

Notes for *Demosion*, the origin of Democratic Archives in ancient Athens

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Problem statement:

Demosion is the origin of the democratic archives.

“Archives are fundamental to democracy, accountability and good governance.”

This message was on the Website of ICA International Council on Archives in 2009.¹

Are archives fundamental to democracy?

Let's explore ancient Athens, cradle of democracy. *Demos* is originally the administrative district made by Cleisthenes reform. Then *Demos* means citizens. Citizens do not include women, children, and foreigners.

We know the etymology of Archives is *Archeion*, the office of Archon. According to Rosalind Thomas,² it is Hellenistic period it means archives where the records were kept.

In Classic Athens, the place where the records were kept was old Bouleuterion. It was called *Demosion*, the building belongs to *Demos*.

Around 410 to 350 BCE, the old *Bouleuterion* was called *Demosion*, the building belonging to the *Demos*.

From the Greek-English Lexicon:

III. neut., δημόσιον, τό, the state, **Hdt.1.14**, **Aeschin.3.58**; “οἱ ἐκ δ.” public officials, **X. Lac.3.3**.

b. public building, hall, **Hdt.6.52**.

c. treasury, = τὸ κοινόν, ἀργύριον ὀφείλοντες τῷ δ. **And.1.73**, cf. **D.21.182**, *Din.2.2*; “ὁ ἐκ δ. μισθός” **Th.6.31**; “ἡ ἐκ τοῦ δ. τροφή” **Pl.R.465d**; “τελεῖν εἰς τὸ δ.” *BGU1188.12* (Aug.), *1158.18* (i B. C.).

d. the public prison, **Th.5.18**.

2. τὰ δ. public archives, *OGI229.108* (Smyrna).

b. public dues, taxes, in pl., *PLond.3.938.11* (iii A. D.), *BGU1018.21* (iii A. D.).³

Bouleuterion is the building belonging to the *Boule*, the 500 people council which prepares the laws for *Ekklesia*, the general assembly. 500 people are elected from each 10 *Demos*. 50 people from one *Demos* would be in charge as *Prytanis* for 35 days, its chair changes daily. Athenian Democracy is flat. The *Boule* has a big power but its chair changes daily.

Around 410 BCE, the new building for the *Boule* was constructed. Then the old building was called *Demosion*.

¹ [Welcome to ICA | International Council on Archives](#)

² Archives, Greek from Oxford Classical Dictionary, <https://doi.org/10.1093/acrefore/9780199381135.013.694>

³ [Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, A Greek-English Lexicon, δ, δημο-γέρον, δῆμος \(tufts.edu\)](#)

In *Demosion*, the laws and decrees were gathered and codified by *Anagrapheus*. Orator Lysias accused Anagrapheus Nichomacos, therefore we can understand what *Anagrapheus* is.

A lot of documents related to the *Boule's* function were kept in *Demosion*.

Orators, such as Demosthenes and Andokides (on the Mysteries 73), or Historian Thucydides referred *Demosion*.

According to the LSD, an epigraphy is also described.⁴

OGI229.108

ἔκγ Μαγνησίας· ἀναγεγράφθαι δὲ αὐτὸ καὶ ἐν τοῖς δημοσίοις.

I show the image of the vase manufactured around 450 held in British Museum. A woman reads a scroll. It is key to literacy at that time. We can find some vase paintings related to writing and reading in the Oxford database.⁵

Some classists mentioned that Classical Athens is oral world and literacy rate is the only 10%.

For them, the existence of the archives or records center itself is questionable. In my opinion, the literacy late is higher, and writing is respected.

Example of Literacy



British Museum 1885,1213.18

Hydria 450



Attic red-figure hydria. Reading poetry of Sappho, probably by the poet herself.⁶

I introduced the picture by Jean-Baptiste Regnault is titled *Socrates dragging Alcibiades from the Embrace of Sensual Pleasure* (1791) held in Louvre.⁷

⁴ <https://epigraphy.packhum.org/text/254899?bookid=525&location=1688>

⁵ carc.ox.ac.uk/xdb/ASP/testSearch.asp?searchBy=Subject&txtValue=*&#W

⁶ From Vari, Attika. Polygnotos Group. 440-430 B.C. (A 1260). National Archaeological Museum

<https://www.namuseum.gr/en/collection/klasiki-periodos/>

⁷ <https://jenikirbyhistory.getarchive.net/media/regnault-socrates-tears-alcibiades-from-the-embrace-of-sensual-pleasure-6c3flc>



According to Athenaios' "Sophists at Dinner", Alcibiades (s c. 450 – 404 BC) erased a name from the accusation with his finger.

Athenaeus (3 c AD), *Deipnosophistae IX 407 b-c Sophists at Dinner*

"Alcibiades rubbed with his finger and erase the name from written accusation."

Alcibiades himself was accused because of the vandalism to Hermes statues.

Map of Athenian Agora of Google with reconstruction image

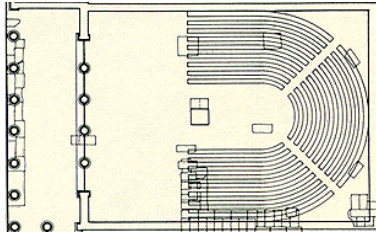
-Athenian Agora⁸



The original *Bouleuterion* or meeting place for the Council of 500 (2) was located next to the Tholos (4), but was replaced by a new *Bouleuterion* (3) at the end of the fifth century. This new building contained a theater-like seating arrangement for the Council.⁹

⁸https://www.faculty.umb.edu/gary_zabel/Courses/Morals%20and%20Law/M+L/Plato/agorapln.htm#bouleuterion

⁹ https://www.faculty.umb.edu/gary_zabel/Courses/Morals%20and%20Law/M+L/Plato/metroon.htm



In the reconstruction above we see the *Metrôon* (2) just in front of the new *Bouleuterion* (3) and next to the *Tholos* (4) (note the temple of Hephaistos (1) in the background). Until the end of the fifth century this building (2) served as a meeting place for the Council of 500 (*Boulê*). But after a new *Bouleuterion* was built immediately behind it, the old building became a shrine of the mother goddess (Cybele, although some say Demeter). The *Metrôon* (= "mother's building") also served as a public archives building. Documents such as the proceedings of the Council of 500 and other official records written on papyrus, parchment, and even on marble were kept in this building.

See also:

[Foundation of Hellenic World](#)

[Private institution in Greece with Hellenic Cosmos](#)

[Introduction to the Politics of Classical Athens](#)

[Virtual Reality of Digital Collection "The Ancient Agora of Athens"](#)

[Athens – The Old and the New *Bouleuteria*](#)



[Old Bouleuterion](#)

Holdings of *Demosion*

Compare with the list of *Metroon* holdings, they are related to the function of the *Boule*. *Metroon* held additions such as Epicurus will and so on.

From the timeline, around 350 B.C. *Demosion* called *Metroon*. *Demosion*, the old *Bouleuterion* converted into the *Metroon*, the Mother Goddess' temple. The goddess is considered as Cybele from Phrygia and regarded as the guardian of Governance and the records. Her attribution is a tambourine and followed with Lion. The copy of the statue is now in Piraeus Archaeological Museum.

Conclusion

In these days, democracy looks to prefer the war. It is important to examine what is democracy and how we acquire and keep it. Archives is the foundation of democracy. I sincerely hope that the democratic archives contribute to the world peace.

Reference

Perseus Digital Library <https://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/>

A dictionary of Greek and Roman Antiquities

“Archeion”

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.04.0063:entry=archeion-cn&highlight=archeion>

ARCHEION (**ἀρχεῖον**) properly means any public place belonging to the magistrates, whether among barbarians (**Hdt. 4.62**) or Greeks (**Xen. Hell. 5.4.58**; [Dem.] *iv. Phil.* p. 145.53). At Athens the name was more particularly applied to the archive office, where the decrees of the people and other state documents were preserved. This office is sometimes called merely τὸ δημόσιον (Dem. *de Cor.* p. 275.142). The archives were kept in the temple of the mother of the gods (**μητρῶον**), and the charge of it was entrusted to the president (**ἐπιστάτης**) of the senate of the Five Hundred. (Dem. *de Fals. Leg.* p. 381.129; Lycurg. *c. Leocr.* § 66 ; **Paus. 1.3.4**; **Athen. 5.214 e**; *Plut. Vit. x. Oratt. p. 842 e*; Harpocrat., Phot., Suid. s. v. **μητρῶον**; Suid. s. v. **ἀρχεῖα**. For the building itself, C. Curtius, *Das Metroon in Athen.* 1868.)

Alan L. Boegehold, “the Establishment of a Central Archive at Athens”, [The Establishment of a Central Archive at Athens | American Journal of Archaeology: Vol 76, No 1 \(uchicago.edu\)](#)

Ernst Posner, *Archives in the Ancient World*,

<https://files.archivists.org/pubs/free/ArchivesInTheAncientWorld-2003.pdf>