NO PREP

The Athenian Agora

Digging Up Democracy

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

Name: Period: Date:

The Athenian Agora: Digging Up Democracy

The Heart of the Ancient City

In the center of ancient Athens, just northwest of the Acropolis, lay a large open space that served as the beating heart of Greek democratic life. The Agora — the word means 'gathering place' in Greek — was simultaneously a marketplace, a law court, a meeting ground for political assemblies, a site of religious ceremonies, and a place where philosophers gathered to argue, teach, and be heard. To walk through the Athenian Agora in its heyday, around 400 BCE, was to experience Greek civilization at its most concentrated: the smell of bread and fish, the noise of political debate, the sight of pottery and textiles laid out for sale, and somewhere nearby, quite possibly, Socrates badgering passersby with questions. Today, the Agora is one of the most thoroughly excavated sites in the world. Since 1931, the American School of Classical Studies at Athens has conducted systematic excavations that have exposed the foundations of dozens of public buildings, recovered hundreds of thousands of artifacts, and produced an extraordinary picture of daily life

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Ostraka: Voting Against Someone with a Broken Pot

Among the most remarkable finds from the Agora are thousands of ostraka: pottery sherds on which citizens scratched the name of someone they wanted expelled from Athens. Ostracism was a democratic procedure unique to Athens: once a year, citizens could vote to banish a politician for ten years, without trial, without specific charges, and without the accused having any formal opportunity to defend himself. If a minimum of six thousand votes were cast and one individual received the most votes, he was exiled. The goal was to prevent any single person from accumulating

enough power to become a tyrant. The ostraka recovered from the Agora and elsewhere are extraordinary historical documents. They preserve the names of real Athenian citizens, written in their own hands, including some famous names: Themistocles, the general who defeated the Persians at Salamis, was ostracized in 471 BCE. Aristides, known as 'the Just,' was ostracized in 482 BCE. One batch of ostraka found in a pit bears the same name, Themistocles, written in only a few different handwriting styles, suggesting that political organizers prepared batches of pre-filled ostraka to hand out to voters who couldn't write. Democracy, apparently, had political operatives from the very beginning.

The Stoa of Attalos and What Survives

Ancient public buildings surrounded the Agora on all sides. The most impressive survivor is the Stoa of Attalos, a long colonnade originally built by King Attalos II of Pergamon as a gift to Athens in the second century BCE. The stoa (a covered walkway with shops along one side) served as a commercial and social space where Athenians could conduct business and escape the rain. In the 1950s, the American School completely reconstructed the Stoa of Attalos using ancient materials and plans, creating a building that now houses the Agora Museum: a controversial reconstruction that echoes the debates around Evans's work at Knossos, though generally considered more faithful to the archaeological evidence. Other key structures include the Tholos (a circular building where the executive committee of the Athenian council met and ate, working in rotation around the clock to ensure constant government) and the foundations of the Metroon, the state archive where official documents were stored. The Metroon's existence confirms something important: Athens was a literate bureaucracy as well as a democracy. Laws were inscribed on stone and bronze for public display, contracts were recorded, and court decisions were documented. The written record was central to how Athenian democracy functioned.

Everyday Objects and What They Reveal

Beyond the grand public buildings, the Agora excavations have produced an extraordinary collection of ordinary objects: bronze coins, terracotta figurines, loom weights, lamps, toy horses, perfume bottles, and simple household pottery. These objects collectively tell the story of who used the Agora — not just the powerful politicians and famous philosophers, but the merchants, craftspeople,

women, enslaved people, and foreigners who made the economic life of the city run. A bronze device used for selecting jury members by random lot — an actual Athenian kleroterion — was found at the Agora, showing how the city randomized jury duty to prevent bribery and favoritism. The sheer variety of find types illustrates something that written sources alone would not convey: the Agora was a genuinely mixed, busy, chaotic space. Legal inscriptions stood next to vegetable sellers. Temple offerings were made next to commercial transactions. A city that we might romanticize as purely philosophical was also a place of noise, commerce, and the very ordinary business of daily life. Archaeology at the Agora consistently humanizes ancient Athens, replacing the idealized image of marble and toga-clad philosophers with the grittier, more interesting reality of a working city.

Key Information: The Athenian Agora

Detail	Information
Location	Northwest of the Acropolis in central Athens
Function	Marketplace, law courts, political assembly space, philosophical meeting ground
Excavating Institution	American School of Classical Studies at Athens, beginning 1931
Ostraka	Pottery sherds used in ostracism votes; thousands recovered from the Agora
Ostracism Minimum	6,000 votes required; highest-vote-getter exiled for 10 years without trial
Stoa of Attalos	Originally built 2nd century BCE; reconstructed in 1950s, now houses Agora Museum
Kleroterion	Bronze device for randomly selecting jury members; recovered during excavation
Key Insight	Agora reveals commercial and everyday life that supplements the political history in texts

Case Study: The Potter and the Vote

Demetrios had been making pots in his small workshop near the Agora since he was fourteen years old. He was forty-three now, and his hands were permanently stained with clay. He made storage amphorae mostly — the large two-handled jars that merchants used to ship olive oil and wine. He did not make fine painted pottery. That was for artists in the Kerameikos district. He made practical pots for practical people. On the morning of the ostracism, he had already been at work for three hours when the herdsman's son from the next street knocked on his doorframe. 'Are you going to vote?' the boy asked. Demetrios shrugged. 'Who should I write?' The boy named a general whose political faction Demetrios had no strong feelings about either way. But the baker on the corner hated him, and the tanner two streets over thought he was dangerous, so Demetrios figured there was probably a reason. He found a broken piece of his own pottery on the floor — a handle that had snapped during firing — and scratched a name into it with an iron nail. He did not write particularly well. He was a potter, not a scribe. But the letters were legible, and that was all democracy required. He carried the shard to the Agora, dropped it in the pile with thousands of others, and went back to his pots. Two thousand five hundred years later, an archaeologist would hold that same shard, read his scratched letters, and wonder who he had been.

1. The case study shows Demetrios voting based on limited information and secondhand opinion. Does this make his vote less legitimate? Use evidence from the reading about how ostracism worked to support your answer.

2. The reading mentions that some batches of ostraka appear to have been pre-written by political organizers. What does this suggest about the reality of Athenian democracy compared to its ideal, and is this so different from modern democratic practices?

Multiple Choice

1. What was the purpose of ostracism in Athenian democracy?

    a) To banish politicians who had become too powerful, preventing them from becoming tyrants

    b) To punish citizens who had been convicted of crimes in court

    c) To remove citizens who had failed to pay their taxes or serve their time in the military

    d) To permanently exile enemies of Athens from the entire Greek world

2. What does the discovery of a kleroterion (jury selection device) at the Agora reveal about Athenian democracy?

    a) That Athens did not have a formal court system and relied entirely on informal arbitration

    b) That jurors were selected based on their knowledge of law and legal precedent

    c) That Athens used a lottery system to randomly select jury members and prevent corruption

    d) That jury duty in Athens was reserved for the wealthiest citizens

3. Why does the reading argue that the everyday objects found at the Agora are historically important?

a) Because they confirm that philosophers like Socrates were actually merchants

b) Because they are more valuable financially than the historical inscriptions and all public buildings

c) Because the pottery proves that Athens had trade relations with China

d) Because they reveal the lives of ordinary people that written historical sources typically ignore

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ agora	A) A covered colonnade with shops along one side used as a commercial and social gathering space
2. ___ ostraka	B) A bronze device used in Athens to randomly select jury members and prevent bribery or favoritism
3. ___ ostracism	C) Pottery sherds used as ballots in the Athenian voting process that could result in political exile
4. ___ stoa	D) The public gathering space at the center of a Greek city, used for commerce, politics, and philosophy
5. ___ kleroterion	E) The Athenian democratic procedure of banishing a citizen by popular vote for ten years without trial

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. Ostracism required a minimum of _____ votes to be valid, and the individual who received the most votes was exiled from Athens for ten years.

2. The _____ of Attalos, originally built as a gift to Athens, was reconstructed in the 1950s and now serves as the Agora Museum.

3. The Agora functioned simultaneously as a marketplace, law court, political assembly space, and meeting ground for philosophers — making it the center of _____ democratic life.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. The reading says that archaeology at the Agora 'consistently humanizes ancient Athens.' What does this mean, and what specific evidence from the reading supports this idea?

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_____

2. Ostracism had no trial, no charges, and no formal defense. Do you think this is consistent with democratic principles or a contradiction of them? Use specific evidence from the reading to support your argument.

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3. Why is the Agora considered one of the most important archaeological sites for understanding ancient Athenian democracy, and what types of evidence have been found there that go beyond what written historical sources provide?

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