For Athenians who were witness to the dramatic events of 508/7 and their aftermath, the most visible sign of change would have been the many buildings and monuments of the new order that soon began appearing in the city center. During the years 508–490, the physical setting of public life in Athens was irreversibly transformed by what was to date probably the most ambitious building program in the city’s history. The bulk of the construction took place in the areas of the Acropolis and the Agora, and the changes made to these two sites form the subject of the second part of this study.

The greatest single concentration of new structures was built in and around the level area lying east of the Kolonos Agoraios between the Areopagus hill and the Eridanos River. Though this site had been cleared for public use some years earlier, only now, it seems, did it become the true political and commercial hub of the city, functions it would retain for the remainder of antiquity. As if to draw attention to its special place in the scheme of the new order, the area was now formally distinguished from surrounding space by a series of stele, each one inscribed with the legend “I am a boundary marker of the Agora” [ήρος εἴμι τῆς ἁγορᾶς].

But it is not only the larger historical significance of the new political center that should interest us here. If seen, in effect, as the physical embodiment of the new order, the Agora complex can also tell us much about the repre-
sentation of political change. By studying the details of its design, especially the treatment of earlier buildings on the site, the architectural language used in the new buildings, and the symbolic links between these structures and other monuments elsewhere in the city, we can begin to form an impression of the overall style of the new order and its purported relations with previous political arrangements in Athens. As background, we should look first at the earlier history of the site.

THE AGORA AREA BEFORE 508/7 B.C.

The Agora, like democracy itself, came over time to be seen as an almost timeless feature of the Athenian civic landscape. Ancient authors had no difficulty imagining that Solon’s laws were first published in the Stoa Basileios (see AP 7.1) or that Solon himself laid down his arms before the Strategion in protest at the “tyranny” of Peisistratus (see Diog. Laert. 1.50). And for fifth-century tragedians, there was nothing wildly incongruous about the idea that a cult of Zeus Agoraios, patron deity of the Agora and the Assembly, might have been present in Athens during the heroic era (see A. Eum. 973–5; cf. E. Hcld. 69–71). But for all its later historic resonance, the Agora area seems to have remained predominantly residential in character down to ca. 550. Only thereafter does it begin to assume the appearance of a public square. Since this development falls broadly within the period when Peisistratus was the unchallenged master of Athens, it was in all likelihood an initiative of the “tyrant” himself.2

During the third quarter of the sixth century, the western flank of the site, defined by an ancient street that ran along the foot of the Kolonos Agoraios, was substantially redeveloped (fig. 6). Two small temples or shrines were set up just to the north of a preexisting structure (Building C), while the space to its immediate south was briefly occupied by Building D. But the most significant new structure was a large, irregularly shaped complex (Buildings F, G, H, I) which now arose in the square’s southwest corner. Linked to Building C by a retaining wall, this complex consisted of a large courtyard surrounded by a number of smaller rooms and ancillary structures. Its size and its location on the site of the later Tholos have caused some to suppose that it must have been a public building of some importance during the Peisistratid period. Yet the irregular plan and the large quantity of domestic artifacts recovered from the site suggest otherwise. This rather grandiose structure looks altogether more like the residence of a prominent family, perhaps even the Peisistratids themselves.3

Whether or not they ever actually lived there, Peisistratus’s sons continued the development of the Agora area as a public space. At some point during the
520s, a fountain house was erected toward the eastern end of the street that marked the south side of the square, a building which Pausanias (1.14.1) later attributed directly to Peisistratus himself. And Thucydides (6.54.6–7) tells us that the younger Peisistratus, son of Hippias, dedicated the Altar of the Twelve Gods during his archonship, probably the year 522/1 B.C.4

The altar is significant for two reasons. First, situated at the northwest corner of the Agora area, where the street running north-south along the west side met the Panathenaic Way, the altar formed the apex of a triangle of Peisistratid structures that followed the lines of the neighborhood’s preexisting street pattern, essentially fixing the spatial scheme of the Agora down to the Hellenistic period. Second, as the new symbolic center of the city, the altar reinforced the growing stature of the Agora area within the public space of the city as a whole. Henceforth, this would be the point from which all distances to places beyond the city walls were measured. Within a few years, the altar would be linked to settlements all over Attica through the system of milestones in the form of herms set up by Hipparchus.5

But despite its emerging importance, there is very little to suggest that the square was yet associated with the commercial, political, or judicial activities with which it would be so closely identified in the centuries to come. As Shear (1994, 231) has recently written,

The implied centrality of the altar [i.e., the Altar of the Twelve Gods] suggests that the stage was set for the development of the classical Agora in the last quarter of the sixth century; but it is equally clear that no demonstrably public buildings had yet been built.

In short, the open space created between the Areopagus and the Eridanos by Peisistratus and his sons was not yet an agora in any conventional sense of the term.

In so far as there was an agora in Athens at this time, whatever remains of it is now thought to lie concealed under the modern neighborhood of Anaphiotika, to the immediate northeast of the Acropolis (fig. 7). Located here was a cluster of the state’s most venerable public buildings (known as the arkheia). These buildings included the Prytaneion, which housed the eponymous archon and the sacred hearth, and the Boukolion and Epilykeion, the seats of the archon basileus and the polemarch, respectively. Here, too, could be found the sanctuary of the Dioscuri known as the Anakeion, along with the Basileion (where the phylobasileis, the leaders of the four pre-Cleisthenic tribes, were officially accommodated) and perhaps the more mysterious Bouzygion.6 These buildings would later be joined by the Theseion (probably established in 476/5
by Cimon) and the Gymnasium of Ptolemy. That there was still space available in the area after 500 B.C. for these two additions may suggest that large outdoor gatherings, such as Assembly meetings, were also held here in earlier times.  

When the Peisistratids laid out their new square on the level ground east of the Kolonos Agoraios, their aim evidently was not to replace or supplant the old civic center northeast of the Acropolis. What, then, was their intention? Drawing on a range of earlier scholarship, Camp (1994, 10–11) suggests four possible answers to this question.

According to Camp’s first suggestion, the family’s immediate concern was to create a space for theatrical performances. It is true that in later years, an area in the center of the Agora was known as the orkhestra, apparently recalling a time when the contests of the City Dionysia were held in that location before the construction of the theater of Dionysus. But as we shall see in chapter 8, evidence for this festival before the last decade of the sixth century is far from secure. Rather less compelling is the second suggestion, that the square was developed to serve as a kind of parade ground for military drills and training. There is no evidence that the Peisistratids maintained a standing army or even established the kind of mechanisms required to raise a citizen force on a regular basis. As far as we can tell, they relied on non-Athenian allies and mercenaries to fight their military actions, and these were levied only on the very few occasions when the need for such a force arose. And even if they did retain an armed bodyguard throughout the period of their preeminence, it is hard to imagine that it was the kind of force that required a large, open space for ongoing military training.

Third, it may be that the space was cleared to serve primarily as a venue for athletics. The only material evidence we have for a running track in fifth-century Athens are the remains of a starting line found in the northwest sector of the Agora, and it is possible that games were staged here on the Panathenaic Way in earlier times, when the neighborhood was still predominantly residential in character. But there is no evidence linking the Peisistratids specifically with the promotion of athletics. While the area’s established role as a venue for games may have encouraged the family to develop it as a public square, the range of monuments they erected there suggests that they saw it more as a multipurpose facility.

For this reason, the final explanation raised by Camp is more compelling, in that it seeks to relate the new square more generally to contemporary political culture. But the specific suggestion that the space was somehow an expression of Peisistratus’s “democratic tendencies” is problematic. There is nothing necessarily democratic about creating a space to hold large gatherings.
of people, and we should need to know more about what went on there before pronouncing it the project of an enlightened despot. As we saw earlier, Peisistratus’s “democratic tendencies” are not self-evident. Even if he was the “most populist” [demotikōtatos] (AP 13.4) of contemporary leaders, there is not a shred of evidence to suggest that this populism directly advanced the cause of popular government in Athens.

The initiative is surely better seen as the latest in a series of self-promoting grands projets pursued by prominent families during the course of the sixth century. Like the monumentalization of the Acropolis in the second quarter of the century, the creation of this new space was, in the first instance, an advertisement for the public munificence, power, and wealth of its sponsors. Unlike the Acropolis developments, however, the square was an ambitious ex nihilo initiative and the work, it seems, of a single family. Whatever mass spectacles and gatherings were held here—which surely included festival processions, athletic contests, and possibly drama (though not yet as part of the City Dionysia)—the Peisistratids’ manifest presence in the physical setting will have given each of these occasions a distinctly personal coloring, reinforcing, in the process, their status within the elite as primi inter pares. The new square may not yet have threatened the place of the old arkheia in the city’s political life. But we might see in the Altar of the Twelve Gods a conscious attempt by the Peisistratids to supplant the Prytaneion as the symbolic heart of Athens and reorient the cultural life of the polis around a space with which they were now so intimately associated.

These were bold moves by a family that was clearly determined to leave a lasting impression on the fabric of the city. Certainly, the creation of a spacious venue for mass spectacles and the provision of amenities like the shrines and fountain house reveal the beneficent, populist side of the Peisistratid regime. But as we see all too clearly in the colossal temple to Olympian Zeus planned for the southeast quarter of the city, their beneficence was not disinterested. Contemporary political culture required expansive displays of power and largesse by leaders if they were to keep their rivals at bay and retain de facto control of the state without recourse to coercion. When they chose to play within the rules, Peisistratus and his sons were among the most skilled practitioners of the art of politics in this era, and their development of the large, open square between the Areopagus and the Eridanos was arguably their masterpiece.

The square would of course long outlive the political forces that produced it. A decade or so after the installation of the Altar of the Twelve Gods, Hippias and his immediate family were expelled from the polis in perpetuity. Their regime was now publicly vilified by its successor: the vast Olympieion was con-
The Athenian Experiment: Building an Imagined Political Community in Ancient Attica, 508-490 B.C.
Greg Anderson
http://www.press.umich.edu/titleDetailDesc.do?id=17798
The University of Michigan Press

PEISISTRATID MONUMENTS IN A NEW POLITICAL CONTEXT

The men charged with transforming the Peisistratid square into the political and economic heart of the new order adopted three different approaches to the preexisting structures. The two shrines and the fountain house they chose simply to preserve intact presumably out of respect for their value as public amenities. At the same time, Building C, Building D (if it still stood at this time), and the northern wing of the Building F complex were completely demolished to make way for new structures on the square’s west side. Most intriguing, however, is the third approach, that of modification, especially since it was applied to the two structures most redolent of the Peisistratid past.

Even if the tyrants did not use the Building F complex as a residence, this unusually grand and elaborate domestic structure would surely have been the square’s most distinctive and prominent landmark. Whatever its function, its association with the family must have been particularly strong. But the designers of the new Agora elected not to level the entire complex outright. Instead, it was substantially remodeled (fig. 8), losing its northern wing, while gaining an additional ancillary building on its southern side (Building J) in ca. 500 B.C. More remarkable, the modified structure was now physically attached by a new parapet wall and a broad esplanade to the so-called Old Bouleuterion, the home of the flagship institution of the fledgling national government, which was erected at around the same time on the site formerly occupied by Buildings C and D. The implication of these links must be that Building F was to play some kind of role in the operations of the Council of 500. Though the material record offers no clues as to the nature of this function, the bold as-
similation of the archaic domestic structure into the fabric of the new Agora would certainly have helped to diminish its “tyrannical” associations.13

A very similar approach seems to have been adopted toward the Altar of the Twelve Gods. The Peisistratid resonance of this monument, which was dedicated by the younger Peisistratus and apparently intended to serve as a new symbolic center for the city, could not have been more pronounced. But these troubling associations seem to have been at least partly dissipated by a process of physical assimilation. To the immediate south of the altar and on the same orientation, a second altar was constructed in ca. 500 B.C., this one in the form of a hearth, or *eskhara*. Its scale (1.76 by 3.77 meters) and location point to a significant role in the scheme of the new Agora, though again the exact nature of this role remains unclear.14

Some have thought it might be the “precinct,” or *temenos*, of the Aiginetan hero Aiakos that is mentioned by Herodotus (5.89.2), since the Aiakeion at Aegina seems to have featured an altar of this same *eskhara* variety (see Paus. 2.29.6–8). But the Athenian Aiakeion was probably located elsewhere in the Agora area. More attractive is the explanation proposed by Sourvinou-Inwood (1994, 282). She suggests that the *eskhara* and the Altar of the Twelve Gods should be seen as components of a single “ritual nexus.” Together, they reproduced the functions of the old Prytaneion in the new civic center, the *eskhara* serving in effect as a duplicate of the city’s original sacred hearth (*hestia*). This conjunction of altars will have drawn further attention to the new prominence of the Agora area in the political and ceremonial life of the polis. At the same time, the addition of the new altar will have helped to neutralize the familiar Peisistratid identity of its older neighbor to the north.15

It is also possible that significant modifications were made to the Peisistratid altar itself at around this same time. The enclosure surrounding the altar is known to have had two distinct phases before the Hellenistic period. The earlier peribolos is very similar to the *eskhara* in orientation, ground level, materials, and workmanship, suggesting that it, too, was a product of the general reconfiguration of the Agora in ca. 500 B.C.16 It is highly tempting to relate this development to the post-Peisistratid rededication of the altar mentioned by Thucydides (6.54.6–7) in his brief discussion of the monument.

And among those who held the annual archonship at Athens was Peisistratus, son of the tyrant Hippias, who took his name from his grandfather. While in office, he set up the Altar of the Twelve Gods in the Agora and that of Pythian Apollo. Later, the demos of the Athenians ex-
tended the size of the altar in the Agora and erased its inscription [kai tòi men en tēi agorai prosokodomesas husteron ho démos Athenaiōn meizon mēkos tou bōmou épahaniseo touπigma].

Thucydides does not tell us when these alterations were made. But it seems safe to infer from the wording that his information came from a second inscription that replaced the first and that the extension he describes was therefore contemporary with the altar’s rededication by the demos. What was the nature of this extension, and when was it added?

Archaeology reveals two significant adjustments to the fabric of the altar in later years, but neither qualifies as the extension described by Thucydides. After suffering damage during the Persian sack, the altar was renovated in the third quarter of the fifth century, though with no apparent change to its overall design; about a century later, a new enclosure was added. Thucydides’ extension must then predate the Persian Wars and presumably refers to the construction of the earlier peribolos in ca. 500.17

If this reconstruction is correct, we can conclude that the altar underwent a fairly complex process of modification during the early years of the new regime. On the one hand, it was considerably aggrandized; the addition of the peribolos and the eskhara formed a kind of functional duplicate of the Prytaneion, thus facilitating the general shift in the city’s center of gravity from the old arkheia to the new Agora. At the same time, these additions, along with the rededication of the older altar and the removal of its original inscription, reveal a conscious effort to divest the monument of its Peisistratid stigma and make its presence at the physical heart of the new order somewhat less incongruous.18

Thus, in their efforts to transform a Peisistratid grand projet into a suitable setting for a new form of popular government, the designers of the Agora exercised considerable discretion in their handling of structures erected by the “tyrants.” Some were preserved intact, and others were demolished, while the least politically neutral of these monuments were carefully assimilated into the new setting. The significance of this intriguing interplay between continuity and discontinuity will be explored shortly.

**DESIGN FOR A NEW AGORA**

Any doubts about the new regime’s “official” attitude toward the Peisistratid past would have been promptly eliminated by Antenor’s statue group, which was probably among the first monuments erected in the new Agora (fig. 9). With its immodest celebration of the violent death of the Peisistratid Hip-
parchus at the hands of Harmodius and Aristogeiton, the monument conveyed the strongest possible repudiation of the previous regime, branding it forever an illegitimate “tyranny.” Located at the physical heart of the new order, the group of course tells us less about the true nature of Peisistratid rule than about the self-image of the regime that replaced it. The new order needed an explanatory narrative to make sense of the recent political transformation, and Antenor’s composition captured the purported moment of change in vivid style. The invention of this tyrannicide tradition will be explored in more detail in due course.19

Turning to more functional monuments, the new identity of the old Peisistratid square and the corresponding rise in its significance were advertised on a series of *horoi* that proclaimed themselves “boundary markers” of the Agora. Like the other monuments and artifacts described in this section, they are generally dated to the years around 500 B.C. Remains of four *horoi* have been found, two of them in situ in the southwest corner, at points where streets from the south and west entered the square. The discovery of another *horos* of similar date and format in the northeast corner of the Academy precinct suggests that all were part of a comprehensive scheme to reorganize and define public space in and around the city center at this time.20

The erection of *horoi* at the entrances to the new Agora served both a religious and a practical purpose. First, they marked off the area within as a sacred precinct. As such, the square was off-limits to the “polluted,” a category that in classical times included not only homicides but also those guilty of certain crimes against the state, such as treachery, desertion, and the avoidance of military service. As at any major sanctuary, the entrances would also have featured ritual washing basins (*perirrhantêria*), where those who were admitted could cleanse themselves before going in—though our earliest evidence for these basins in the Agora dates only from the mid-fourth century.21 On a more practical level, the *horoi* would also have defined the area from which was excluded a range of quotidian activities, such as the construction of private buildings and the dropping of refuse.22 Collectively, then, these boundary markers not only announced the square’s new role as the official center of political and economic life in the polis but also marked a more fundamental shift in its character, from a privately developed utility to a publicly administered sacred space.

Befitting this elevation in status, the square also seems to have undergone some infrastructural improvement in the years around 500 B.C. At least one of the neighborhood’s thoroughfares was either surfaced or resurfaced at this time, and others may have experienced the same treatment. More important, it was also during this period that the first systematic attempt was made to ad-
dress the area’s serious drainage problem. The so-called Great Drain now installed under the old street running north-south along the square’s west side was constructed with an exceptionally high level of precision and workmanship. Filling was used at various points along its course to create a smooth northward gradient, and its floor and walls were lined with finely worked polygonal stone slabs. The Great Drain would retain its function as the central artery in an ever growing network of drains and side channels for the remainder of antiquity.23

With the transformation of the square into a fully functional agora, one would expect that economic activity established itself fairly rapidly in the area, especially in and around the east side, where business seems to have been concentrated in later times. In the era before the construction of the great stoas, commercial structures are of course less archaeologically visible than their civic counterparts. But the remains of what are thought to be retail premises dating from the end of the sixth century have been unearthed in the northeast corner of the square, and further traces of mercantile activity from around the same time have been detected in the Agora’s eastern section. Predictably, given the proximity of the city’s famous potter’s quarter, the earliest visible activity on the east side seems to have involved the sale of ceramics.24

Fortunately, evidence for the erection of a series of new civic structures in and around the square in ca. 500 B.C. is rather more extensive. Not the least important of these structures was a large theatral area on the slope of the Pnyx hill, designed as the meeting place for the new national assembly. Though located some four hundred meters to the southwest of the square proper, it may safely be regarded as an “appendage of the agora,” as Wycherley (1978, 35) observes.25 The slope of the hill was quarried and dressed to form a cavea, and a retaining wall was erected to contain the earth fill, from which a flat terrace was then created to serve as the podium area (bema). The result was a large public space of around 2,400 square meters, believed sufficient to accommodate up to five thousand citizens. Though debate continues about the precise chronology of the site, majority opinion would assign this, the earliest phase, to the final years of the sixth century, when, as we have seen, the competence of the Assembly was dramatically expanded. Presumably, the construction of the cavea was an integral part of a larger building program that also brought about the substantial redevelopment of the west side of the Agora at around this same time.26

Chief among these new structures on the west side was the so-called Old Bouleuterion, home of the Council of 500, the critical link between the deme/trittys/tribe system and the central government in Athens (fig. 10). Its
date is the subject of ongoing debate, but the most recent work on the remains bears out the traditional assignment of the Old Bouleuterion to ca. 500 B.C.\textsuperscript{27} The building’s foundations, made of limestone blocks, measure 23.3 by 23.8 meters, and its plan featured a broad entrance lobby on the south side. The interior is thought to have included rows of seating ranged along the north, east, and west sides, around the five columns that supported the roof. Meanwhile, the exterior of the building has now been restored in the Doric order, with a facade featuring five columns \textit{in antis} and with a finely executed triglyph-metope frieze decorating the entablature on all four sides.\textsuperscript{28}

As noted earlier in this chapter, the Old Bouleuterion was linked by a parapet wall and an esplanade to the Peisistratid Building F, which underwent substantial remodeling at around this same time. Though the two structures appear to have functioned together as a single complex, the role that the older building played in this scheme remains unclear. Thompson (1940, 42–43) originally suggested that, like the later Tholos on the same site, it served as the accommodations for the prytaneis of the Council. But since serious doubts have now been raised about the existence of a prytany system before the reforms of Ephialtes (see Rhodes 1972, 17–19, 209–10), when the powers of the Council were significantly expanded, Thompson’s idea is no longer so attractive.

More appealing is the suggestion that the building was adapted to serve as the official seat in the new Agora of the college of archons, who would have convened and presided over the Council in the years before the prytany system was introduced. Like its predecessor in the arkheia to the northeast of the Acropolis, the modified structure was probably known as the Thesmotheteion. As such, the building was now one of a surprising number of monuments and artifacts in the new setting that explicitly recalled or reproduced landmark features of the old civic center. Further illustrations of this continuity, both symbolic and functional, along with its larger significance, will be discussed shortly.\textsuperscript{29}

The other major civic structure built on the west side at this time was the Stoa Basileios, the seat of the archon basileus (fig. 11). In this function, it replaced the Boukolion, which stood near the Prytaneion in the old civic center.\textsuperscript{30} Again, the date of the building is contested, though the chronological profile of the sherds used as fill in its foundations seems to resemble that of the fill used in the Old Bouleuterion.\textsuperscript{31} The remains of the stoa are more substantial than those of any other contemporary structure in the Agora; they include the stylobate, the stumps of both antae, and blocks of the triglyph-metope frieze. Like the Old Bouleuterion, the stoa was constructed in the Doric order, with an east-facing facade of eight columns \textit{in antis} and, initially, two interior columns supporting the roof. To judge from what survives of its
architectural details, an exceptionally high level of workmanship was lavished on the structure.32

The building also has interesting symbolic links with the old arkheia. First, it was here that the designers of the Agora chose to display the laws of Solon, inscribed on stone tablets, or kurbeis. The texts of the laws were presumably copied from the original wooden documents, known as axones, which stood in the old Prytaneion. The kurbeis were most probably mounted on the stone platform that appears to have lined the interior walls of the stoa from the time of its construction.33

Second, Shear (1994, 242–45) has raised the intriguing possibility that the large, unworked poros block found in situ in front of the stoa’s east facade was itself once a prominent landmark in the old civic center. Several sources refer to “the stone” (ho lithos) in the Agora where the archons swore oaths of office before commencing their public duties, and Pollux (Onom. 8.86) specifies that it was located at the Stoa Basileios. Shear argues that this lithos should be equated with the “herald’s stone” that stood in the neighborhood of the old arkheia. And given the apparent antiquity of the archons’ swearing-in ceremony, it seems highly likely that a similar procedure was followed in both locations, whether the lithos used in the Agora was merely a facsimile of an older stone or, as Shear suggests, was physically translated there from its original setting in ca. 500 B.C. Either way, the installation of the lithos in front of the Stoa Basileios has an obvious symbolic significance, reflecting the recent shift in the city’s political center of gravity, while at the same time vividly illustrating the designers’ concern to emphasize links and continuities between the old arkheia and the new Agora.34

The last of the major new structures was a large open enclosure (26.5 by 31 meters) located toward the west end of the street that ran along the south side of the square. The height of the walls remains unclear. But what survives indicates that they were made from well-cut squared blocks of Aeginetan limestone and were surmounted by a cornice decorated with a pointed hawksbeak molding. The cornice profile and the pottery associated with the peribolos make it roughly contemporary with the other structures already discussed, and it may be that the soft bedrock removed from the interior when the floor was leveled was later used to raise the ground level at the site of the Old Bouleuterion.35

There are no artifacts or inscriptions from the site to help us identify the function of the enclosure. Size, location, and quality of workmanship point to its significance, while its general plan suggests that it must have served as a venue for large gatherings of some kind. Thompson and Wycherley (1972, 63) remark, “By a process of elimination one is virtually drawn to the conclusion
that [it] was a law court.” And support for this idea may come from Building A (ca. 400 B.C.) on the east side, a similarly large, open, rectangular enclosure located under the Stoa of Attalus, which is thought to have served this same function. For these reasons, the traditional identification of the peribolos as the Heliaia still seems the most attractive available. As we saw earlier, the popular court of that name, like the Assembly, seems to have acquired somewhat broader powers after 508/7, a direct result of the new regime’s emphasis on mass participation in public life. The peribolos would have amply filled the need for a structure large enough to accommodate a judicial body that was now considered to represent the will of the entire demos. But pending more decisive evidence for the identification, such conclusions must remain speculative, however tempting.36

The Agora building program of ca. 500 B.C. also seems to have included a number of religious monuments. In addition to the new eskhara mentioned earlier, a small temple (6.8 by 18 meters) was erected on the west side, between the archaic apsidal temple and the Old Bouleuterion.37 The building has plausibly been identified as the original Metroon, the temple of Meter, the Mother of the Gods, whose cult would long be associated with the Council of 500. According to standard reconstructions, the cult was actually relocated to the Old Bouleuterion after the temple was destroyed by the Persians. Following the erection of the New Bouleuterion toward the end of the fifth century, the original council chamber combined the role of cult center and record office, itself acquiring the title “Metroon” by at least the middle of the fourth century. Later, during the second century, a sprawling Metroon complex was constructed over the sites formerly occupied by the Old Bouleuterion and the original temple.38

Whence this rather incongruous link between the goddess otherwise known as Cybele, an imported Phrygian deity, and a sober deliberative body in the Athenian state? As Parker (1996, 189) has written, “Cybele in charge of the state documents is an image no less startling than that of Dionysus wedded to the archon basileus’ wife.” Whether or not the Athenians themselves were startled by this image back in ca. 500, it is clear that Meter’s role as a kind of patron divinity of the Council and its operations became thoroughly unremarkable over time.39 This domestication of the goddess probably began in northern Ionia, where her cult seems to have entered the Greek world during the course of the sixth century. And it may be that the Athenians’ surprising choice of Meter to perform a political function in the new Agora was influenced by the practices of their neighbors in eastern Greece, since there is some evidence that she played a similar role in Smyrna and Colophon. But beyond this, we can say little.40
A comparable function may also have been performed by the goddess associated with our final new monument from this period. In 1981, just across the Panathenaic Way from the Stoa Basileios, excavation brought to light the remains of an elaborate Cycladic marble altar measuring 5.1 by 2.4 meters. The use of island marble and the associated pottery point to a date of around 500 B.C. The altar is believed to have belonged to the precinct of another domesticated import, Aphrodite Ourania. Its proximity to the stoa, like that of the Meteoon to the Old Bouleuterion, suggests that here, too, cult was being used to give some kind of divine sanction to a political institution. Why this particular divinity was chosen for this role is again not entirely clear, though Aphrodite is known to have served as a guardian of magistrates elsewhere in Greece.41

In sum, the level area east of the Kolonos Agoraios was first cleared and developed as a space for communal activity during the Peisistratid era, but not until after Cleisthenes’ reforms did it assume the character of a true agora, a publicly administered sacred space serving as the center of political and commercial life in the city. Although the earlier format of the square was retained and the Peisistratid monuments were for the most part preserved intact or carefully assimilated, a series of new structures was required to accommodate the institutions of the new regime and to rehouse the officials uprooted from the old arkheia northeast of the Acropolis. The building program pursued in the years around 500 B.C. transformed the appearance and significance of the area almost beyond recognition. Exotic new cults were added, commercial activity began to take root on the east side, and infrastructural improvements were implemented to cope with the greatly increased demands now made on the square. But most important of all, the creation of spacious meeting places for the Assembly, the Council of 500, and possibly the Heliaia offered visible evidence of the shift to a new era of mass participation and collective responsibility in public life.42

CONTINUITIES AND DISCONTINUITIES

The creation of a new kind of polity in Attica in 508/7 thus motivated comparable discontinuities in the form and function of public space in the center of Athens. But our interest in these physical discontinuities goes well beyond their historical significance. The civic center that replaced the old Peisistratid square was also a richly symbolic environment—in effect, a showcase for the new regime. Its fabric can tell us much about how the political experiment of
the late sixth century was perceived and represented at the time. How, then, was the idea of the new order articulated in the material culture of the Agora?

We can begin to answer this question by considering what must be the two most unexpected features of the new civic center. In the first place, we have the relatively large number of items that either recalled or directly reproduced prominent monuments and landmarks from the old civic center. Since the buildings in the ancient *arkheia* would continue in use and since antique structures like the Prytaneion would retain a special place in the symbolic life of the community long after 508/7, the incorporation of so many features from this site into the fabric of the new Agora seems a little excessive, even redundant. Logistics or convenience may account for some, like the creation of the second Thesmotheteion. But antiquities like the *lithos* and the second copy of Solon’s laws appear rather out of place in the home of a regime that represented so profound a break with the past.

Our expectations are also confounded by the strikingly mild treatment administered to the existing Peisistratid monuments. Again, expediency may well explain the preservation of a utility like the fountain house, and no doubt partly accounts for the decision to locate the new civic center in this area in the first place, given that it had already been cleared and developed for communal activity. But the relatively minor changes made to the Building F complex and the Altar of the Twelve Gods, the two monuments most redolent of the Peisistratids, defy any straightforward explanation. One would think that a new order that publicly celebrated the violent end of the previous regime as an act of tyrannicide might have sought to distance itself much further from its predecessor.

A clue to the reason for these puzzling incongruities may be provided by a third, no less striking feature of the new Agora: the architectural idiom used in the major civic buildings. The earlier Peisistratid structures in the square were not especially distinguished for the quality of their workmanship, typically featuring walls of unworked stones surmounted by unbaked bricks. The contrast offered by the new buildings could hardly have been more marked. The Old Bouleuterion, the Stoa Basileios, and the building usually identified as the *Heiliaia* all featured regular courses of precisely fashioned poros blocks, along with an attention to ornamental detail that was traditionally reserved only for sacred architecture. As Shear (1994, 239 with n. 58) points out, these are in fact the earliest known examples of the use of monumental stone architecture outside conventional sanctuaries, and the stoa and the bouleuterion were possibly the very first structures of purely secular function to be built in the Doric order.43
Why, then, was this sacred architectural idiom deemed appropriate for the landmark edifices of the new Agora? The square’s status as a sacred precinct may well have influenced or encouraged the choice, and these buildings were clearly felt to be of sufficient importance to merit the kind of workmanship that was usually lavished only on major temples. But it would be surprising if the choice was not also in some sense a statement about the character of the regime these buildings were designed to serve.

Shear (1994, 239) himself is certainly willing to read a political significance into the use of sacred architectural language in this context. He suggests that this significance lay in the “celebrated equilibrium of proportion and monumentality of form unique to the Doric order,” which he sees as a “perfect visual metaphor” for the concept of isonomia. He goes on to explain, “Architectural form and political function thus coalesce in [the stoa and the bouleuterion], and the Doric order makes a significant contribution of its own to the nascent ideology of democracy.”

This explanation is attractive, if not entirely persuasive. The proposed relationship between form and function seems a little too academic and oblique. One wonders if the Doric order’s proportionality was, for an ancient viewer, its most suggestive feature. It is, in any case, not entirely certain that isonomia really was the guiding principle, stated or unstated, behind the political changes. As we saw earlier, the immediate concern of the reforms of 508/7 was to redefine the state as a regionwide, collective enterprise, not to eradicate inequalities for their own sake.

I believe that it was an altogether less recondite quality of this particular style of architecture that made it so attractive to the designers of the Agora. Shear (1994, 239) in fact alludes to this quality a little earlier in his article, when he speaks of how the architectural language of the Doric order “is governed by certain laws framed in long usage and tradition.” It is not the order’s sacred resonance per se which explains its appeal, nor its “equilibrium of proportion and monumentality of form.” The appeal lay rather in its suggestion of the traditional practices and cultural permanence associated with the structures hitherto built in this idiom. Much as the Capitol building in Washington and the Houses of Parliament in London use traditional sacred architectural language to lend an aura of hoary antiquity to the institutions within, so it seems that the Doric order was self-consciously applied to civic buildings in Athens in the late sixth century to suggest some kind of political continuity with the distant past.

If correct, this interpretation also helps to explain the two other distinctive features of the new Agora discussed above. By retaining most of the preexisting monuments and reusing them in the new scheme, the designers of the
Agora drew on a further source of physical continuity to reinforce a general sense of the new regime’s links with the past. Of course, the site’s earlier identification with the “tyrants” was problematic. But only the most overt of its Peisistratid associations could be removed or neutralized if the overall impression of continuity was to be sustained. This same impression was also encouraged by reproducing monuments and landmarks of the old civic center in the new setting. The incorporation of features like the lithos and the laws of Solon into the fabric of the Agora was as much symbolic as it was functional, visible evidence of the new order’s links with the traditions of government represented by the cluster of venerable structures around the old Prytaneion. With so much effort made to invest the new space with an aura of tradition and continuity, later observers, like the author of AP (e.g., 7.1), can certainly be forgiven for believing the Agora to be older than it actually was.

There were of course some genuine institutional continuities between the old order and the new; the Assembly had existed in some form since long before the reforms of Cleisthenes, while the Areopagus and the major magistracies would all survive long thereafter. But the essential character of the regime after 508/7, with its emphasis on mass participation and government by regionwide community, was radically new. Thus, there appears to be something of a disjunction between the realities of the new order and its representation in the visual scheme of its primary physical setting. The larger message here is, I think, clear enough: Cleisthenes and his associates consciously refrained from presenting their experiment at face value. Rather, they chose to emphasize its reassuring continuities, real and imagined, with Athenian political traditions. In other words, they made it appear as if they were not founding any brave new order but were simply restoring an old one, the traditional order that had supposedly been suspended or dissolved by the Peisistratid “tyrants.” What better way to allay suspicions of “revolution” than to deny the existence of any progressive change at all?

This emphasis on tradition and continuity is in fact a recurring feature—almost a leitmotif—of the various other innovations in public life that followed Cleisthenes’ reforms. Its appearance in a range of different contexts will afford us further opportunity to analyze the representation of political change in the chapters to come, and to explore in more detail the public characterization of relations between the new order and previous political arrangements in Athens.