



15 Lesser-Known Historical Landmarks in the Center of Athens

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Socrates and the Timeless Charm of Plaka

It is almost impossible to wander through the neighborhood of Plaka without feeling the invisible presence of Athens' most famous philosopher, Socrates. Here, where the narrow stone-paved alleys wind beneath the shadow of the Acropolis, history has left traces not only in ruins and monuments, but also in the very spirit of the place. Socrates himself once walked among these streets, although in his own time they were not yet the quaint neighborhood of tavernas and neoclassical houses that we see today, but rather part of the ancient city that surrounded the Agora. The Agora, the beating heart of classical Athens, lay only a short distance from where modern visitors now sip their coffee in shaded courtyards.

Socrates was not a man of wealth or status. He lived simply, often barefoot, dressed in the plainest of tunics, and spent his days in conversation with whomever he encountered—merchants in the marketplace, young aristocrats, foreign visitors, even craftsmen at work. He did not write a single line of philosophy himself; instead, he left behind a method, a way of questioning the world that was so radical and persistent that it both fascinated and infuriated his fellow Athenians. This was the so-called elenchus, or Socratic method: asking questions that stripped away assumptions until the truth—or at least the awareness of ignorance—stood exposed.

But Socrates was not universally loved. In fact, his habit of exposing contradictions in the reasoning of prominent men earned him powerful enemies. He was accused of corrupting the youth of Athens and of introducing new gods. In 399 BCE, at the age of seventy, he stood trial before a jury of 500 citizens in the very heart of the city. Found guilty, he was sentenced to death. Yet even in the face of this ultimate penalty, Socrates refused to abandon his principles. Offered the chance to flee into exile, he chose instead to drink the fatal cup of hemlock, becoming an enduring symbol of intellectual freedom and moral integrity.

As you wander Plaka, about 100 meters southwest of the Agora, among the ruins of houses and workshops, lies a public building carved into natural rock, which has been identified as the classical-era prison. This structure, excavated in the 19th century by British historian Thomas Smart Hughes, yielded thirteen miniature vessels (out of a total of 21 found in the Ancient Agora area), which may have been used to hold

hemlock—the poison administered to those sentenced to death. All thirteen vessels were found discarded in the same cistern.

Although the building is located in an industrial area and its structure could suggest a commercial center or an inn, the layout of its rooms would have also suited the function of a prison perfectly. A long corridor leads to a large courtyard, on one side of which there are five square rooms and on the other side three, likely used as prison cells.

At the entrance, there is a complex of four additional rooms with a different orientation, built in the same period as the rest of the structure, which may have served as guards' quarters. The large courtyard could have been used for mass detentions or for prisoners' outdoor exercise. Constructed in the mid-5th century BCE, the building faced a main road, was located in a natural depression in the terrain, and included bathing facilities. All of these features align with what is known about the prison from Plato's dialogues and from Plutarch.

Among the objects discovered in the ruins was a small, worn statue of Socrates, placed there to honor his memory. If this truly was the prison, then it was here that Socrates drank the hemlock and drew his last breath.

Agia Dynamis: The Gunpowder-Scented Power of Heracles

Tucked away in the Rodakio neighborhood of Athens, at the intersection of Mitropoleos and Pentelis Streets, stands the small chapel of Agia Dynamis, or "Holy Power." Today, it may seem modest and unassuming, yet this site has witnessed centuries of history, layered with myth, religious devotion, and revolutionary zeal. Its location is no accident: in antiquity, this very intersection was the site of the famous Diocharous Gates of the Themistoclean Wall, one of the principal entrances to the city. Greek urban planning of the classical period often situated bathhouses near city gates, combining the practical need for hygiene with the ritualized aspect of cleansing before entering sacred or public spaces. Later, during the Roman era, these bathhouses evolved into elaborate *thermae*, while sacred precincts and gymnasiums flourished nearby. It was in this continuum of sacred and civic space that the first sanctuary of Heracles was established, long before the modest chapel of Agia Dynamis would be constructed centuries later.

The transition from pagan hero cult to Christian sanctuary illustrates the remarkable capacity for religious adaptation in Athens. Archaeological discoveries attest to this continuity: votive reliefs dedicated to Heracles, inscribed with the words "HERACLEIDI (LIKE HIM) AND DEDICATED IT," suggest that ancient Athenians sought to internalize the power of the demigod, attributing to him strength, protection, and fertility. When Christianity spread through the city, these aspects were not entirely abandoned. Instead, the "Power" (Dynamis) of Heracles was transferred to the Virgin Mary, creating a sacred locus where the physical and spiritual intermingled. Pregnant women, in particular, turned to Agia Dynamis for protection and assistance, while later, during the Greek War of Independence in 1821, fighters sought courage and fortitude from the same hallowed walls.

Historical records provide a vivid glimpse into the chapel's role in both ecclesiastical and revolutionary life. According to Kyrillos Degleris, abbot of the Penteli Monastery, Agia Dynamis functioned as a *metochi*

(dependency) of the monastery, known by various names—“Mentelítissa,” a corruption of “Pentelítissa,” “tou Mentelióti,” or “tou Rodakiou”—reflecting the neighborhood’s evolving identity. Until the 1950s, when the Ministry of Education was built nearby, the chapel maintained a courtyard and additional structures that have since been demolished. These architectural remnants hint at the significance of the site as a community center as well as a religious sanctuary.

The chapel’s clandestine role during the Revolution of 1821 is particularly striking. In 1641, a Jesuit monk named Francesco lived near the church, teaching Italian and French, only to be accused of proselytism and expelled. In the years leading to the Revolution, the house near the chapel—secretly connected via an underground passage to Agia Dynamis—became a covert munitions workshop under the guidance of master pyrotechnician Pavlis Alexis, known as “Barouxís.” Pavlis’s son, Spyridon, would later establish the famous Pavlidis Confectionery in 1841 on the site of the old gunpowder mill, linking culinary heritage to revolutionary ingenuity.

Under the noses of the Ottoman authorities, Pavlis produced ammunition in secret, relying on the underground passage to transport supplies discreetly to Menidi. From there, villagers, aided by mules, carried weapons to the revolutionary fighters. Among the most trusted collaborators was Kyra-Manolena, also known as Maria Biniari, who ingeniously concealed the munitions beneath dirty laundry supposedly destined for washing in the Ilissos River. Her courage and ingenuity exemplify the quiet heroism of countless women whose contributions often remain invisible in grand historical narratives.

Agia Dynamis also safeguarded the treasures of the Penteli Monastery during the turbulence of the early 19th century. Tragically, these treasures were lost during the Turkish invasion led by Omer Vrionis on July 21, 1821. The chapel, however, endured. After Greek independence, in 1837, it briefly served as a cavalry station, demonstrating the adaptability of sacred spaces to civic and military needs. Today, Agia Dynamis also houses a relic of Saint Nicholas Planas, a modern Greek Orthodox saint, linking the ancient, revolutionary, and contemporary layers of devotion in one remarkable site.

Greece and Byron (crowning or stealing?)

At Zappeion, at the point where Amalias Avenue meets Olgas Avenue, there stands a statue depicting Greece crowning Lord Byron. Greece is symbolized as a seated, semi-nude woman, larger in scale than Byron, who shows her gratitude by extending a palm branch above his head as a symbol of immortality. Byron’s pose and gesture—though somewhat awkward, especially in the orientation of the palm and the spreading of the fingers—are rendered with romantic intent. His gaze, fixed upon Greece, is full of passion.

The half-reclining male figure on the back side symbolizes the subjugated Hellenism. Looking more closely at Greece’s gesture, it seems that on the one hand (with her left hand) she crowns him to distract him, while on the other (with her right) she tries to snatch his wallet. The work, considered scandalous in its time, provoked the outrage of Dimitrios Filippotis (the great sculptor), who declared in *Palingenesia*: “*I am ashamed as a Greek, because the work has neither symbol nor nationality. The foreign sculptor depicted Greece as a common woman with sagging breasts.*”

The history of its creation is also of interest: in April 1888 a competition was announced for the construction of a statue of Byron, larger than life-size and set on a pedestal bearing allegorical or historical

reliefs. The expense was covered by the Greek expatriate Dimitrios Stefanovic Skylitsis. Among the entries, the model by I. Vitsaris stood out (all models submitted were exhibited at the Olympian Exhibition that year).

According to the competition rules, the sponsor was not obliged to award the execution of the monument to the winning artist. Thus, the commission was given to French sculptors, sparking a storm of protest. In the newspapers of the time, one finds reviews and statements by Greek artists full of bitterness and disappointment. The model of the statue was made by Henri Michel Antoine Chapu. After his death, the marble execution was completed by Alexandre Falguière. The unveiling took place on July 20, 1895.

The Altar of the Twelve Gods: A Sanctuary of Compassion and Civic Centrality

Nestled in the heart of the Ancient Agora of Athens, the Altar of the Twelve Gods occupies a space that has witnessed centuries of religious devotion, civic activity, and the ebb and flow of political power. Between the temple and altar of Ares and the Stoa Poikile, a portion of the sanctuary's enclosure remains visible even today, running along the modern railway line and partially hidden by dense vegetation. For modern visitors, these remnants may appear modest, yet they hint at the grandeur and symbolic significance this site once held. The geographer and traveler Pausanias referred to it as the Altar of Eleos, dedicated to the goddess of mercy and compassion, capturing its spiritual essence and civic importance in a single term.

Evidence of the sanctuary's use survives in an inscription preserved among the stones, reading: "Leagros, son of Glaukon, dedicated [this statue, now lost] to the Twelve Gods." Such dedications illustrate the intimate relationship between Athenians and their deities, where private offerings and public ritual intertwined to sustain both personal piety and civic identity. According to the historian Thucydides, Peisistratos, son of Hippias and grandson of the earlier tyrant Peisistratos, established the sanctuary in the Agora as a central locus of religious and communal life. The sanctuary consisted of a square precinct, with a prominent altar situated in its center, a design that emphasized symmetry, order, and ritual visibility. Unfortunately, the sanctuary did not survive intact through the turbulence of history: it was destroyed during the invasion of Xerxes' forces in the Persian Wars, only to be painstakingly rebuilt by the Athenians at the close of the Classical period, reflecting both resilience and devotion.

The Altar of the Twelve Gods was not merely a spiritual center; its central location within the Agora rendered it a practical landmark. Athenians used it as a reference point for measuring distances—the *stadiasmos*—much as modern Athenians might use Syntagma Square as a central point from which to gauge the layout of the city. Beyond its function as a civic marker, the sanctuary also served as a sacred place of asylum, where individuals fleeing injustice or persecution could seek protection. Archaeological and literary evidence suggests that even during the late Roman period, this role persisted, further underlining the enduring importance of the site in both religious and social life. Pausanias' identification of the sanctuary as the Altar of Eleos likely reflects this dual significance: a site that combined compassion, sanctuary, and civic order.

The worship of Eleos presents a fascinating insight into Athenian spirituality. Unlike most Olympian deities, Eleos was treated as a "thirteenth god," and her cult diverged markedly from the standard sacrificial rituals of ancient Greece. She received neither animal sacrifices nor bloodless offerings; instead, worshippers dedicated their tears, an intimate and deeply human form of devotion. This act, symbolic yet profoundly

emotional, highlights the Athenians' recognition of human vulnerability and the need for divine empathy. In addition to Eleos, Athenians also erected altars to abstract personifications, such as Aidos (Modesty), Horme (Impulse), and Phēme (Rumor), illustrating a religious landscape that embraced not only the mythic and heroic but also the moral, psychological, and societal dimensions of life.

Pausanias, reflecting upon these practices, suggested that the Athenians were uniquely fortunate among mortals. In his words, "those in whom piety is developed beyond the ordinary measure possess happiness in proportion." This observation captures the essence of the sanctuary: a place where spiritual dedication, civic identity, and moral contemplation converged. Pilgrims, citizens, and travelers entering the Agora would have encountered the Altar of the Twelve Gods not only as a site of religious ritual but also as a symbol of Athens' civic cohesion, embodying the city's ideals of mercy, justice, and collective responsibility.

The Altar's architecture, now largely lost, would have reinforced its symbolic function. Its square precinct, the central altar, and surrounding enclosure allowed for organized ritual processions, public gatherings, and ceremonies that reinforced social hierarchies and civic values. The sanctuary's central location within the Agora, along routes traversed daily by Athenians engaging in trade, political discourse, and philosophical debate, further cemented its role as a spiritual and civic anchor. Even in times of crisis—whether during foreign invasions, political upheaval, or social strife—the Altar of the Twelve Gods provided a focal point where the city's residents could seek protection, guidance, and reassurance.

The “Kamarotripa” of the Panathenaic Stadium: Passage of Rituals, Spectacles, and Fate

The structure known to ancient Athenians as the Kamarotripa stands as a remarkable testament to the intersection of religion, athletics, and folklore in the city's long and layered history. Located on the eastern side of the semicircular end of the Panathenaic Stadium, this vaulted underground passage served multiple functions across centuries, adapting to the changing cultural, religious, and social needs of Athens. In contemporary times, the Kamarotripa provides visitors with access to the Olympic Games Museum and the athletes' changing rooms, situated near Archimideus Street. Yet beneath this modern functionality lies a rich and complex history, stretching from the Classical and Roman periods through the Ottoman era and into the modern imagination.

In antiquity, the Kamarotripa was integral to the ceremonial and athletic life of the Panathenaic Stadium. It allowed for the discreet entry of animals destined for sacrifice during religious processions in honor of the gods, as well as for the arrival of athletes and judges overseeing the competitions. These competitions, often held in conjunction with the Panathenaic festival, were not mere athletic contests—they were imbued with deep religious significance, celebrating both the physical excellence and spiritual devotion of participants. The passage ensured that the sacred and the profane could coexist within the stadium, allowing ceremonies and games to proceed with precision and decorum.

During the Roman period, the use of the passage expanded dramatically. It became the conduit for animals and gladiators participating in bloody spectacles and beast hunts, events designed to entertain and awe the public. One particularly spectacular occasion, organized under Emperor Hadrian, reportedly involved the entrance of more than one thousand wild animals through this very passage. Beyond its utilitarian

function, the Kamarotripa became a symbol of the Romans' fascination with scale, spectacle, and control over nature and human bodies alike. In subsequent years, as athletic competitions continued under Roman rule, the passage served as a private entrance for officials, magistrates, and priests, ensuring that those of high status could access the arena discreetly once spectators had taken their seats.

The passage's story took a dramatic turn with the prohibition of games in the stadium by Emperor Theodosius I. With the cessation of athletic spectacles and sacred rites, the Panathenaic Stadium fell into ruin, its marble cladding stripped away and repurposed for other constructions throughout the city. Over time, the site was largely filled in, leaving only a hollow between two hills as evidence of its former grandeur. It was not until 1869 that the German architect Ernst Ziller undertook systematic excavations, revealing and beginning the restoration of the stadium, including the 57-meter-long and 4-meter-wide entrance to the Kamarotripa.

Between the Roman period and Ziller's excavation, the original function of the passage had faded from collective memory. In its place, Athenians developed a wealth of superstitions and magical associations surrounding the site. The tunnel became known as the Hole of Fate, the Kamarotripa, or the Pierced Stone, a space believed to be inhabited by the three Moirai, or Fates, along with other supernatural beings capable of influencing human destiny. For centuries, the Kamarotripa became a focal point of magical rituals, or mantologia, often performed by women seeking divine intervention in matters of love, marriage, fertility, and family health.

The rituals performed at the Kamarotripa were complex and symbolic. Worshippers would leave offerings to appease potentially hostile spirits, including scraps of colored cloth, broken glass, flour, honey, almonds, dried peas, and coins carefully tied with red thread and wrapped in embroidered handkerchiefs. These acts were believed to ensure the safe return of a husband from a journey, the conception of a child, or the general protection of loved ones. The space thus functioned as a liminal zone, a threshold between the mundane and the supernatural, where human desire and divine influence intersected.

Accounts from travelers in the early nineteenth century provide vivid glimpses of these practices. The Italian painter Simone Pomardi, who traveled in Greece with the Englishman Edward Dodwell between 1804 and 1806, described scenes of ritual drama within the tunnel: "The women present, without fear, made the appropriate offerings and then danced naked, hand in hand, around a large fire that illuminated most of the cave. To ensure secrecy, the two entrances were guarded by elderly members of the group, who gave warning in the event that a passerby appeared." These descriptions reveal a vibrant, secretive, and highly symbolic culture surrounding the Kamarotripa, one in which communal bonding, ecstatic movement, and the invocation of fate and divine favor coexisted in a highly charged ritual space.

The Church of All Saints: From the Sanctuary of Urania Aphrodite to Byzantine Reverence

Nestled quietly at 39 Tsocha Street, near the Ambelokipi metro station, the small Byzantine church of All Saints may seem unassuming at first glance. Slightly sunken into the slope of the terrain, lying approximately two meters below the level of the surrounding street, it is easily overlooked by the casual passerby. Yet beneath this modest exterior lies a layered history that stretches back to the classical period, revealing a remarkable continuity of sacred use over millennia. The site embodies a fascinating palimpsest

of religious devotion, architectural transformation, and cultural memory, reflecting the evolving spiritual landscape of Athens.

The site first drew serious attention in 1815, when Princess Caroline of Wales, residing in Athens, financed an excavation in the area. The discoveries were striking: among them were small marble doves, symbolic of the goddess Urania Aphrodite, the celestial aspect of Aphrodite associated with pure love, family harmony, and the spiritual dimensions of affection. The presence of these votive objects led scholars to conclude that the location had originally been a sanctuary devoted to Urania Aphrodite, a sacred place where the boundaries between divine and human love were ritually observed. In addition to these artistic relics, the excavations revealed a natural spring of fresh water, which would have been an integral element of ritual purification and the cultic activities performed at the site.

Architectural fragments from the ancient sanctuary, many bearing inscriptions, have been ingeniously incorporated into the walls of the present church. The windows of the Byzantine structure feature elaborately decorated frames, which reflect a synthesis of classical and medieval artistic traditions. This integration of ancient material into the later church underscores a continuity of sacred space, demonstrating that even as religious practice evolved from paganism to Christianity, the sanctity of the location was preserved.

The current church was constructed over these ancient remains in the 11th century, during the height of Byzantine religious architecture in Athens. Before this Christian transformation, the site had contained not only a temple dedicated to Urania Aphrodite but also a sacred grove, or *Kēpoi*, a verdant space where ritual and reflection could coexist with natural beauty. Within this grove stood the goddess's altar, which remains preserved to the left of the modern church. During the festival of the *Arrephoria*, this altar served as the focal point for ritual activity, particularly for the placement of "secret offerings" to the goddess. Two young girls, aged between seven and eleven, would carry these offerings from the Parthenon down to the subterranean sanctuary of Aphrodite in the Gardens, where they were deposited, reciprocated with other ritual items, and then returned to the Acropolis. This ceremonial act symbolically linked the deities of love and wisdom, demonstrating the interconnection of the spiritual and civic dimensions of Athenian religious life.

The advent of Christianity, especially after 300 CE, led to the gradual decline of the sanctuary. In its place, a church dedicated to All Saints was erected, establishing a new framework of worship while maintaining the sacred significance of the site. A monastery, the Monastery of the Confessors, was later built around the church, further embedding the location into the Christian monastic and urban landscape. Accounts from foreign travelers in the 19th century describe the church as being largely in ruins, yet still serving as a site of active devotion. Liturgy was often performed outdoors, drawing local Athenians to participate in communal worship. Interestingly, before the Greek Revolution, Ottoman Turks are reported to have also visited the site, seeking the holy water and paying respect to the enduring sanctity of the location—a testament to its spiritual magnetism across religious and cultural divides.

In 1922, the first systematic archaeological excavation of the church, led by G. Sotiriou, revealed the full extent of the ruinous state of the structure. Only the eastern and northern walls remained standing, while the rest had collapsed over centuries of neglect. Excavations uncovered numerous monastic graves, some of which have been preserved to this day in a crypt located north of the church. Among the most notable

finds was the sarcophagus of the monk Theophylaktos, situated on the western side of the structure, providing a tangible link to the medieval monastic life that had once flourished here.

The church was restored to its present form in 1956, allowing modern visitors to experience a space that harmoniously integrates the remnants of ancient Greek religious practice with Byzantine architectural sophistication. Today, the Church of All Saints stands not only as a monument of religious devotion but also as a living archive of Athens' layered history. From its origins as the sanctuary of Urania Aphrodite, where young girls performed sacred rites and offerings were dedicated at the altar, to its transformation into a Byzantine church and monastic center, the site encapsulates the evolving spiritual and cultural currents of the city. Its preservation reminds us of the enduring power of place in shaping religious identity, connecting past and present through ritual, devotion, and architectural memory.

Saint Elisseos: The Church of Alexandros Papadiamantis in the “Courtyard of Miracles”

Tucked within the historic quarter of Monastiraki, opposite the imposing Hadrian's Library, lies the modest yet historically rich Logothetis Mansion at 14 Areos Street. Although the passage of time and the transformations of Athens have left only fragments of this Ottoman-period mansion intact—a gateway arch, a small fountain, a stone exterior staircase leading to the upper floor, and a courtyard partially enclosed by later additions—the site retains an aura of historical resonance. Within this courtyard, once part of the Chomatianos-Logothetis family residence, stands the small church of Saint Elisseos, a modest single-aisled basilica with a wooden roof dating back to the 17th century. This humble church, though modest in architectural ambition, is a treasure trove of cultural and literary memory, its significance extending far beyond its size or ornamentation.

The church of Saint Elisseos is first documented in the 1832 map of Athens drawn by Schaubert and Kleanthis, revealing that it had already established itself as an enduring presence within the city's ecclesiastical landscape by the early nineteenth century. Architecturally, the church exhibits characteristics typical of post-Byzantine ecclesiastical construction in Athens: its walls incorporate recycled construction materials and decorative elements from earlier monuments, reflecting a long-standing practice of *spolia*, where fragments of older sacred or secular structures were repurposed for new construction. Notably, one of the church's walls leaned against the stone staircase of the mansion, integrating the sacred and the domestic, the religious and the familial, in a tangible expression of continuity.

The church's historical significance is inseparable from its connection to the celebrated Greek writer Alexandros Papadiamantis (1851–1911) and his cousin Alexandros Moraitidis, both natives of the island of Skiathos. For many years, the cousins devoted themselves to nightly religious vigils within the church, chanting in a deeply ritualized manner: Papadiamantis as right cantor, Moraitidis as left cantor. These devotional nights were not merely acts of personal piety but became cultural events, drawing attention from the intellectual and literary circles of Athens. Papadiamantis's voice and presence turned the modest church into a locus of literary and spiritual life. Contemporary newspapers, letters, and memoirs describe how prominent literary figures, including Zacharias Papantoniou, Pavlos Nirvanas, Giannis Vlachogiannis, and Gerasimos Vokos, attended the services solely to experience Papadiamantis's chanting. This

association with the great literary figure of modern Greece elevated the church's symbolic importance, transforming it from a simple neighborhood chapel into a site of cultural memory and literary pilgrimage.

Despite its cultural significance, the church faced existential threats in the twentieth century. After passing into the hands of Heraklis Kazakos, a grandson of the Chomatianos-Logothetis family, the building suffered significant destruction during the Nazi occupation of Athens. Kazakos, motivated by personal profit, illegally demolished much of the church, disregarding protests from architects, historians, and archaeologists. His actions reflected a broader tension in modern Athens between preservation and property development, a struggle often played out in the historic center where ancient, medieval, and Ottoman layers coexist precariously. Kazakos feared that the church would be declared a protected monument, which would have constrained his ability to exploit the property. In response, the Ministry of Culture ultimately expropriated the site and assigned it to the Museum of Greek Folk Art, ensuring that the remnants of the church would be preserved for posterity.

For many decades, the small church remained in a state of ruin, its walls weathered, its roof partially collapsed, and its interior exposed to the elements. Yet the memory of Papadiamantis and the spiritual significance of Saint Elisseos persisted. In 2003, the Papadiamantis Studies Society spearheaded a restoration project, painstakingly reconstructing the church's structure while preserving its historical authenticity. By 2005, the restored church had regained its place as a site of devotion and cultural commemoration, hosting the first vigil in memory of Papadiamantis, a symbolic act linking the literary heritage of Greece with its religious traditions.

The church of Saint Elisseos, often referred to by locals as part of the "Courtyard of Miracles," stands today not merely as a building but as a testament to the intertwined legacies of literature, faith, and urban history in Athens. Its modest architecture belies the richness of its story: a sacred space where nightly vigils gave rise to cultural memory, where Ottoman-era urbanity intersected with modern literary heritage, and where the preservation of history became an act of collective devotion. Visitors who wander into this hidden corner of Monastiraki are reminded that history is not always grand in scale, but it is often profound in the lives and memories it preserves. From the chants of Papadiamantis and Moraitidis to the careful work of modern restoration, the church embodies a continuity of devotion, art, and culture, illustrating how even the smallest sacred spaces can leave an enduring imprint on the soul of a city.

The Pantheon: The Monumental Hadrianic Building

Ascending Adrianou Street to number 80, one reaches a remarkable area of Athens where the layers of history are physically palpable, a place where the city's evolution is preserved in successive strata of ruins. Situated approximately fifty meters above Hadrian's Library and the Roman Agora, this site reveals the remains of structures from multiple periods, a testament to the city's long and continuous habitation. Among these ruins lies the vestige of a massive building, at least 85 meters in length, attributed to the Roman emperor Hadrian, renowned for his philhellenism and his monumental building programs throughout Greece. In 1968, archaeologists identified this structure as the Common Sanctuary of the Gods, known in ancient sources as the Pantheon. However, the interpretation of this building has been debated: some scholars propose that it may instead have been the Panhellenion, another Hadrianic

foundation that functioned as a ceremonial meeting place for representatives of the Greek city-states, a symbolic gesture emphasizing unity among the Hellenic world under Roman rule.

The significance of this monumental complex is heightened by the depth of the archaeological layers beneath it. Athens, long predating Hadrian, preserved within its soil evidence of earlier constructions from the late Hellenistic and early Roman periods. Excavations have revealed the complexity of this urban palimpsest: foundations of older buildings coexist with Hadrianic architecture, creating a physical record of the city's continuous development. This stratification allows historians and archaeologists to trace the evolution of civic, religious, and ceremonial spaces over several centuries, offering invaluable insights into the urban fabric of classical and Roman Athens.

One of the most striking features of the site is the integration of defensive architecture from the Late Roman period. On the northern side of the excavation, part of the Late Roman Wall, dating to 267 CE, has been preserved. This wall, later modified during the reign of Emperor Justinian in the 6th century CE, incorporates a fortified tower, of which approximately five meters remain standing, as well as a finely crafted marble gate. These elements illustrate both the military concerns of late antiquity and the aesthetic considerations of monumental construction, revealing how functionality and beauty were carefully balanced. The fortifications stand as a reminder of the turbulent times faced by the city during the late Roman and early Byzantine periods, when external threats and internal instability necessitated robust defensive measures.

The monumental Hadrianic building itself must have been a spectacular sight in antiquity. Its imposing scale—over eighty-five meters in length—would have dominated the surrounding urban landscape, asserting the authority and cultural vision of the emperor. Whether functioning as a Pantheon, dedicated to the collective worship of multiple deities, or as the Panhellenion, serving as a ceremonial meeting space, the building symbolized Hadrian's philhellenic ideals and his desire to link Roman imperial power with Greek cultural prestige. Its architectural design likely reflected contemporary Roman trends, incorporating colonnades, large open spaces, and perhaps intricate marble decoration, although much of this detail has been lost over time.

The site also preserves layers of later history, including evidence of ecclesiastical use. Excavations revealed the remains of the church of Panagia Misseraliotissa, also known as Chryssaliotissa, dating to the 17th century. This church had been located in the basement of a 19th-century building, demonstrating the continued reuse and adaptation of sacred spaces across centuries. The church gave its name to the historic street, linking the medieval and modern cityscape to its ancient antecedents. Such continuity of sacred and civic use exemplifies the adaptive nature of urban spaces in Athens, where sites of monumental significance were continuously reinterpreted to serve the evolving needs of the community.

Today, visitors to Adrianou Street can witness the complex layering of history at this site. Walking among the ruins, one is struck by the interplay of different architectural periods—the Hellenistic foundations, the Hadrianic colonnades, the Late Roman fortifications, and the traces of Byzantine ecclesiastical structures—all coexisting within a single urban panorama. The site embodies the notion of Athens as a living city, continuously inhabited and continually reinvented over millennia. It serves as a powerful reminder of how imperial ambition, religious devotion, and civic planning intersected to shape the ancient city, leaving behind tangible traces that continue to inspire admiration and scholarly inquiry.

The Vespasiana: The Ancient Public Latrines

Northwest of the Tower of the Winds and northeast of the eastern stoa of the Roman Agora lies a remarkable remnant of everyday life in ancient Athens: the Vespasiana, the city's public latrines. These facilities were added during the second half of the 1st century CE, at a time when Athens, under Roman rule, had become a bustling urban center with increased commercial activity and a growing population of residents, travelers, and merchants. The function of these latrines was identified in 1940 by the architect and archaeologist Anastasios Orlandos, whose meticulous studies of Roman structures in Athens clarified their purpose for modern scholarship. The Vespasiana were more than mere sanitation facilities; they were a reflection of Roman urban planning, hygiene practices, and social interaction.

The latrines owe their name to the Roman emperor Vespasian (69–79 CE), who, as part of his efforts to modernize and regulate city infrastructure throughout the empire, established similar facilities in all major cities, including Corinth, Thessaloniki, and Ephesus. Vespasian's reforms were not limited to construction; he imposed a small fee on each user, typically one obol, demonstrating the practical Roman approach to public amenities and civic revenue. A well-known anecdote illustrates Vespasian's pragmatic humor: when his son Titus criticized him for generating income from such a sordid source, Vespasian reportedly held a coin beneath his nose and asked, "Does it smell?"—giving rise to the famous Latin phrase *pecunia non olet*, or "money does not smell." This saying encapsulates the Roman attitude toward commerce and public finance: the utility of money transcended its origins, no matter how humble.

Architecturally, the Vespasiana consisted of a rectangular structure designed for both functionality and durability. Visitors first entered a long antechamber, which led to an almost square hall furnished with marble benches. These benches were perforated with circular openings arranged on all four sides, allowing multiple individuals to use the facility simultaneously. Beneath the benches ran a deep sloping channel, which carried waste efficiently toward the city's main sewer system. This flow was aided by the constant supply of fresh water descending from the springs on the northern slope of the Acropolis, illustrating the Romans' sophisticated engineering in urban sanitation. The roof covered the perimeter of the hall, while the central rectangular atrium remained open to allow for natural light and ventilation, ensuring both hygiene and comfort.

In antiquity, public latrines such as the Vespasiana were often referred to as *Soteria*, literally "places of salvation," a term that highlights the cultural and practical significance of these structures. Interestingly, this terminology persisted into the 19th century. For example, in the Zappeion Hall in 1888, the numbering of rooms included a designation for the lavatories, labeled "00,00," with the note that they were the *Soteria*—men's facilities to the right, women's to the left. This continuity illustrates the long-standing awareness of the importance of sanitary spaces in public life, bridging antiquity and modernity.

The Vespasiana were not only functional but also social spaces. Unlike modern expectations of privacy, the latrines lacked partitions between the openings on the benches. Ancient Athenians often used this opportunity to socialize, converse, and even gossip while attending to their personal needs. Friends arranged to meet at the latrines at the same time, discussing politics, commerce, or the latest city news. In this sense, the Vespasiana functioned as informal gathering places, blending public hygiene with civic interaction. This social dimension underscores the integration of daily life and community in Roman

Athens, revealing a society in which even the most basic necessities became occasions for dialogue and exchange.

The significance of the Vespasianae also lies in their engineering. The continuous water flow, the channeling of waste, and the open-air atrium demonstrate advanced understanding of sanitation, hydrology, and architecture. Public latrines such as these were emblematic of Roman influence on urban development, emphasizing efficiency, hygiene, and public order. At the same time, they offer insights into the rhythms of daily life, illustrating how ordinary Athenians—merchants, scholars, travelers, and citizens—interacted within shared urban spaces.

Today, the remains of the Vespasianae provide a vivid glimpse into the practical and social realities of ancient Athens. Archaeologists and visitors alike can observe the carefully laid marble benches, the channels for wastewater, and the open central courtyard, imagining how Romans and Athenians of the 1st century CE navigated the intersection of public utility and social engagement. Far from being merely utilitarian, the Vespasianae represent a fusion of engineering ingenuity, urban planning, and communal life, offering a window into the daily routines, social habits, and civic priorities of an ancient metropolis.

The Sleeping Girl by Yannoulis Chalepas at the First Cemetery of Athens

Yannoulis Chalepas (1851–1938) remains one of the most significant figures in modern Greek sculpture, whose life story is as compelling as his artistic output. Born on the island of Tinos, a center renowned for its marble quarries and sculptural tradition, Chalepas demonstrated exceptional talent from a young age. Trained in the classical techniques of sculpture, he quickly gained recognition for his ability to combine technical mastery with profound emotional expressiveness. His early works already displayed a sensitivity to human form and an attention to detail that would become hallmarks of his mature style.

However, Chalepas's career was tragically interrupted by mental illness. In 1878, he began to exhibit symptoms of a severe psychological disorder, which led to periods of erratic behavior and social isolation. Eventually, he was confined to the psychiatric asylum of Corfu, where he remained for a long period, effectively halting his creative production for nearly forty years. This long hiatus deeply affected both his personal life and the trajectory of Greek sculpture, as a generation of artists developed without his contribution. Nevertheless, when he returned to artistic practice later in life, Chalepas created works that reflected both the technical skill of his youth and the emotional depth shaped by his life experiences.

Among his works, the *Sleeping Girl* (Koimomeni) stands as a masterpiece of funerary sculpture, exemplifying Chalepas's unique ability to blend realism with classical ideals. Commissioned by the distinguished benefactor Georgios Nikolaou Oikonomou Afentakis, the monument was intended to honor his niece, Sophia Afentaki, a seventeen-year-old girl who tragically died of tuberculosis. This commission reflects not only the personal grief of the family but also the broader cultural practices of 19th-century Athens, where funerary monuments were often used to express both mourning and social prestige.

The statue itself is carved from marble with meticulous care, capturing the delicate features of the young girl in a state of peaceful repose. Sophia Afentaki is depicted lying in full length upon a couch, her body draped in sheets that fall naturally and with careful attention to folds, suggesting a sense of realism and movement. Her head rests gently on an intricately embroidered pillow, which adds both texture and a

sense of intimacy to the sculpture. In one hand, she holds a cross, signifying her Christian faith, while her other hand rests lightly upon the sheets, conveying tranquility. One foot is slightly raised, an artistic choice that enhances the impression of a gentle, natural pose.

The iconography of *The Sleeping Girl* is deeply rooted in classical and neoclassical traditions. In ancient Greek thought, sleep (Hypnos) and death (Thanatos) were often conceptualized as twin brothers, illustrating the close association between rest and the eternal passage of life. Chalepas draws upon this classical heritage, presenting death not as something violent or terrifying, but as a peaceful, almost natural state, akin to sleep. At the same time, the work embodies the ideals of 19th-century Classicism, emphasizing beauty, serenity, and the moral and aesthetic elevation of the subject. The effect is a striking combination of realism and idealism, producing a figure that is both emotionally touching and formally precise.

The Sleeping Girl also illustrates the evolving role of funerary art in modern Greece. During the 19th century, Athens and other urban centers witnessed a flowering of monumental sculpture in cemeteries, reflecting both the influence of European artistic trends and the desire of families to commemorate loved ones with lasting memorials. Chalepas's work is a prime example of how personal grief, artistic skill, and cultural values intersected to produce objects of enduring beauty. The statue conveys both the sorrow of premature death and the hope for spiritual peace, offering a meditative experience for visitors to the First Cemetery of Athens.

Today, the original *Sleeping Girl* remains at the Afentakis family tomb, where it continues to attract admiration for its craftsmanship and emotional resonance. Recognizing the fragility of the marble and the importance of preserving Chalepas's legacy, the National Archaeological Museum produced a plaster cast in 1980. This cast is displayed publicly, allowing a broader audience to engage with the work while ensuring that the original is carefully preserved in the National Glyptothèque. The dual preservation strategy highlights the significance of Chalepas's sculpture not only as an object of personal memory but also as a cultural artifact of national importance.

The Stylites of the Olympieion

The Columns of Olympian Zeus, known as the Olympieion, stand today as monumental ruins in the heart of Athens, silently recalling the grandeur of antiquity. Yet beyond their architectural significance, the temple became, during the Ottoman period, the focal point of a remarkable set of legends concerning hermits who adopted the ascetic lifestyle of the Stylites, or "pillar-dwellers." These figures captured the imagination of both locals and travelers, blending Christian hagiographic traditions with the exotic mystique of aerial asceticism.

The practice of living atop a pillar originates with Saint Simeon Stylites the Elder, a Syrian ascetic of the 5th century CE, who famously spent thirty-seven years on a small platform atop a pillar in the desert. This radical form of devotion was believed to bring the ascetic closer to God by removing the body from worldly temptations and focusing entirely on prayer, meditation, and mortification. In the case of the Olympieion, several hermits emulated this practice in Athens, choosing the towering epistyles of the temple as their platforms, asserting that earthly life did not permit them to sufficiently purify themselves.

The English writer Elizabeth Craven, traveling in Athens in 1786, documented one such stylite who reportedly “did not descend even once for twenty whole years.” According to her account, the hermit survived entirely on the modest offerings of devout Christians, who lowered small baskets filled with bread, water, and other foodstuffs tied to ropes. Twice daily, these provisions were sent aloft, allowing the ascetic to maintain his extreme seclusion while remaining connected, in a symbolic sense, to the faithful below. Such stories highlight the tension between human endurance and divine devotion, capturing the fascination Europeans held for the exotic forms of piety observed in Ottoman-ruled Greece.

The French traveler Louis Jacques Lacour adds further testimony to the phenomenon. He recounts a stylite who lived for eighteen years on the epistyle between the fifth and sixth columns of the temple’s eastern façade. According to Lacour, the hermit received weekly supplies via a rope ladder and did not descend for six consecutive years. These accounts indicate not a single isolated figure, but a succession of stylites, each seeking spiritual transcendence atop the columns. Remarkably, some of these ascetics were Muslims, demonstrating the cultural permeability of the region and the broader human fascination with extreme forms of devotion, regardless of religious affiliation.

One striking example involves a Turkish ascetic who adopted the stylite lifestyle during the period of the Greek uprising. In imitation of the Greek hermits, he ascended the temple, remaining isolated for an extended period. However, his fate was tragic: local Greek insurgents, suspicious of his intentions and fearing espionage, killed him, believing he was aiding Ottoman forces. This episode underscores the fraught political and social context in which these practices occurred, blending religious asceticism with the dangers of a city under occupation and revolt.

The physical challenges faced by these stylites were extreme. Proust Antonin, in his 1857 travelogue *Un hiver à Athènes*, recounts the testimony of one hermit, who described the harsh conditions atop the columns: “I was so scorched by the terrible cold that very often the nails of my feet fell off, and the crystallized water hung from my beard like stalactites.” Such descriptions reveal not only the physical suffering involved in this practice but also the extraordinary resilience and devotion of the individuals who undertook it. Exposure to sun, wind, rain, and snow for years on end exemplifies the ascetic ideal of enduring the hardships of the material world to achieve spiritual elevation.

The legends of the stylites also had a profound cultural and symbolic resonance. For Ottoman Athens, these figures became living markers of faith, inspiring awe among local Christians and curiosity among foreign travelers. They were celebrated in memoirs, travel narratives, and illustrations, forming part of a broader European fascination with “exotic” religious practices in the Eastern Mediterranean. Moreover, the stories of the stylites atop the Olympieion illustrate the layered history of Athens itself: a city where ancient ruins were not merely remnants of the past, but living spaces that intersected with contemporary religious, social, and political life.

The “Lament of the Columns” and the “Time of the Column”

The Olympieion has long captured the imagination of locals and travelers alike. Beyond its architectural grandeur and historical significance, the temple also became the center of vivid folklore and superstition, particularly surrounding the fate of its remaining columns. One of the most enduring tales concerns the so-called “Lament of the Columns,” an eerie phenomenon reported when a standing column fell or collapsed.

According to oral traditions recorded during the Ottoman period, villagers living in modest huts near the ruins claimed that, whenever a column collapsed, a mournful and haunting wail emerged from the marble itself. This lamentation, described as long, continuous, and deeply sorrowful, was believed to convey the anguish of the ancient stones, which had witnessed centuries of devotion, conquest, and decline. The Ottoman authorities, taking these accounts seriously—or perhaps fearing the superstitious wrath of the populace—reportedly punished the voivode, the military commander responsible for allowing the demolition or disturbance of the temple’s architecture, by executing him. This story reflects the intertwining of legend, fear, and authority in the cultural memory of Ottoman Athens, where even monumental ruins were considered animate witnesses to the city’s fortunes.

In modern history, a particularly dramatic incident reinforced the power of these beliefs. On 14 October 1852, a violent hurricane struck Athens with unprecedented force. The Finnish academic Wilhelm Lagus, who was present at the time, documented the havoc in his diary: “Everything was creaking, even in our interior apartment. The wind carried off chimneys, windows were shattered, and the terrible storm raged throughout the night with all its might.” The aftermath revealed widespread destruction: rooftops torn from houses, trees uprooted and intertwined, damage to the Royal Garden, toppled kiosks, and the loss of the city’s finest cypresses and acacias. Amid this devastation, the sixteenth column of the Olympieion collapsed, marking a dramatic moment of collective trauma for the Athenians. In addition, two columns of the Erechtheion, another prominent Athenian monument, also fell during the same storm.

The collapse of the column prompted a profound response from the city’s inhabitants. According to the historian Georgios Tsokopoulos, the entire population gathered at the temple to mourn the misfortune. The fallen column became a symbol of loss, decay, and vulnerability, prompting debates on whether it should be restored. Queen Amalia, concerned with preserving the city’s monuments, consulted the Archaeological Service for guidance. Leading archaeologists Lambros Pittakis and Dionysios Rangavis advised against re-erecting the column, citing concerns about authenticity, structural integrity, and historical preservation. Respecting their expertise, the queen refrained from further intervention, leaving the ruins as they stood.

Despite the widespread destruction caused by the hurricane, it was the fallen Olympieion column that lingered most vividly in public memory. Its collapse left a lasting impression on Athenians, who referred to the event as the “Time of the Column”. For many, the fallen stone was not simply an architectural casualty but a tangible omen, a bearer of misfortune. Ancient beliefs were revived: it was thought that each fallen column released long-buried “deaths” or malevolent forces into the city, influencing subsequent events. Two years after the collapse, a devastating cholera outbreak swept through Athens, reinforcing the superstitious connection between the fallen column and civic calamities.

The story of the Lament and the Time of the Column also illuminates the ways in which Athenians have historically related to their monuments. For centuries, ruins were not merely inert stones but active participants in the city’s spiritual and social life. The fallen column symbolized the fragility of human achievements, the relentless passage of time, and the intersection of nature and culture. The legends surrounding it reveal a city grappling with modernization, natural disasters, and the preservation of its ancient heritage. In this context, the lamenting column becomes both a literary motif and a cultural metaphor, embodying the sorrow, resilience, and collective memory of Athens itself.

The Fertility “Slide” or “Polisher”

Throughout the centuries, the neighborhoods surrounding the Hill of the Nymphs in Athens have acquired a rich tapestry of local toponyms, each reflecting the city’s layered history and the interplay between its geography, folklore, and social practices. Among these, one particularly curious site stands out in the Theseio district, known variously as the *kylistra* (“slide”) or *xouliastra* (“polisher”). Later historical sources also refer to it as *tsoulithria*, *tsouliastra*, or *tsoulistra*, emphasizing its distinctive function and cultural significance. While many smooth and slippery rocks in Athens were generically called *tsoulithres*, denoting natural “slides” used for play or amusement, the *xouliastra* gained a specific reputation for its connection to a mysterious fertility ritual that persisted across centuries.

The *xouliastra* is located east of the Athens Observatory, in a rocky area that rises above the surrounding neighborhoods. Its surface is noticeably smooth and polished, the product not only of natural erosion but also of repeated human use. Historical accounts suggest that the ritual associated with this stone may date back to medieval times, and possibly even earlier, surviving into the final decades of the 19th century. The practice involved women, often barren and desperate for offspring, who visited the stone in secrecy under the cover of night. These women, whether Christian or Muslim, would approach the slide alone, demonstrating both courage and devotion, and engage in a practice that combined physical action with magical incantations.

According to the ritual, each woman would sit at the summit of the polished rock and slide down to its base. This act was accompanied by incantations and whispered wishes—words whose precise content has been lost over time. The participants believed that the stone itself possessed an almost supernatural efficacy, capable of granting fertility to those who approached it with sincere desire. The repeated sliding over hundreds of years gradually smoothed the rock’s surface, leaving a visible testament to its long history of ritual use. Danish traveler Christiana Lüth, wife of King Otto’s chaplain, described a related practice in her diary, referring to a rock on the Pnyx hill:

“According to an old custom, every girl about to be married must, on the eve of her wedding, go sit upon this rock, wearing only a few clothes, and slide down to the bottom. In this way she will bear many children. The polish of the slide shows that it is used often. It seems that better results are obtained when it is rougher, and for this reason another stone nearby has begun to be used. This part of the hill is called the *Nymphaion*.”

The accounts illustrate how deeply ingrained these practices were in the popular imagination of Athens, blending folklore, superstition, and pragmatic hopes for family life. Sliding on the *xouliastra* was not merely a playful activity; it was a ritualized performance of desire and hope, often taking place under strict secrecy to protect the practitioner from potential ridicule or interference. The ritual embodies a remarkable continuity of belief in the magical properties of natural landscapes, where certain rocks or springs were thought to channel divine or supernatural power.

In later centuries, the ritual expanded in scope and significance. Not only did barren women seek the slide to ensure conception, but pregnant women themselves would perform the act to facilitate childbirth. The timing of the ritual also acquired symbolic importance: sliding on Holy Tuesday, within the framework of the Christian liturgical calendar, was regarded as particularly efficacious, intertwining ancient fertility traditions with more contemporary religious observances. This syncretism highlights the flexibility and

resilience of folk beliefs in Athens, which adapted to changing religious, social, and cultural contexts while retaining core symbolic meanings.

The xouliastra also serves as a cultural marker, reflecting broader notions of femininity, reproductive labor, and social ritual in Greek history. Women's use of the stone underscores both their agency and vulnerability within patriarchal society: while they were often socially constrained, they could engage in these secret rituals to exert influence over their destinies. Furthermore, the survival of this ritual into the 19th century, documented by foreign observers like Lüth, demonstrates how local practices persisted despite urbanization, modernization, and the formalization of medicine and science. The polished surface of the rock remains, even today, as a silent witness to centuries of hope, anxiety, and devotion, symbolizing the intimate connection between the city's natural environment and the human desire for continuity through family and fertility.

Saint John of the Column, the “Healer of Fevers”

In a quiet and somewhat hidden corner of central Athens, along Evripidou Street, there stands a modest church, a single-aisled basilica whose exterior offers little indication of the extraordinary secrets contained within. Despite being nestled amid modern apartment blocks, the church exudes a sense of calm and timelessness. Its unassuming walls and small garden create an oasis of spirituality in the midst of a bustling urban environment. Yet it is within this modest Christian edifice that an unexpected vestige of antiquity reveals itself: a monolithic ancient column, rising dramatically through the center of the sanctuary and piercing several meters above the tiled roof. Crowning the column is a finely crafted Corinthian capital, which completes an unusual juxtaposition—the presence of classical Greek architectural grandeur integrated seamlessly into a humble Christian space.

The incorporation of such ancient remains into Christian structures was not unusual in Greece, where the reuse of stone, columns, and capitals from classical temples was widespread. However, the column at the Church of Saint John of the Column reflects more than mere pragmatism or architectural convenience. Its preservation and prominent display signify the survival of an older popular cult, subtly transformed and preserved under a Christian guise. The column had long been considered sacred, and its continued presence within a Christian sanctuary reflects the syncretic blending of pre-Christian and Christian beliefs—a phenomenon that characterizes much of Greek religious history.

The church became renowned among Athenians as a site of healing, especially for fevers and other maladies. Historical records and local traditions reveal that devotees sought the intercession of Saint John of the Column for themselves, their children, and other family members, particularly in cases of persistent or severe illness. In past centuries, when diseases such as malaria were widespread across Greece, medical remedies were limited and often inaccessible. In such contexts, the combination of magic and religion served as a vital alternative, bridging the gap between superstition and devotion.

The rituals practiced at the church were both symbolic and deeply tactile. Worshippers would perform acts intended to “bind” the illness to the ancient column itself, thereby removing it from the afflicted individual. This involved attaching strands of hair, threads, ribbons, or small pieces of cloth to the column, which were then sealed with wax or tied carefully. The belief was that the illness would remain fixed to these offerings, neutralized through the saint's intercession. Over time, as observed by Themistokles Philadelphus in

1902, the column became “covered with cotton or gilded threads,” an accumulation of centuries of devotion and healing practices. In some cases, entire circumambulations of the church were made with thread, further amplifying the symbolic containment of disease.

In addition to the thread ritual, special holy water practices were observed. On 29 August, the feast day of Saint John of the Column, worshippers brought jugs of water to the church, which priests blessed and returned to households. This water was then preserved as a ready remedy for future fevers or illnesses, often kept in special containers or under household altars. This practice exemplifies the enduring Greek folk tradition of blending material, symbolic, and ritual acts with prayer, a holistic approach to health and protection that combines tangible and spiritual elements.

The church also functioned as a locus of community and memory. Beyond its role in healing, it served as a site where local Athenians—especially women and children—could engage in ritual acts of devotion, reinforcing social bonds and maintaining continuity with ancestral practices. The prominence of the ancient column within the church reminded the faithful of the persistence of sacred space, even as the urban landscape evolved around them. It stands as a testament to the interweaving of Christian faith and pre-Christian traditions, offering a tangible example of how spiritual practices adapt while preserving echoes of the past.

Architecturally, the column is a striking example of classical form and technique. The Corinthian capital, with its acanthus leaves and volutes, demonstrates the refinement of Hellenistic artisanship and the aesthetic standards of ancient Athens. Its placement within the church was not purely decorative; it symbolized continuity, power, and divine protection. For the worshippers, the column was more than a relic—it was a living conduit of healing, a mediator between the physical and spiritual realms.

Even today, the Church of Saint John of the Column stands as a unique testament to the layers of Athens’ sacred landscape, where ancient ritual, folk belief, and Christian devotion coexist in harmony. It reminds visitors and worshippers alike that sacredness in Athens has always been a palimpsest of traditions, where the old and the new coexist, influence one another, and continue to shape the experiences and beliefs of the city’s inhabitants. The column, silent yet potent, continues to narrate a story of healing, hope, and the enduring human desire to negotiate the uncertainties of life through faith, ritual, and tangible acts of devotion.

The Sleeping Alexander Ypsilantis at the Pedion tou Areos

In the heart of Athens, within the expanse of the Pedion tou Areos, one encounters a striking funerary monument: the full-length statue of Alexander Ypsilantis, positioned solemnly in front of the Church of the Archangels. This statue, remarkable in both form and symbolism, follows the Koimomeni or “Sleeping Figure” type—a funerary motif long used to depict the deceased as peacefully resting, rather than in violent or dramatic repose. In this composition, Ypsilantis is shown lying atop a sarcophagus, his body rendered in serene repose, as if captured in the moment between life and the afterlife. The sarcophagus itself is adorned with delicate reliefs, including a coat of arms, laurel wreaths, and decorative motifs, which emphasize both the dignity of the individual and the ceremonial solemnity of the monument. Significantly, this statue constitutes the only known example of a male figure portrayed in this “sleeping” funerary type within the Greek context, where such depictions were traditionally reserved for female subjects.

The identity of the commemorated figure has been the subject of scholarly debate. Some references cite him as Alexander Ypsilantis, while others suggest Demetrios Ypsilantis. However, the sarcophagus bears a clear inscription on its eastern façade, at the rear of the monument:

ALEXANDROS YPSILANTIS / GENERAL COMMISSIONER OF / THE FILIKI ETAIREIA

This inscription serves as both a historical marker and a political statement, commemorating Ypsilantis' pivotal role in the early revolutionary movements that eventually led to the Greek War of Independence. The monument itself, although unsigned, is generally dated to 1869, though debates over its authorship persist. Many scholars attribute the work to Leonidas Drossis, based on archival material held at the National Gallery of Greece. Within these records, a work identified as "Ypsilantis"—allegedly connected to the Polytechnic—appears in the artist's archive, further supporting this attribution. Additionally, according to the archive, Drossis' son confirmed the connection between the artist and the monument. Others, however, have suggested that Ioannis Vitsaris may have executed the statue, and historical correspondence, such as a letter from 1843 by the architect Christian Hansen, indicates his own involvement in designing a monument for Ypsilantis.

Originally, the statue was placed in the garden of the Polytechnic, where it generated considerable controversy. Contemporary observers and scholars argued that the monument was unsuitable for the location, partly because its solemn funerary character clashed with the educational and civic purpose of the Polytechnic grounds. Over time, the statue suffered acts of vandalism, reflecting both political tensions and public ambivalence toward monumental commemorations in a rapidly changing Athens. In 1964, the statue was relocated to its present site in the Pedion tou Areos, a park that already contained cenotaphs honoring Alexandros Praïdis, the Sacred Band of 1821, and the fallen of Domokos (1897). This relocation provided a more appropriate, contemplative environment for the monument, aligning it with other commemorative and patriotic sites.

Significantly, on 27 October 1964, the remains of Alexander Ypsilantis were repatriated from Vienna and interred within the monument itself. It is most likely at this time that the inscription referencing his role as General Commissioner of the Filiki Etaireia was added, further linking the statue to the historical and patriotic memory of the Greek struggle for independence. The repatriation of the remains transformed the monument from a purely sculptural object into a cenotaph with both symbolic and tangible historical significance, making it a focal point for remembrance ceremonies, patriotic commemorations, and historical education.

Artistically, the statue demonstrates a masterful blend of classical and 19th-century sculptural ideals. The serene depiction of Ypsilantis' body resonates with Classical Greek notions of repose and heroism, while the detailed reliefs on the sarcophagus recall the ornamentation of Hellenistic funerary art. By portraying a male revolutionary figure in the *Koimomeni* type—previously reserved for young women—the artist emphasized not only the sacred and solemn nature of death but also the heroic qualities of the individual, highlighting his sacrifice and patriotic devotion.

Moreover, the monument serves as a testament to the interplay between memory, nationalism, and public art in 19th-century Greece. The choice of placement, the style, and the iconography reflect a deliberate effort to link the personal story of Ypsilantis with the broader narrative of Greek independence and nation-building. Visitors to the Pedion tou Areos can thus experience not only the aesthetic qualities of the

sculpture but also the layered historical and cultural meanings it embodies, from revolutionary heroism to the symbolic language of mourning and remembrance.

The Little Room of Alexandros Papadiamantis in Psyrri

Alexandros Papadiamantis (1853–1911) remains one of the most revered figures in modern Greek literature, often venerated as the “saint of modern Greek letters”. Born on the island of Skiathos, he grew up in a humble household; his father served as a priest, instilling in him a deep awareness of religious tradition and moral values that would profoundly influence his literary work. From an early age, Papadiamantis demonstrated both intellectual curiosity and literary talent, mastering the intricacies of language and developing a sensitivity to human character, nature, and social relations that would define his writing.

In pursuit of education, he moved to Athens, enrolling at the Varvakeios School, where he completed his secondary studies with distinction. Subsequently, he registered at the University of Athens, intending to pursue higher studies. However, financial difficulties and the pressing need to support himself interrupted his formal education. Despite these obstacles, Papadiamantis cultivated an extraordinary literary output, producing short stories, serialized narratives, journalistic essays, and devotional writings. His works, often steeped in moral reflection and social commentary, resonated widely with the Greek public, ensuring his place among the preeminent literary figures of his era.

Papadiamantis’s personal life, however, contrasted sharply with his literary fame. He lived modestly, almost ascetically, demonstrating indifference to material wealth and outward appearances. Known by contemporaries as the “monk in the world” (*kosmokalogeros*), he devoted himself entirely to writing, reflection, and church chanting. His reclusive lifestyle was centered in the Psyrri district of Athens, where he navigated a narrow existence among the vibrant urban life of the Monastiraki area.

Facing persistent difficulties in paying rent, Papadiamantis was offered refuge by Monk Niphon, a resident of the Church of Saints Anargyroi in Psyrri. Within the church compound, Niphon provided him with a small, modest chamber, resembling a monastic cell. This “Little Room of Papadiamantis” became a sanctuary for the writer, a space removed from worldly distractions where he could immerse himself fully in creative work. Within these simple walls, he composed some of his most celebrated writings, including the acclaimed novella *The Murderess* (*Fonissa*), which explores moral ambiguity, social norms, and the psychological depth of its characters.

The room itself, though humble in scale and decoration, retains profound historical and cultural significance. It reflects not only Papadiamantis’s ascetic lifestyle but also the intimate conditions under which much of modern Greek literary tradition was nurtured. The simplicity of the chamber—containing only a bed, a writing desk, and a few personal belongings—evokes the disciplined and contemplative environment that shaped the author’s thoughts and narrative style. This austere setting also underscores the profound tension between spiritual devotion and worldly poverty, a recurrent theme in Papadiamantis’s life and work.

Over the decades, the room was preserved as a symbolic site of literary heritage, attracting scholars, enthusiasts, and devotees who wished to connect with the environment that inspired one of Greece’s

literary saints. In 2021, the chamber underwent a careful renovation and restoration, ensuring its structural preservation and enhancing its accessibility to the public. Today, visitors can step into the same space where Papdiamantis labored, reflect upon his disciplined routine, and gain insight into the everyday conditions that shaped his creative genius. The room now functions not merely as a historical artifact but as a living memorial to the enduring influence of Papdiamantis's life and works.

In a broader cultural context, the Little Room exemplifies the intertwining of spiritual, literary, and urban history in Athens. Nestled within the bustling Psyrri district, the site bridges past and present, offering a tangible connection to the late 19th and early 20th centuries. It demonstrates how the city's sacred and residential spaces accommodated the lives of its most prominent literary figures, providing a framework in which creativity, devotion, and survival coexisted.