

KERAMEIKOS

ATHENS



The famous Deme of Kerameis, Kerameikos, extended over the small Eridanos River valley in the northwestern fringe of ancient Athens, in Thucydides' "most beautiful suburb". Until the Persian Wars, the Eridanos valley was a large, quiet cemetery containing some humble pottery workshops that have left no traces. After the building of the wall and its two most important gates – the Sacred Gate and the Dipylon – at this location, the city was secured and acquired an imposing front towards the West, urban planning components with impressive structures, and its most formal cemetery.

Of all the surviving sections of the walls of ancient Athens in the modern city visitors can admire the best preserved and most instructive segment of the fortifications at the archaeological site of the Kerameikos (n. 1-2). The first phase of the wall section preserved in the Kerameikos dates to 478 BC, after the battle of Plataea and the Persian retreat from mainland Greece, when Themistocles, a farsighted general and talented politician, pressed the Athenians to quickly fortify their city in haste. According to Thucydides, "the Athenians walled their city in a short time (one year) with a new wall that included and expanded the city in all directions" (Thuc. 1.93.2, translation: E. Venizelos). Many grave stelai from tombs and sculptured stones were used in its construction, which are now exhibited in the small Kerameikos Museum, as well as in the National Archaeological Museum. With the rebuilding of the greater Themistoclean wall, which ran to a length of 43 stades (i.e. 6,450 m. with approximately 200 m. preserved in Kerameikos), the previously unified deme of Kerameis, which had lain outside the walls, was separated into two, the "Inner" and the "Outer" Kerameikos, the city proper (the *asty*) and the extramural, rural land surrounding it. The Athenians repaired, reinforced and occasionally rebuilt these walls, along the same line of defense for about a millennium, until the reign of the emperor Justinian (6th c. AD).

Along the section of the wall that traverses Kerameikos in a general northeast-southwest direction opened two gates: the Thriasian Gates or Dipylon (n. 3) and the Sacred Gate (n. 4). Both functional and religious reasons determined the location of these two gates. Long before the building of the Themistoclean wall, the Panathenaic and the "Iakchos" (headed for Eleusis) procession, were organized in this area; the former began from the area of the later Dipylon, the latter from that of the Sacred Gate and followed the course of ancient roads that were in use for centuries, long before the construction of the wall: Dromos or Kerameikos street, which led from the Thriasian gates to the suburb of Akademeia, the deme of Eleusis – Thria – which also gave its name to the gate, the Thriasian Plain, and beyond this to the Peloponnese, and the Sacred or Eleusinian Way, heading for Eleusis. These two roads were thus named from the Classical period on.

The Sacred Way was a processional road in operation from at least the 8th century BC. Parallel to its course flowed the small river Eridanos, and passed through the Sacred Gate, which was planned and constructed accordingly, so as to accommodate pedestrians, riders, wheeled vehicles and the river. The entire length of the Sacred Way was flanked by funerary monuments and clusters of graves in roadside burial family plots (*periboloi*) dating from the early Archaic down to the Roman period, and along its route there have also been identified superimposed sections of ancient road pavements, workshops, bridges, and sanctuaries. Three luxurious private residences were built in the Classical period in the Inner Kerameikos, immediately next to the city wall, and remained in use for centuries, undergoing modifications as the years passed (n. 5). Right before the Archaic precinct of the Tritopatreion (n. 6), the





Sacred Way forked, and its southern branch, the so-called “Street of the Tombs”, led to the harbor of Mounichia in Piraeus. It was so called because some of the most beautiful grave monuments in the whole of the archaeological site crowned familial burial plots of the ripe and the late Classical period, along its edges.

The Dipylon (“double gate, double entrance”), in the northernmost section of the wall within the Kerameikos, was the largest gate in the ancient world, with a total area of 1,800 square meters and the most monumental entranceway in the city. The enormous court of the Dipylon and the Dromos in front of it offered ample room for crowds to assemble on official occasions: at the yearly ceremonies in honor of the dead, at contests, or for the delivery of funerary orations in honor of those fallen in war and being buried in the Demosion Sema. Inside the city proper (the *asty*), this road was known as the “Panathenaic Way”, since it was there – at the starting-point for the festival of the Great Panathenaea – that the crowds gathered to assemble the Panathenaic procession, before the construction of the Pompeion in the end of the 5th c. BC. A large fountain in contact with the inner (city) side of the Dipylon refreshed wayfarers and their animals and supplied part of the city with water (n 7).

Shortly after the fall of the Thirty Tyrants (403 BC) and before Conon’s renovation of the walls (394 BC), an oblong, public building – the Pompeion – was built, squeezed into the empty space between the Dipylon and the Sacred Gate (n 8). It presented the layout of an ancient gymnasium and featured a monumental propylon, peristyle inner court, and a series of square banquet rooms on its west and north sides. As its name suggests, it was built to serve the needs of the festival of the Great Panathenaea, every fourth year in mid-August. The building was almost entirely destroyed by the Romans under Sulla (86 BC) and replaced by a new two-storey structure called by modern research the “Building of the Warehouses”, which was again completely destroyed in the Herulian invasion (AD 267), to be later substituted by two parallel facing stoas with a shared entrance.

The area outside the city walls known as the “suburb” is occupied by public buildings, sanctuaries and workshops, but above all by



the Classical necropolis. During the Archaic period, large tumuli signaled the burial spots of aristocratic clans (n 9), while some of these earth mounds also remained in use during the ensuing period of Democracy. In the 5th and mostly in the 4th c. BC, familial burial plots extend neatly across the fringes of major thoroughfares, each with its own funerary monuments – veritable masterpieces in marble – that echoed the ideal figures and feats of eminent men and women of Athens, like for example the young

knight Dexileos or the maiden Hegeso (n 10-12), but also of foreigners, like for example Agathon and his family from Herakleia in Pontus (in the Black Sea) or Philoxenos from Messene *et al.* An oblong burial enclosure built in ashlar masonry on the southern rim of the Dromos, has been identified with the Tomb of the Lacedaemonians (Spartans) who were killed in 403 BC, at Piraeus, in a battle against the Athenian Democrats, led by Thrasybulos (n 13). The dead were buried according to Xenophon’s *Hellenica* (2.4.33) “before the gates of Athens in the Kerameikos”. Further to the West, half-buried beneath today’s Piraeus Street, beside a marble boundary stone, is one of the most imposing of the cemetery’s funerary plots, conventionally called the “funerary building at the third boundary stone” and dating to the end of the 5th c. BC. Beneath the contemporary city and namely under the modern streets Piraeus, Salaminos, Plataion and Leonidou extended the public cemetery for the distinguished Athenians who had lost their lives in war for their homeland, the so-called *Demosion Sema* (public cemetery), *Polyandreion* (common grave), *Mnema* (tomb monument). The tombs of Pericles, Chabrias, Phormio, Solon, Kleisthenes and of the Tyrannicides were also located there (Pausanias 1.29).

Adjacent to the Tomb of the Lacedaemonians, lies the circular bath house (*balneum*) of the mid-5th c. BC (n 14) that is mentioned by Aristophanes in the *Knights* and by the orator Isaeus. To the East of the bath house survives a telling example of a potter’s firing kiln of the Hellenistic period and close to that a small temple of the 4th c. BC, perhaps connected with the worship of the goddess Athena.

At the entrance to the Sacred Gate in front of its southwest tower, a small sacred precinct with a marble altar on a marble base had been founded in the 5th c. BC; according to some scholars it is related to the worship of Demeter. Some distance to the West stood a triangular-shaped sacred precinct dedicated to an as-yet unidentified deity. Right at the junction between the Sacred Way and the “Street of the Tombs” was the so-called Tritopatrein (n. 6), an open-air, sacred precinct founded in the 6th c. BC for the worship of the *Tritopatores*.

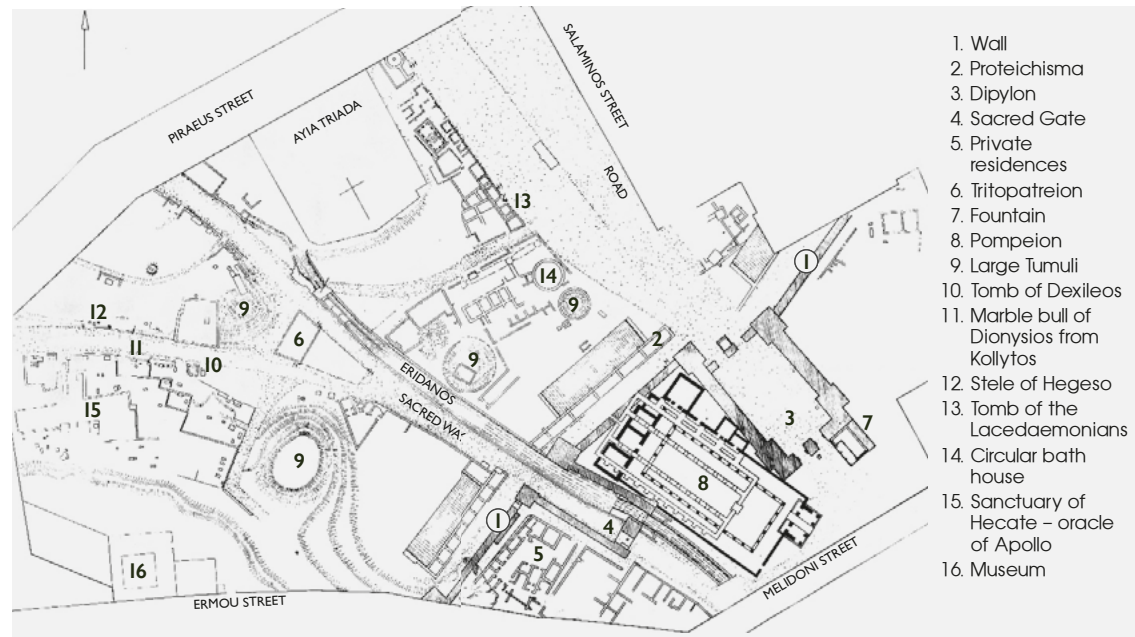
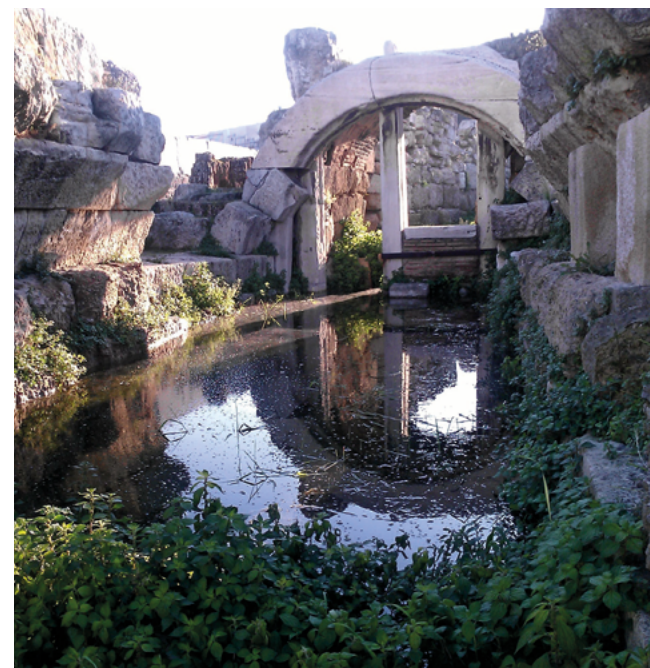


North of the Museum, on the terrace extending below the densely arranged funerary *columellae* that were used as plain tomb markers after the edict of Demetrius of Phaleron (317-307 BC) against the extravagance of funerary art was put into effect, extends a *temenos* identified by earlier research as a sanctuary of Hecate. However, new research shedding light on the matter, confirms that it was actually dedicated to Artemis Soteira as well as her brother Apollo (n. 15). This venue was in fact the sole known oracle of the god in Athens, as suggested by an invocation to Apollo by the epithet "Paian", which was found inscribed repeatedly all over clay tiles layering the interior of a well that was sealed under an inverted lekythos-"omphalos", inside the *temenos*.

The earliest Kerameikos excavations began in the spring of 1863 but were systematically undertaken by the Archaeological Society from 1870 until 1913, when they passed on to the German Archaeological Institute, still directing them to this day. The early finds of

these excavations are exhibited in the National Archaeological Museum; however in 1938 a dedicated small Museum was inaugurated on the site (n. 16), exhibiting since then some of the most influential finds of the excavations, arranged and presented in neat chronological order.

The "L" shaped portico in front of the Museum as well as the north side of the Museum house funerary monuments, primarily of the 4th c. BC, the first section of the Museum and the atrium house works of sculpture from the Archaic and the Classical times and the three remaining oblong corridors framing the atrium, house grave goods from the Prehistoric period to Late Antiquity. Finds from the excavation of the eventually abandoned Kerameikos Metro station at the junction between Piraeus Street and Hiera Odos are displayed in showcase n. 10, the most remarkable being the remains from the mass burial of the Athenians who were exterminated by the lethal plague that hit the city in the summer of 430-429 BC. The last showcase n. 15 comprises artifacts of everyday private and public life in ancient Athens, mainly from the private houses south of the Sacred Gate (n. 5). Here one may note some ostracism sherds recording the names of prominent Athenian citizens who fell victim to the ostracism procedure in the course of the 5th c. BC. These belong to only a small fraction of almost 9,500 similar sherds, of which many were dumped in front of the *proteichisma*. Finally, some lead tablets bearing information about the Athenian cavalry of the Hellenistic times that were rejected in a well near Dipylon are also exhibited in this showcase and are of particular interest.



1. Wall
2. Proteichisma
3. Dipylon
4. Sacred Gate
5. Private residences
6. Tritopatreion
7. Fountain
8. Pompeion
9. Large Tumuli
10. Tomb of Dexileos
11. Marble bull of Dionysios from Kollytos
12. Stele of Hegeso
13. Tomb of the Lacedaemonians
14. Circular bath house
15. Sanctuary of Hecate - oracle of Apollo
16. Museum

OPERATING RULES

Please be informed that the following is strictly prohibited:

*(Law 3028/2002 and Official Government Gazette
88/B/23.1.2004)*

- to collect, remove or damage any kind of object, including ancient and contemporary works of art as well as any natural item,
- to consume food or beverages,
- to smoke,
- to produce litter of any kind,
- to behave, dress or act in a way not compatible with the nature of the archaeological site/museum,
- entrance to people under the influence of substances (intoxicants, narcotics, etc.),
- entrance to pets, except for dogs accompanying people with disabilities,
- entrance to all vehicles, except for emergency vehicles and those used for conducting archaeological works.

Furthermore, visitors and guides are kindly requested:

- to comply with the instructions and indications of the security guards,
- to follow the signs, walk along marked routes and avoid entering restricted areas,
- not to touch any work of art,
- to be very careful whilst being near areas of high risk or areas where works are in progress.

PHOTOGRAPHY AND FILMING

*(Official Government Gazette 1138/B/10.04.2012,
3046/B/30.12.2011 and 648/B/07.03.2012)*

- Photography and filming with professional cameras as well as aerial photography and filming, with or without human presence, are allowed only after a special permit has been issued and fees have been paid.
- Photography and filming with amateur cameras are permitted for free unless they are to be used for commercial purposes.
- Photography with the use of supplementary lighting systems inside a museum is not allowed, unless permission is granted.

Non-compliance with the above rules can lead to the eviction of recalcitrant visitors.

The archaeological site is partially accessible to visitors with disabilities using a wheelchair, with the assistance of an escort. The Museum is fully accessible.



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ATHENS

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