The archaic agora of Athens in context of sites of political assembly in Ancient Greece and the Ancient Near East

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To this day Athens is lauded as the first democracy in history. Among other things, this exclusive claim is closely tied to the agora, which was a crucial prerequisite for the development of democracy as a place of popular assembly and the civic centre of Athens. Already Homer treats the existence of open assemblies as a distinguishing feature of urban life: In his contrasting description of Greek and Cyclopean life, the latter is criticised as uncivilised due to its lack of assemblies, communal life and lawful order (Od. 9, 105-115). The presentation first aims to demonstrate that polis structures and sites of assembly existed also beyond the Greek world. As recent studies have revealed, a variety of public places existed in Mesopotamia capable of fulfilling various economic, commercial, religious and political functions. Archaeologically, these public places have been located at large crossroads, city gates and important buildings, such as temples and sanctuaries. The extension of large streets into squares can also be observed in archaic Greek poleis, which likewise show variety of central sites besides the agora proper.

As for the functions performed by these various assemblies, modern cultural studies suggest that public assemblies contain a potential power that can both stabilise and challenge dominant notions of the political. As Plato already observed, the power of the people is not confined to popular assemblies proper: In his Politeia, he mentions the courts, the theatre and military camps as further sites of discourse power that no one can escape (Plato, Pol. 492b4-d1).

Departing from a survey of various sites of assembly, one can then ask which religious or political functions the individual assemblies performed and who made use of them. The agora provided the elite in particular with a space in which to display their status most conspicuously. Xenophanes reports that the wealthy citizens of Colophon presented themselves on the agora adorned with precious garments, beautifully made-up hair and doused in fragrant scents. Aristotle adds that in Thessaly craftsmen and peasants were actually barred from entering the free agora (Aristot. Pol. 1331a30).

By comparison with other poleis, the agora at Athens developed relatively late. The final question this raises accordingly concerns the consequences of an intentional act of delimitation and design. The impact the agora had on urban life and the political empowerment of the citizens and how it affected the relations between religious and political space shall thus be evaluated in conjunction with the other forms of assembly discussed earlier.