If we trust the available sources – though late and few – regarding the Athenian history in the time of the beginning of the sixth century, we are informed that the nine archons and the Areopagos Council were invested with judicial powers. Tradition has it that Solon introduced to these two institutions the People’s Court, the Heliaia. There are two main assumptions among modern scholars concerning the character of the archaic Heliaia: either it was the People’s Assembly in its judicial capacity, or it was a new institution. These two points of view show that the Heliaia is part of a wider debate about the localization of the Athenian public spaces and how they were structured during the archaic period. If we accept the first assumption, there is no reason to suppose the existence of a separate space/building; instead, we must search for the place where the Athenians met during the archaic period. If, on the contrary, we accept the second hypothesis, it is possible to think that a separate structure could have existed and search for its location.

As such, this paper examines whether a place which hosted the judicial meetings of the Athenian demos could have existed during the archaic period. This is a question that is directly related to the way we conceive and interpret the ancient sources regarding Athens of the sixth century as well as prompts us more generally to rethink the evolution of the Athenian constitution by paying close attention to the context of each period. Obviously, the possibility of not being able to identify a specific building among those discovered in the Agora of Athens or elsewhere does not mean that we should deny the existence of the People’s Court in the sixth century. The study of the archaeological findings along with the literary and epigraphic sources will allow us to draw a firmer conclusion as to the issue at hand. To this end, we should take into consideration the following four points: 1. The assumptions concerning the identification of a large rectangular structure at the southwest corner of the Agora, two of which are the most significant: the structure is identified either with the Heliaia, or with the Aiakeion. 2. The interpretation of the literary sources: most likely, the word “Heliaia” appears for the first time in the decree about the Athenian relations with Chalcis (IG I2, 40), dated in 446/5. Thus, it appears rather late if we consider Aristotle who attributes the Heliaia to Solon. This chronological distance between the date at which the Heliaia was theoretically introduced and the date it appears to judge a case, invites us to study the contemporary sources of Solon’s time and the texts of Aristotle. 3. The testimony of Diogenes Laertius (I. 66): he speaks of an “Heliaia” in front of which Pisistratus presented himself wounded and asked for a guard to be placed at his disposal. 4. The problem of the location of the archaic Agora. Although it is known that the classical Agora is situated at the northwest of the Acropolis, we cannot locate with certainty the Agora of the archaic period.