

A HERO SHRINE IN THE ATHENIAN AGORA

(PLATES 15, 16)

DURING THE SIX CENTURIES before Solon's reform created the Agora in the lowlands north of the Areopagus, the Mycenaean and Geometric peoples frequently used the area as a burial ground.¹ When Athenians of the Archaic and Classical periods discovered or disrupted these early burials, as they often must have done in the course of leveling and building in the Agora, they sometimes honored the dead as ancestral heroes. In rare cases this honor was expressed in direct attention to the early graves; in 1955 the Agora staff discovered a rich Mycenaean chamber tomb which construction workers of the 5th century B.C. had twice entered and twice presented with votives of their own funeral *lekylthoi*.² More often around the Agora, honor to the heroized dead took the form of a votive pit or *temenos*, over or near the early graves, which was surrounded by boundary stones or a wall and became the cult place of the identified or anonymous hero or heroes.³ An elaborately constructed votive pit just west of the Panathenaic Way, near the northeast corner of the Temple of Ares, is probably such a hero shrine inaugurated in the 7th century B.C. in connection with one or more of the numerous tombs in the area.⁴ Near the southwest corner of the Agora square, archaeologists discovered in 1966 a triangular abaton of the late 5th century B.C. designated by its surviving boundary stone simply TO HIERO.⁵ About the time of the Peloponnesian War, the triangular walls were erected around a crude altar which marks the founding of this hero cult in the early 6th century B.C., most

¹ A short version of this article was read at the 80th General Meeting of the Archaeological Institute of America, Vancouver, 1978; see *Abstracts*, vol. 3, p. 18. The author would like to extend his thanks to those who contributed to this article: to Homer A. Thompson for suggesting this study and making many valuable contributions to it; T. Leslie Shear, Jr., Director of Agora Excavations, for use of the Agora research facilities; William B. Dinsmoor, Jr., for the drawing of Figure 1 and advice on architectural matters; Abigail Camp for her drawing of Figure 2; Alan Walker for photographs of the hero shrine; and Grinnell College for research funds.

² H. A. Thompson and R. E. Wycherley, *The Athenian Agora*, XIV, *The Agora of Athens*, Princeton 1972 (= *Agora* XIV), p. 120; *Hesperia* 22, 1953, pp. 47-48; E. D. Townsend, *Hesperia* 24, 1955, pp. 195-196, 202; S. A. Immerwahr, *The Athenian Agora*, XIII, *The Neolithic and Bronze Ages*, Princeton 1971 (= *Agora* XIII), Tomb VII, p. 184. Similarly, excavators in the Agora found evidence that 4th-century workmen shifted the location of a monument when its foundations intruded on a Mycenaean tomb: Thompson, *Hesperia* 22, 1953, p. 47.

³ For the common association of heroa and civic centers, see R. Martin, *Recherches sur l'agora grecque*, Paris 1951, pp. 194ff., "Les cultes héroïques et funéraires"; for the Athenian Agora in particular, see *Agora* XIV, pp. 119-121.

⁴ Thompson, *Hesperia* 27, 1958, pp. 148-153.

⁵ G. V. Lalonde, *Hesperia* 37, 1968, pp. 123-133; cf. Wycherley, *Phoenix* 24, 1970, pp. 289, 291; *The Stones of Athens*, Princeton 1978, pp. 192-194; for a similar triangular hero shrine at Eretria, see K. Schefold, *AntK* 9, 1966, pp. 120-123; *Archaeology* 21, 1968, pp. 277ff., C. Bérard, *Eretria*, III, *L'Hérôon à la porte de l'ouest*, Bern 1970, pp. 56-64.

likely to honor rich Mycenaean and Geometric tombs of the sort that excavators have found in the area. Near by, below the slopes of Kolonos Agoraios, a walled family burial plot of the 8th century B.C. underlay a trapezoidal area which was never built over in ancient times (Agora grid F-G 12-13). Even when the precinct was flanked by the Tholos and the Strategeion for which it served as a forecourt, it had the appearance of a hero shrine, and this identity is corroborated by an enclosure wall and tetrastyle Doric propylon added about the time of Augustus. At some time the heroized dead of this cult may have become identified with a particular Athenian hero, Strategos, probably because of the proximity of the shrine to the Strategeion.⁶

It is the purpose of this article to add another chapter to the history of Athenian honor of the heroized dead by examining a shrine which was discovered some time ago but has received little publicity. Its remains, which were partly exposed by A. W. Parsons in 1934 and investigated further by H. A. Thompson in 1965,⁷ underlay the terrace of the Middle Stoa toward its east end (Agora grid M 14). Its easternmost point is 48.04 m. from the eastern end of the Stoa and the orientation of the temenos differs from that of the Stoa by 2° 35' in a southwest-northeast direction. All that remains of the shrine is from its south side: the sill and some parapet blocks of the south wall, and adjoining at right angles, parts of the east wall and the cuttings in bedrock for a part of the west return wall (Pl. 15:a; Fig. 1:a). Thus, the structure was rectangular, possibly square, though the full dimensions could not be recovered. Its north side was obliterated early in the 2nd century B.C. with the construction of foundations for the north terrace wall of the Middle Stoa (Fig. 1:b), and, judging from the fact that the sill of the heroon lies 1.18 m. below the euthynteria of the Stoa, all that remained of the shrine was buried beneath the terrace floor. The remnant of the east wall was later built over by a semicircular corridor which connected the courts of the Late Roman Gymnasium.

The heroon was well designed and carefully constructed. Its lower structure consisted of a course of massive gray limestone sill blocks, of which the south side with marble stele beddings at the corners is preserved in its full length of 7.10 m. One full block of the east sill, 1.10 m. in length, abuts on the southeast stele bedding. The extant sill blocks were set in bedrock cuttings to an average depth of a few centimeters and then the lower parts of the blocks were backed with 0.15 - 0.30 m. of excavated bedrock or gray clay (Fig. 1:c). The sill course showed a better face to the outside of the temenos with the outer sides of its blocks brought into alignment, carefully smoothed at their upper surfaces and marked with a ledge at the intended ground level, about 0.11 m. below the top of the sill. The inner face of the sill is finished uniformly from top to bottom with no marks other than one or two sinkings about halfway up each block, which were probably used for handling. At a few places within the temenos excavators found a hard level of gravel and earth about 0.10 m. below

⁶ *Agora XIV*, p. 73.

⁷ Thompson, *Hesperia* 35, 1966, pp. 48-49; *Agora XIV*, p. 120.

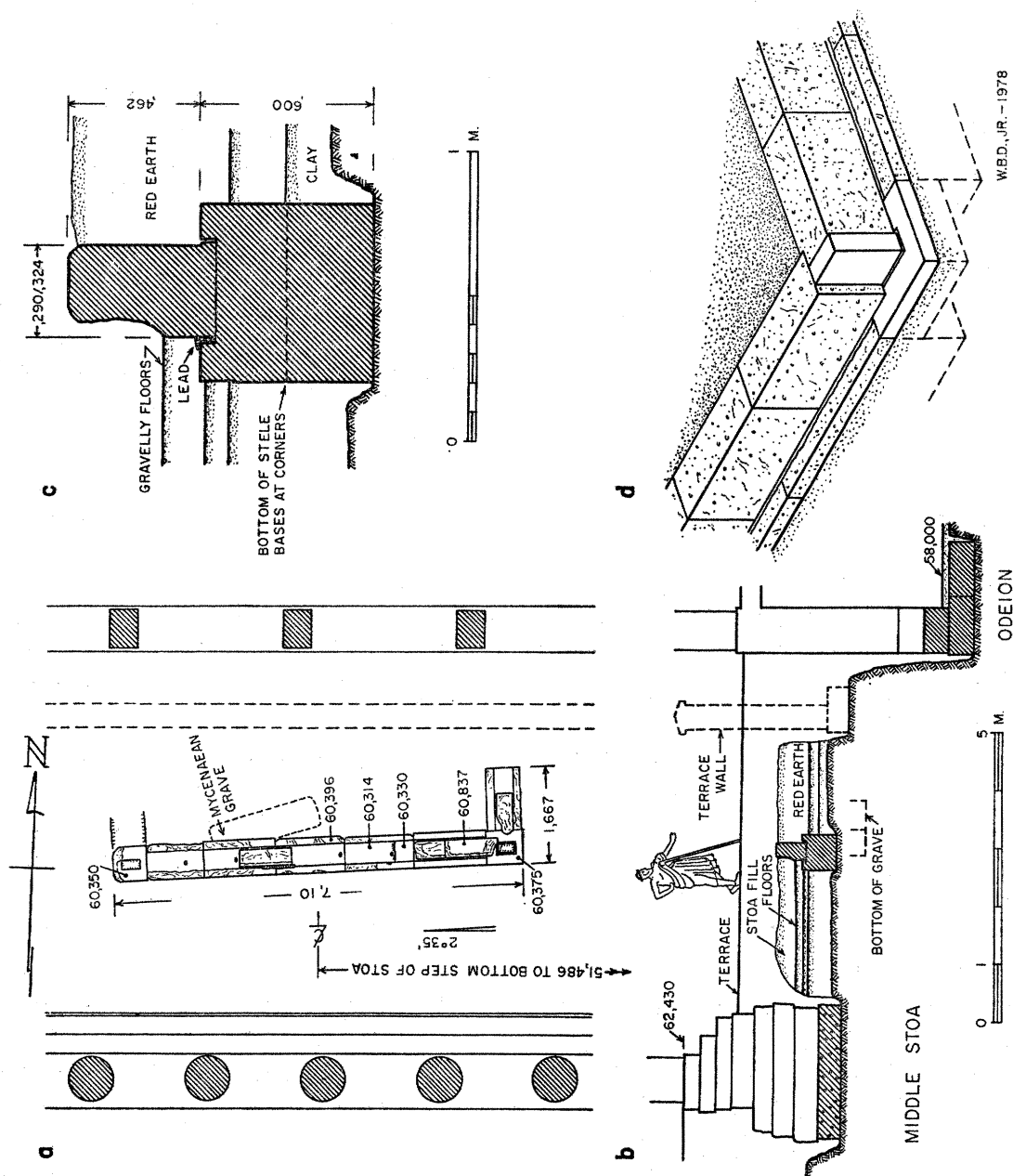


FIG. 1. A hero shrine in the Athenian Agora.

the top of the sill. This level corresponds to the original level outside the shrine, and both probably represent the ground level at the time of construction (Fig. 1:c).

A channel 0.05 - 0.07 m. deep was cut in the top of the sill course, and into it thin orthostate blocks (maximum preserved dimensions: H. 0.52 m.; Th. *ca.* 0.32 m.; L. 0.92 m.) were set and secured with generous quantities of lead to form a parapet (Pls. 15:a, 16:a).⁸ Where the orthostates are now missing, pry holes used to lever the blocks into place are visible at intervals in the bottom of the channel. On the south sill, two complete orthostates and half of another survive, while on the east return wall there is part of a fourth. The upper edges of the orthostates are worn and irregular, and this condition along with the thinness of the blocks makes it unlikely that the wall was of more than one course or much higher than its preserved maximum. Erosion of the soft Piraeus limestone of the orthostates appears to be the result of long-term weathering and wear during the life of the shrine; it is distinct from the pillage of blocks which probably occurred during Late Roman times when the foundations of the Middle Stoa were damaged at the same level. Although the outer faces of the orthostates are greatly worn at street level, there is evidence in places that they were dressed smooth before setting, whereas the inner faces, to judge from the setback one or two centimeters above the level of the sill channel (Fig. 1:c), received their final dressing only after being set in the sill. This irregular treatment and the absence of wear on the inner surfaces of both sill and parapet suggest that the heroon was an *abaton*, or closed precinct. When the inside of the shrine was excavated, masses of red earth containing broken roof tiles and a few fragments of Hellenistic pottery were found at various levels, but it is doubtful that this material is as early as the wall (see below, the discussion of dating).

The two surviving corners of the temenos are formed by marble stele beddings whose dimensions (0.06 m. square) fit neatly with the ends of the sill blocks (Pls. 15:a, 16:b). The stelai, which have not survived, were undoubtedly boundary stones. The beddings are flush with the top of the sill, but their depth (0.30 m.) is only half that of the sill blocks (Fig. 1:d). They are neatly picked all around except on the inner sides abutting against the sill where they are dressed with a rough anathyrosis. Both beddings are worn as if subjected to considerable traffic, and the northwest corner of the west block is broken away (Pl. 16:c). At the east corner, a slight channeling of the bedding block in line with the sill channels and a slight undercutting of the orthostates at the same point show that the parapet blocks overlapped and rode on the beddings so as to abut directly against the stelai (Fig. 1:d).

The locations of pry holes in the south sill channel show that the orthostates were put into place from east to west, the first being levered up against an east stele already

⁸ This technique of setting orthostates in a channel is similar to that occasionally used in the setting of multiple stelai, e.g. the sill comprising a couple of blocks that was re-used in the south side of the north porch of the Royal Stoa; in all likelihood this sill originally held some of the multiple stelai ("walls"?) on which was engraved the revised version of the Laws of Solon at the end of the 5th century. Cf. *Hesperia* 40, 1971, p. 271, fig. 1 on p. 245 and pls. 47, 48:a, 49:a.

in place and the last dropped into the last space against the west stele.⁹ This order of construction, the exceptional use of marble in the stele beddings, the wear on the stele bedding blocks even where they abut against the sill, the shallowness of the bedding blocks in comparison with the sill, and the fact that the orthostates formed peculiarly uneven corners with the stelai (Fig. 1:d) suggest the possibility of an early phase of the sanctuary delimited only by horoi which were later linked by sill and parapet. Such an evolution would have a close parallel on Delos in a shrine whose four stelai, inscribed with the word ABATON, were in use from the late 5th or early 4th century, but were joined by a semicircular wall in Hellenistic times.¹⁰

The stelai at the surviving corners were ripped from their sockets, leaving at the west a misshapen mass of lead and at the east fragments of island marble from the stele and the surrounding lead in its original form; the lead yields the exact lower dimensions of the stele: Th. 0.15 m.; W. 0.28 m.; socket depth 0.07 m. (Pl. 15:b). The use of island marble for the horoi would suggest that they are dated not much later than the middle of the 5th century B.C. A survey of the unassigned horoi found in Athens produced just one stele, Agora I 2618, inscribed simply [H]OROΞ, whose date in the mid-5th century B.C. is compatible with the chronology of the shrine (see below) and whose marble and dimensions resemble the traces left in the socket (Pl. 16:d).¹¹ The temenos in its original condition probably had stelai at all four corners, the kind of generous allotment of horoi which was common around small sanctuaries. For lack of other evidence, the identity of this heroon is apparently lost with its stelai.¹²

Evidence for dating the construction of the hero shrine is neither plentiful nor unambiguous. The construction trench of the sill with its fill of excavated bedrock or clay produced no datable pottery. The lowest fill inside the temenos and the stratum at the upper ten centimeters of the sill on its north side yielded a small lot of Hellenistic

⁹ The author is indebted to W. B. Dinsmoor, Jr. for this observation.

¹⁰ See F. Courby, *Délos, V, Le Portique d'Antigone ou du nord-est et les constructions voisines*, Paris 1912, pp. 97-102; cf. the Tritopatreion in the Athenian Kerameikos, where the Archaic boundary stone was incorporated into the 5th-century peribolos wall. For the Tritopatreion cf. Judeich, *Topographie*², pp. 410f.; D. Ohly, *AA (JdI 80)*, 1965, pp. 327f.; J. Travlos, *Pictorial Dictionary of Ancient Athens*, New York 1971, pp. 302f.

¹¹ B. D. Meritt, *Hesperia* 21, 1952, p. 359, no. 6, pl. 90. This stele was found near the hero shrine in a modern wall just east of the East Building (Agora grid P 14). Although its dimensions are not precisely those left in lead at the southeast stele bedding, it is close enough that it might have belonged to one of the other corners.

An unpublished boundary stone in the Agora collection (I 5784) has the thickness of the heroon socket, but its width is not preserved. It has a fragmentary text: --]ΔΗ/
--]ΟΞ

¹² The hero or heroes might not have been named even on the stelai. The inscriptions on many horoi, bases and dedications were simple anonymous descriptions like τῷ ἥρω or τοῦ ἱεροῦ, and although many of these must have been standard even when the hero was well known (e.g. the shrine reliably identified as that of Kodros has a horos of the mid-5th century B.C. inscribed only *hópos τῷ ἡερό*: see J. Travlos, *op. cit.* [footnote 10 above], pp. 332-334), others may have referred to heroes who were nameless even in antiquity. For other named and nameless heroes and heroa, see S. Rotroff, *Hesperia* 47, 1978, pp. 204ff.

sherds, the most conspicuous of which were fragments of a moldmade relief bowl (Agora P 4825 a-d; Fig. 2; Pl. 15:c). The piece is decorated in relief from the rim downward with bands of running-wave pattern, dolphins, flying water birds and tendrils, on the body with a floral pattern of alternating slender leaves and plants, and in the base medallion with a rosette. These motifs tend to date the piece to about 200 B.C.¹³ Four coins found at the same levels as the pottery are of compatible vintage, but only two of them, because of their superior condition, are worth mentioning. One, from the outer edge of the south sill, is an issue of Argos (Agora M 304), with a head of Hera on the obverse and Athena Promachos on the reverse, datable to 250-229 B.C.¹⁴ The other (Agora M 305), found just south of the heroon near a footing of the Middle Stoa, is a Theban coin of the last quarter of the 3rd century B.C. Its types are a head of Demeter on the obverse and a standing figure of Poseidon on the reverse.¹⁵

If one were to take into account a generation or more for wear and circulation of the coins and then rely only on the ceramic and numismatic evidence just described, one would have to set the heroon's *terminus post quem* about the beginning of the 2nd century B.C. But this would give the shrine a life of scarcely 25 years before it was buried under the Stoa terrace. It is extremely doubtful that this is enough time to account for the extent of wear and erosion found on the orthostate blocks and stele beddings. It seems that the stratified evidence is to be associated with the end rather than the beginning of the sanctuary, and that the structure must be considerably older than the late 3rd century B.C. How much older cannot be closely determined, but its age might be approximated by analogy with dated shrines of similar function and construction. Excavations near by in the northwest corner of the Agora in 1971 unearthed one of the closest of these analogues, a small square enclosure which has been identified with the elusive Leokorion and in any case has the features of a hero shrine to the early dead of the area.¹⁶ This sanctuary seems to have been initiated in the Archaic period with a large natural rock serving as a rustic altar at its center; about 430 B.C., perhaps as part of a religious reawakening with the Great Plague of 430/429, it was enclosed by a poros wall which is similar in its sill and parapet to the hero shrine of the Middle Stoa terrace. Two small rectangular temene of the late Archaic era recently unearthed at Corinth also resemble the Middle Stoa hero shrine in form and function. The first, near the intersection of the Lechaion and Acrocorinth roads, was built in the Middle Corinthian period over the Protogeometric graves

¹³ For the examination and dating of these fragments the author is grateful to Susan I. Rotroff whose book on Hellenistic moldmade relief bowls is forthcoming in the Athenian Agora series, vol. XXII.

¹⁴ Cf. S. W. Grose, *Greek Coins*, Cambridge Univ. Press 1923-1929, nos. 6862-6864; *British Museum Catalogue, Peloponnesus*, p. 144, nos. 106-108.

¹⁵ Cf. Grose, *Greek Coins*, nos. 5628-5633; *British Museum Catalogue, Central Greece*, p. 41, nos. 81-89.

¹⁶ *Agora XIV*, pp. 121-123; T. L. Shear, Jr., *Hesperia* 42, 1973, pp. 126-130, 360-369; *Agora Guide*³, pp. 87-90; T. L. Shear, Jr. in *Athens Comes of Age* (A.I.A., Princeton Society and Department of Art and Archaeology, Princeton University), Princeton 1978, pp. 101f.

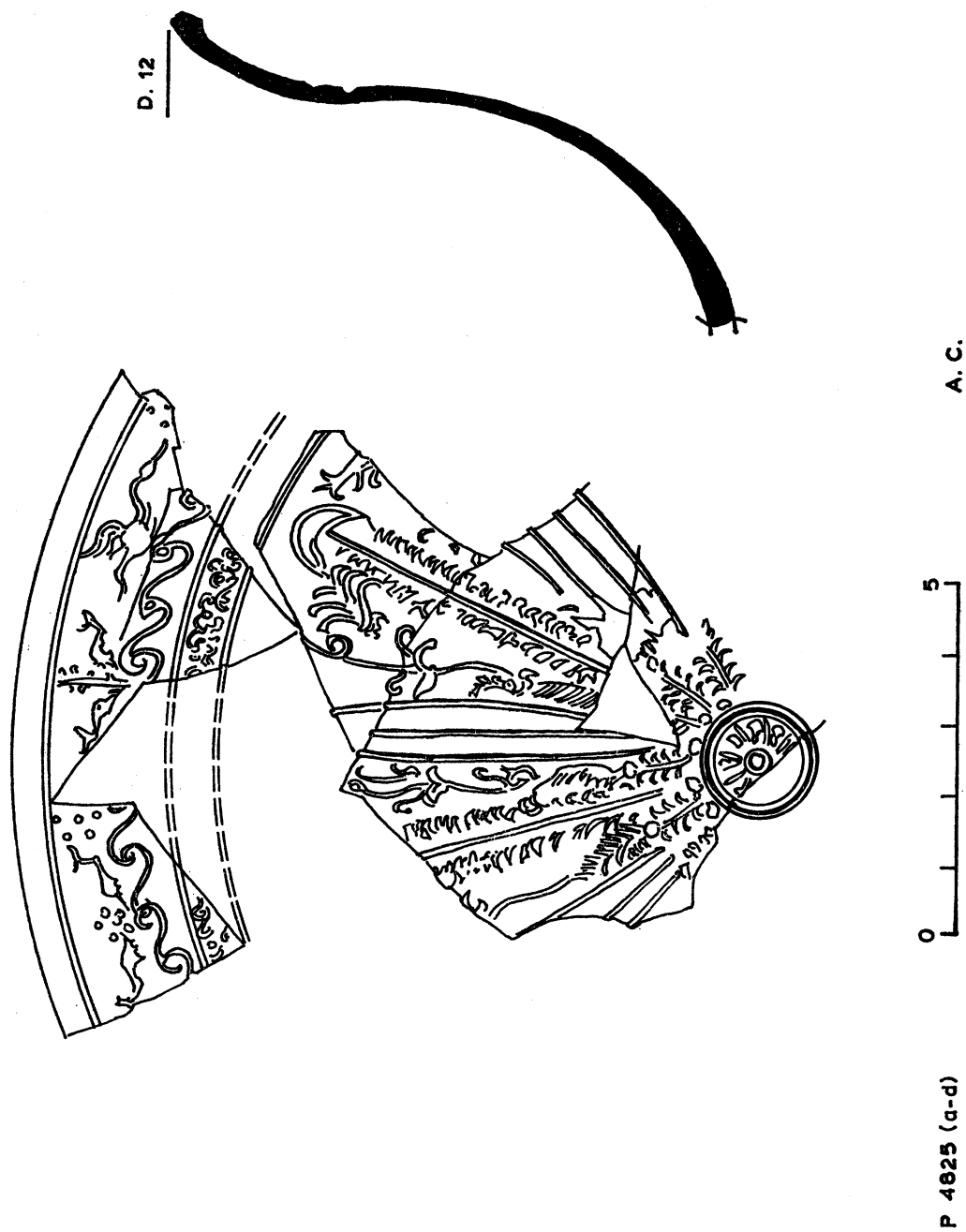


FIG. 2.

which it honored, and consisted of a parapet wall fastened in a channeled sill.¹⁷ The other Corinthian shrine was founded in the second quarter of the 6th century B.C., and though it was partly built over by the South Stoa in the latter half of the 4th century B.C. the remaining portion, which projected from the west end of the Stoa, continued as a sacred place at least till the late Hellenistic period.¹⁸

These analogies and the archaeological evidence of the Middle Stoa shrine itself suggest a history beginning in the 6th or 5th century B.C. when Athenians established the temenos to honor near-by tombs. In the immediate area the Agora staff found in 1935 and 1952 three Mycenaean cist graves, one of them (dated to Late Helladic III) lying directly beneath the south wall and interior of the temenos (Fig. 1:a, b),¹⁹ and in 1965 a fine Mycenaean chamber tomb with the remains of two wooden coffins.²⁰ All of these graves may have been part of a family plot and were certainly part of a cemetery in the area which had been frequently disrupted in the Archaic to Classical periods by leveling and construction. There is no sign of other burials beneath the shrine itself, though evidence on the north side would have been obliterated by construction of the Odeion of Agrippa. Whether or not the Classical Athenians were aware of these specific tombs, it is very likely that there were many other tombs in the area and that tombs could have been known from the survival of early markers at least till Archaic times.²¹ In any case, the shrine may well have been established to honor the dead of the area in general. Initially, boundary stones alone marked the temenos, but the parapet was added by the late 5th century B.C., perhaps another expression of the concern with hero shrines that was aroused by the traumas of war and plague.

If, as the erosion of the heroon walls suggests, the structure is to be dated as early as the 5th century, it is puzzling that there is no evidence in the form of potsherds or coins before the late 3rd century B.C. With the end of Macedonian occupation of Athens and Piraeus in 229 B.C., there was a renewal of interest in cults and their monuments under Eurykleides of Kephisia.²² If there was earlier stratified evidence,

¹⁷ See C. K. Williams, II, *Hesperia* 42, 1973, pp. 1-12; *Hesperia* 43, 1974, pp. 1-6.

¹⁸ *Idem*, *Hesperia* 47, 1978, pp. 1-12.

¹⁹ T. L. Shear, *Hesperia* 5, 1936, pp. 21-22; Immerwahr, *Agora* XIII, pp. 239-241.

²⁰ E. Vermeule and J. Travlos, *Hesperia* 35, 1966, pp. 55-78; Immerwahr, *Agora* XIII, pp. 242-247.

²¹ There is considerable evidence of such early markers: the stelai of Grave Circles A and B at Mycenae are well-known examples. In the mid-10th century B.C., graves in the Kerameikos at Athens were located in rows and marked head and foot with libation vessels and stelai, and in the 8th century monumental amphoras and kraters of the so-called Dipylon style were used: see Travlos, *op. cit.* (footnote 10 above), p. 299. In and around the triangular hieron at Eretria (see Schefold, footnote 5 above), bronze-kettle burials were found covered with large stones. The close alignment of Geometric graves inside a contemporary wall at Athens indicates that the exact location of successive burials was marked: see R. Young, *Hesperia*, Suppl. II, Athens 1939, p. 7; for a general comment on grave markers in the Geometric Period, see D. C. Kurtz and J. Boardman, *Greek Burial Customs*, Ithaca 1971, pp. 56-58.

²² For this spiritual revival of Athens, see W. S. Ferguson, *Hellenistic Athens*, London 1911, pp. 205-206, 237-239; for the dating of Eurykleides' regime, pp. 205, note 3, 256, note 3.

it may be that a clean-up of the area in and around the shrine at the time of Eurykleides accounts for its loss and the fact that the small accumulation of sherds and coins only dates from the late 3rd century on. In any case the shrine did not live long after this, and the time and circumstances of its demise are clear. In the 2nd century B.C. Athens enjoyed a renaissance of sorts from the patronage of Hellenistic monarchs who financed buildings throughout the city and especially in the southeast section of the Agora. When possible, the new buildings were oriented to older structures such as the Heliaia on the south side of the Agora square, but when old buildings were incompatible with the new plan, they were sacrificed. The new South Stoa II replaced South Stoa I, the orientation of the Stoa of Attalos required destruction of the Square Peristyle at the northeast corner of the square, and in the second quarter of the 2nd century construction of the Middle Stoa ended a small but no less aged and respected monument in this hero shrine.²³

While it is certain that construction of the terrace of the Middle Stoa destroyed the northern half of the temenos, buried the rest and thus ended the hero cult at that spot, it is also possible that the Athenians, rather than abandon the cult altogether, continued it at another location. The relocation of civil and religious institutions and monuments was not uncommon around the Agora.²⁴ Excavations in the Agora have yielded no trace of a similar sanctuary dating from the mid-2nd century B.C., but, since the original temenos was devoted to tombs in the immediate area, it is possible that the cult, if not abandoned altogether, was relocated in the large unbuilt area to the north where it would have been disrupted again with construction of the Odeion of Agrippa about the end of the 1st century B.C.²⁵ But in the absence of any clear evidence of new locations, it remains most probable that the hero cult perished with its original sanctuary in the early 2nd century B.C.

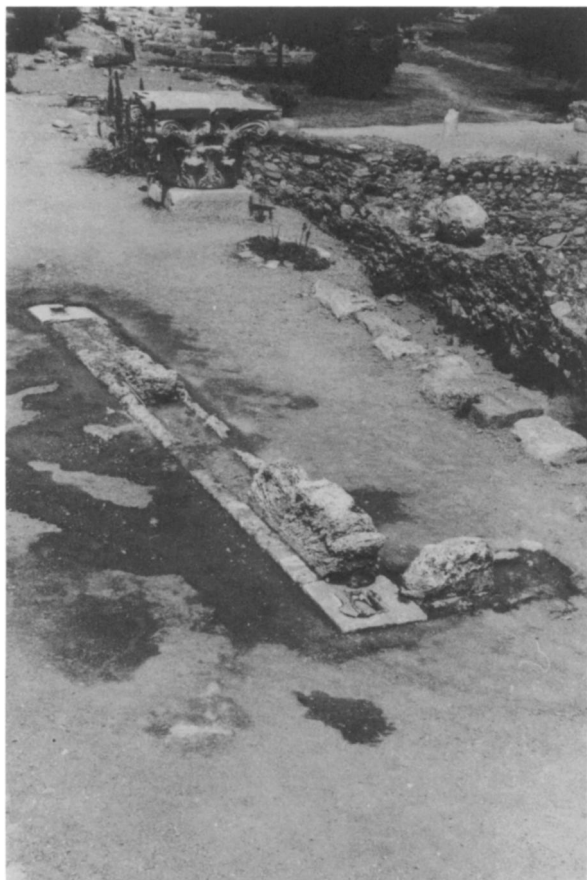
GERALD V. LALONDE

GRINNELL COLLEGE

²³ Construction of the Middle Stoa apparently began about 175 B.C.; cf. *Agora* XIV, p. 67.

²⁴ E. g. the Altar of Zeus Agoraios: R. Stillwell, *Hesperia* 2, 1933, pp. 140-148, H. A. Thompson, *Hesperia* 21, 1952, pp. 91-93; Monument of the Eponymous Heroes: T. L. Shear, Jr., *Hesperia* 39, 1970, pp. 145-222, *Agora* XIV, pp. 38-41; Temple of Ares: *Agora* XIV, pp. 162-165; in general see *Agora* XIV, pp. 160-168.

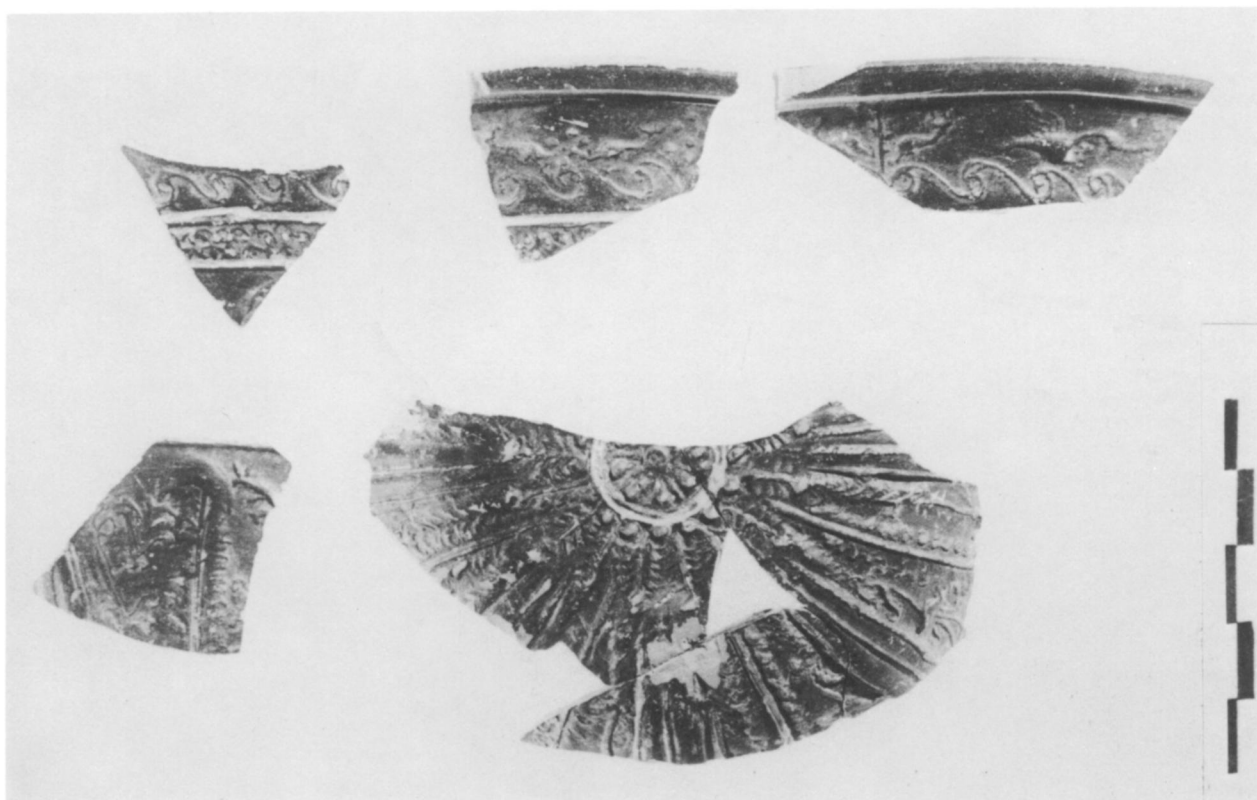
²⁵ Near the southeast corner of the Odeion, and dating from the same period as that building, is the foundation of a monument similar to the hero shrine in size, shape, and the location at its northern corners of cuttings which might have held stele beddings. Despite these similarities, the remote probability of a cult surviving two displacements makes its candidacy as a successor to the original temenos speculative at best. Furthermore, the scarcity of marble votives from old hero shrines much after the 4th century B.C. suggests that few hero cults continued beyond that period, and it may be that our cult was a victim of this decline sometime before the destruction of its shrine.



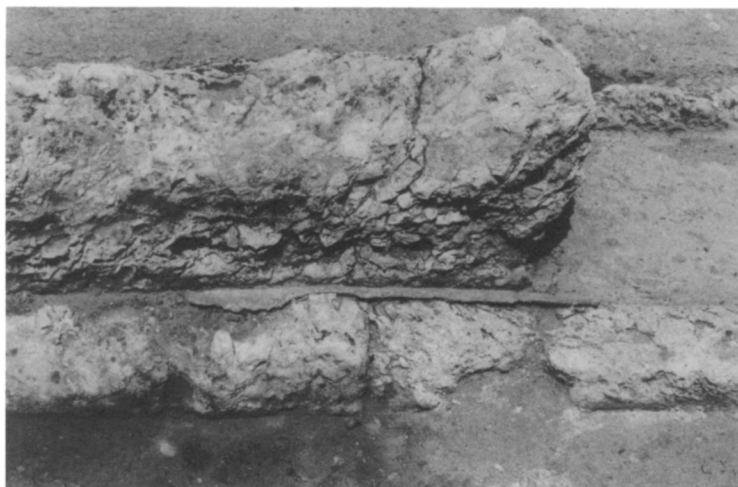
a. Remains from southeast



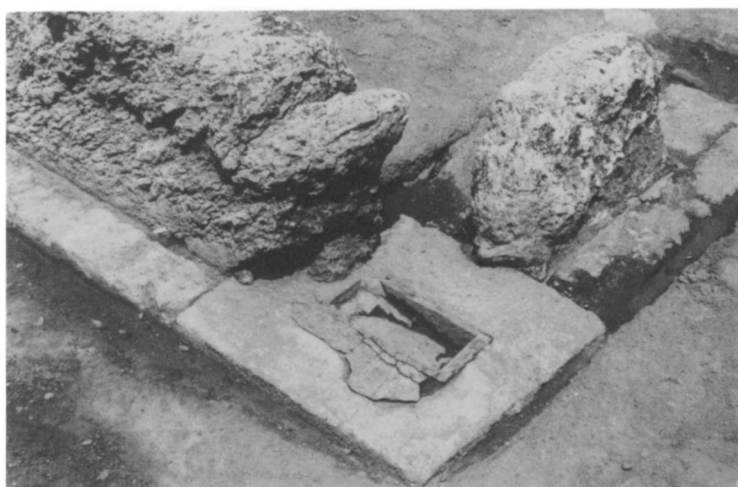
b. Southeast stele socket



c. P 4825



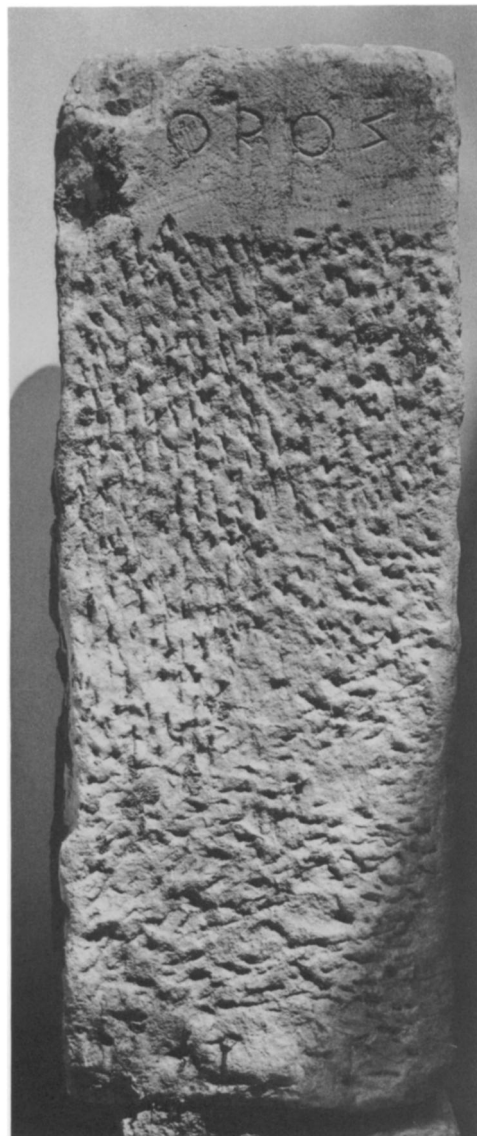
a. Orthostate set in channeled sill, from north



b. Southeast corner



c. Southwest stele bedding



d. I 2618