-1830, it was used as a meeting place for Greeks when planning how to become independent of the Ottoman Empire.



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At both of the islands, donkey rides are readily available, but the donkeys don't look happy or healthy. I did my best not to have them in the pictures because they look like they need to be taken to a deep hay field that borders a creek and allowed to graze and drink for a few months. But Greece does not have deep hay fields in most places, and fresh water is a limited resource. What Greece does have is a lot of sun, as evidenced by the size of the cone of a king sago palm (actually a cycad: *Cycas revoluta*), a plant that thrives under a hefty dose of sun.



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On another day, I took a bus out to see Delphi (Δελφοί), of oracle fame, located on the side of Mt. Parnassus (Παρνασσός), with a view of the Pleistos Valley (Πλειστός). Delphi was also the center of the Greek world, and there is a monument over the navel of the world, which was identified by Zeus (Ζεύς), who released two eagles from the ends of the earth, both of which were released at the same time and who flew at the same speed. This begins to sound like an algebra problem: if you release two eagles at the same time from either end of a line, and they both fly at an equal speed, where/when will their paths cross?. Delphi was where their paths crossed.



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The oracles were older, virtuous women, chosen from the peasantry. They would go below the floor of the temple (for Apollo) into a small chamber, and breathed the air. According to Greek tradition, laurel inspired the oracles' ecstatic babbling. Laurel does contain a toxic compound (hydrogen cyanide) that can induce seizures (epilepsy was thought to be a sacred illness in ancient Greece, a different opinion on the disorders than a lot of other cultures have come up with). Plutarch (Πλούταρχος) said that the oracles inhaled gases, and this is closer to the modern explanation, that the chamber under the floor is over intersecting faults that run north-south and east-west, where ethylene gas is slowly released. A small chamber under the floor could collect the ethylene and cause neurological impairments in the oracles, whose babbling was then interpreted by clever priests, who invariably interpreted babbling into ambiguous statements that could be made to make sense after the fact, no matter what happened.



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Delphi was also the site of the Pythian Games (Πύθια), precursors of the Olympic games. The large stadium is still clearly visible and not overgrown, with the stone starting line still in place. These designs are along the walkway to and from the stadium. Winners at the Pythian Games received laurel wreaths. I jogged around in the stadium but didn't win anything, except that I think that I'm winning whenever I'm traveling, laurel wreath or not.

