

# INDUSTRIAL RELIGION

The Saucer Pyres of the Athenian Agora

SUSAN I. ROTROFF



HESPERIA  
SUPPLEMENT

47

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*Hesperia Supplement 47*

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*The Saucer Pyres of the Athenian Agora*



SUSAN I. ROTROFF

*The American School of Classical Studies at Athens*

2013

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**Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data**

Rotroff, Susan I., 1947–

Industrial religion : the saucer pyres of the Athenian Agora / Susan I. Rotroff.  
pages cm. — (Hesperia supplement ; 47)

Includes bibliographical references and indexes.

ISBN 978-0-87661-547-8 (alkaline paper)

1. Agora (Athens, Greece) 2. Athens (Greece)—Antiquities. 3. Excavations (Archaeology)—Greece—Athens. 4. Funeral rites and ceremonies—Greece—Athens—History—To 1500. 5. Religious articles—Greece—Athens—History—To 1500. 6. Pottery, Greek—Greece—Athens. 7. Animal remains (Archaeology)—Greece—Athens. 8. Social archaeology—Greece—Athens. 9. Industrial archaeology—Greece—Athens. I. Title.

DF287.A23R69 2013

938'.5—dc23

2013043336

*In memoriam*

*Evelyn Byrd Harrison*  
*Evelyn Lord Smithson*



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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

This project began over 10 years ago, prompted by Lynn Snyder's examination of the seemingly unpromising remnants of burnt bone from the deposits that have come to be known as saucer pyres, and her request that I investigate the ceramic and stratigraphic evidence relevant to the deposits. She reawakened an interest that goes back to my earliest years at the Agora, when Steve Miller and John Camp excavated pyres in Greek Building Δ and the houses in section Ω, respectively. Determined to understand the purpose behind the deposits, I spent my excavation lunch breaks reading the notebook accounts of earlier discoveries. It was a discouraging enterprise, so I set aside thoughts of understanding the ritual and concentrated instead on dating the deposits, part of the project of *Agora* XXIX. Lynn's discovery that the bone from the pyres is exclusively that of animals, and particularly the species and parts of animals appropriate to sacrifice, coupled with the availability of new material from the excavations north of Hadrian Street and elsewhere in Athens, encouraged me to try again to make some sense of the activities of the people who left these deposits behind. This monograph is the result of that effort.

I am grateful, as always, to the staff of the Agora Excavations, who have supported my work in innumerable ways. The director, John Camp, encouraged me to study and publish this material, and conversations with him over the years have helped to shape my ideas about the phenomenon. He also initiated additional excavations in the area outside the southwest corner of the public square, where supervisor Laura Gawlinski spent several seasons clarifying the plans and stratigraphy of buildings where pyres had been found in the early years of excavation. I am particularly grateful to Laura for the energy and attention she devoted to these important but poorly preserved structures. Craig Mauzy and Angelique Sideris undertook the monumental task of photographing the pyres anew and, between them, supplied me with most of the illustrations in this book. Anne Hooton generously responded to a last-minute plea for a drawing, fitting my request into an already overloaded schedule. Charts and graphs are my own unless otherwise indicated; photographs, plans, and drawings were supplied by the Agora Excavations unless otherwise noted. Many of the artifacts required repair and conservation, provided by Karen Lovén

and her colleagues in the conservation lab. In collaboration with secretary Jan Jordan and registrar Sylvie Dumont, they also reorganized and stored the objects more securely. Jan and Sylvie dealt with my requests for access to the material, with the assistance of the guards of the Agora Museum. They cheerfully shouldered the extra work that my inventorying of many new objects visited upon them and often drew my attention to deposits and details I would not otherwise have been aware of. Agora volunteers, especially Joseph Lillywhite and Christine Smith, helped with the task of sorting through material in dusty tins and boxes stored in the basement of the Stoa of Attalos, and foreman George Dervos and his team retrieved and reshelved those same tins and boxes in aid of the project. Essential to it all, of course, was the work of the generations of excavators who devoted meticulous care to the excavation of the deposits—both the supervisors who recorded their discovery and the workers who found them and removed them from the soil.

For financial support I owe thanks to the National Endowment for the Humanities, which supported a year of residence in Athens dedicated to work on this project (2009–2010), and to Washington University, which granted me sabbatical leave for that year. I am grateful to the American School of Classical Studies at Athens for the scholarly support it supplies in the form of the Blegen Library, and for a “home” in Athens populated with talented scholars and students with a wide range of interests, whose questions, comments, and advice contributed materially to the development of the project. In particular I would like to thank the former director of the School, Jack Davis, for his invitation to speak about the pyres in the School’s lecture series, giving me the opportunity to draw my ideas together and present them to a knowledgeable audience. The Mobius and Interlibrary Loan systems, together with the Agora website built and maintained by Bruce Hartzler, have made it possible for me to continue my work at home in St. Louis. Bruce’s work has revolutionized the study of Agora material, and he deserves the hearty thanks of this and future generations of scholars for making the excavation records available worldwide.

Several colleagues have provided texts or information that I have incorporated into the manuscript. Maria Ntinou contributed Appendix I, on charcoal from the pyres, and Evi Margaritis arranged for the sorting of the organic remains recovered through flotation (carried out under the supervision of Amber Laughy) and contributed her expertise to the identification of the preserved plant material. Lynn Snyder provided me with information about the animal bone, in anticipation of her planned publication on that material. Phyllis Graham supplied a vivid, firsthand account of an exorcism at Archaia Nemea in 1981. To all of them I am grateful for the generous sharing of their knowledge, experience, and expertise.

I am indebted to Elizabeth Pemberton for information about relevant pottery at Corinth, and to Ioulia Tzonou-Herbst and Guy Sanders for facilitating access to it. Jutta Stroszeck kindly enabled me to examine the pottery from pyres at the Kerameikos, which I visited on a stormy day when she had also to deal with major flooding in her offices. Many others have shared information, advice, bibliography, and insights: the list is long, but important among them are Nancy de Grummond, David Jordan, Gudrun

Klebinder-Gauss, Kathleen Lynch, John Papadopoulos, Andrew Stewart, Sara Strack, and Barbara Tsakirgis. I also appreciate the many observations and corrections contributed by the learned anonymous readers tasked by the American School with the evaluation of my manuscript; they have saved me from many errors and prompted me to a fuller consideration of several features of the pyre phenomenon. For the meticulous care they devoted to the manuscript during the publication process, I would like to thank Gene McGarry, whose contribution went far beyond the usual definition of “proofing,” and my in-house editor, Michael Fitzgerald, whose wise advice resolved many thorny issues and whose gentle humor made light the work. The mistakes that remain are, of course, my own. Special thanks, as always, are due to my husband, Bob Lamberton, who, among many other kindnesses, has patiently helped me talk and think through the many conundrums that the pyres present.

Finally, I dedicate this volume to the memory of Eve Harrison and Evelyn Smithson, members of the formidable second generation of Agora scholars who joined the excavations after the Second World War. They were at the height of their powers when I first came to the Agora in 1970, and their work has provided models of intellectual acuity, meticulous observation, encyclopedic knowledge, creativity, insight, and daring that I have tried to emulate but can never match. I owe them a special debt for that, and for the support, encouragement, and friendship they offered me. I hope they knew how important they were to me.

Jerusalem



## INTRODUCTION

On the 10th of March in 1933, with the discovery of a small cache of pots in a Hellenistic layer, Eugene Vanderpool encountered a puzzle that has continued to exercise students of Athenian life for three generations. Vanderpool described the event in typically laconic style: “The following vases . . . were found together in a small pocket in the earth below a Hellenistic fill at KA:5. A few other fragments found with them, including two pieces of a BG skyphos with lines crossing diagonally on the reserved band above the base, discarded.”<sup>1</sup> Two similar discoveries followed in May,<sup>2</sup> and in subsequent years the numbers mounted, showing that these simple concentrations of pottery bore witness to a repeated and customary ancient activity. The nature of that activity, however, has remained a mystery. It is the goal of this study to present the complete evidence for such deposits, now numbering about 70, as they are documented at the Agora; to evaluate that evidence in the light of similar deposits discovered in Attica and elsewhere, and against the background of Greek ritual practice as it is known from written and archaeological sources; and to explore the motives that may lie behind the burial of these small but distinctive offerings in the Attic soil.

Buried burnt offerings are by no means rare, at the Agora or elsewhere in the Greek world, and they are not infrequently labeled “pyres.”<sup>3</sup> The phenomenon on which I focus here, however, constitutes a specific genus of ritual deposit, clearly defined by its contents and the manner of its deposition. In brief, the deposits consist of a suite of characteristic objects (mostly ceramic) found in shallow pits or clusters, together with burnt bones and other evidence of fire. The presence of burning justifies their traditional designation as “pyres,” though the German term *Brandopfer* does them greater justice, suggesting as it does a ritual function and dissociating them from cremation burials, with which they have nothing to do. Although no two pyres are identical in their content, the collection

1. Agora field notebook (hereafter “Notebook”) Z II, p. 265; pyre 25. All dates in this study are B.C. unless otherwise indicated.

2. Pyre 30, found on May 15

(Notebook Z V, pp. 809–810), and pyre 29, found on May 20 (Notebook Z VII, p. 1263).

3. E.g., the pyres outside the walls of the sanctuary at Eleusis (Kokkou-

Vyridi 1999, 2010). Cf. Van den Eijnde 2010, *passim*, for early Attic pyres in ritual contexts, which he links with ritual feasting (p. 49). Beyond Attica, see the deposits listed in Appendix IV.

of offerings they contain is repetitive; it is this that defines them and sets them apart from other deposits of possible ritual character. The object that occurs with the greatest frequency, a small, plain saucer, provides a further distinguishing label,<sup>4</sup> and the term “saucer pyre” has become the standard English designation for such deposits.<sup>5</sup> In this specific form, the pyres are a uniquely Attic phenomenon, and with few exceptions they are chronologically limited to the 4th and 3rd centuries.

Since these deposits were first recorded in the 1930s, various hypotheses have been put forward concerning the activities that they document, as I will outline below. The behavior that brought them into being has apparently escaped comment in literary and documentary sources, and the pyres now exist only as an archaeological phenomenon, defined purely by the manner of their deposition and the characteristic objects that they include. This study is therefore limited to deposits that share those characteristics, and it excludes others that may well have been laid down for similar motives but differ either in terms of their contents or the way in which they were deposited.

A perfectly preserved and excavated saucer pyre would lie in a well-defined pit or cluster, and traces of burning in the form of charred wood, ash, and burnt bone would be present. The pots would be nestled closely together and would include the following characteristic forms: one or more drinking cups, one or more lamps, and ribbon-handled and rilled-rim plates, all in functional sizes; miniature saucers and cooking pots (both the shallow lopadion and the deeper chytridion), and a miniature handleless lekane (Fig. 1). Only eight of the deposits included in this study conform in every detail to this ideal description.<sup>6</sup> Others lack one or more of the distinctive offerings, or have been found dispersed or disturbed, or preserve no evidence of burning or of bone. Whether to include such deposits in the tally has been determined on a case-by-case basis. The most doubtful cases are indicated by a question mark in the Catalogue.

Saucer pyres are limited to Attica but not to the area investigated by the Agora Excavations. In addition to the neighborhoods surrounding the public square, they have been found under private buildings just inside the city wall at the Kerameikos, in shops and houses to the south of the Acropolis (also within the walls), in the Piraeus, on the central plain of Attica, and perhaps on the island of Salamis (see Appendix II and Fig. 125). In this study I refer to these as “settlement” pyres; they are to be distinguished from “graveside” pyres, similar deposits found in close proximity to graves in the cemeteries of Athens and Attica (see Appendix III and Fig. 126), but that differ in some details from pyres within the city. Although the present study focuses on the Agora pyres, for which I have the most complete documentation, it also takes those other deposits into account, insofar as the published record permits.

4. The saucer is present in about 80% of the pyres found at the Agora, and in about 75% of those found elsewhere, as far as one can determine from the published information; see p. 25, below.

5. Other designations include “pyre burial” (Young 1951b, p. 110), “sacrifi-

cial pyre” (*Agora* XII, p. 45; Shear 1973a, p. 141; 1984, pp. 45–46), “ritual pyre” (*Agora* XXIX, p. 212), “ceremonial pyre” (Parlama and Stampolidis 2000, p. 92), or just plain “pyre” (*Agora* XIV, p. 16). The standard German terms are *Opferstelle* (e.g., *Kerameikos* XVII, p. 50) or *Brandopferstelle* (Knigge and

Kovacovics 1981, p. 388); in Greek, τελετουργική πυρά (Eleftheratou 1996–1997), and, folding interpretation into terminology, εγκαίνιον, “inauguration” (Andreou and Andreou 2000; Eleftheratou 2006, p. 8), or αναγισμός, “offering to the dead” (Eleftheratou 1996–1997).

6. Pyres 9, 18, 19, 21, 37, 40, 43, 60.

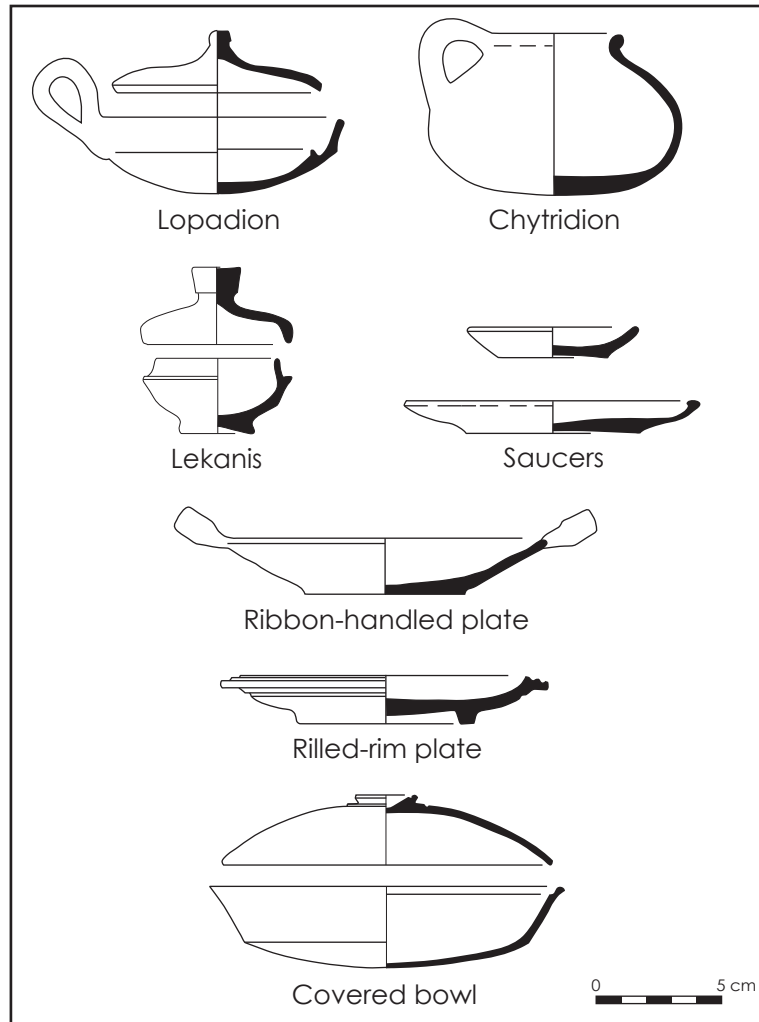


Figure 1. Characteristic pyre shapes: lopadion (P 28508, pyre 60), chytridion (P 17696, pyre[?] 45), lekanis (P 18543, pyre 44), small saucer (P 9717, pyre 21), large saucer (P 19870, pyre 35), ribbon-handled plate (P 28494, pyre 62), rilled-rim plate (P 18545, pyre 44), covered bowl (P 18581, pyre 46). Drawing S. I. Rotroff

## CHALLENGES AND METHODOLOGY

Like all archaeological assemblages, the saucer pyres present challenges to those ambitious to understand the behavior that created them. It is only rarely that a pyre has survived without any discernible disturbance, so that we may be confident that we are unearthing the entirety of what was originally buried. In 17 instances there is reason to believe, from the excavation account or the remaining objects, that there has been little or no significant disturbance of the deposit. In other cases the pyre has been partially cut away by later pits, walls, or even by later pyres; and 14 pyres have been thoroughly dispersed, spread throughout fills or dumped into wells, their existence recoverable now only by the presence of the characteristic shapes. A further problem emerges from the manner in which the pyres were buried. It is clear that the people who made these deposits did not take care to bury everything that they had used in the attendant ceremony. Even in pyres that show no evidence of post-depositional disturbance, both cinders and fragments of relevant pottery have sometimes been found outside the pyre itself, at some distance and on the level from which the pyre was dug.<sup>7</sup> In other cases, something is clearly missing (for example, the lekanis that

7. Young 1951b, p. 111; see, e.g., pyres 39 and 52.

should go with a lid in pyre 49), or the pottery is quite fragmentary (e.g., in pyre 30). Therefore we must always keep in mind that what is lacking in the archaeological assemblage was not necessarily absent from the living assemblage.

It would be useful, nonetheless, to have some idea of the degree to which the different vessel types were thought essential to the procedure. To this end, Table 3 presents the types of offerings found in the pyres and the number and percentage of pyres that contain each type (see below, pp. 18–19). The pyres are divided into three categories: the 17 that are most likely to have been substantially undisturbed; those for which varying degrees of disturbance can be inferred; and the dispersed pyres.

Modern recovery also presents problems. The Agora pyres have been excavated over a period of nearly 80 years by a cast of at least 20 different supervisors and uncounted workmen and student volunteers, each with different talents and standards of observation, recovery, and recording. Although a pyre is easy to recognize in the ground, understanding its relationship to the contiguous strata can be difficult, and the experienced Greek workmen of the past often had more success than the student volunteers of the present. Recording also varies. The best accounts include generous and perceptive written description and commentary, and plans, sections, and photographs of the pyres in situ. These, however, are rare. Only about half of the deposits were photographed before removal,<sup>8</sup> almost none were drawn in any detail, and precise information about the orientation and position of individual pots has rarely been provided. In the worst cases, there is no notebook account at all: as, for example, with pyre 63, found washing out of a scarp by a gardener during the winter,<sup>9</sup> or pyre 64, the discovery of which was not described.<sup>10</sup>

The apparent absence of written testimonia that could shed light on these deposits forces us to view the pyres themselves as our texts,<sup>11</sup> a procedure that has grown more familiar with the development of cognitive archaeology. Stating what ought to be obvious, but apparently is not, Robin Osborne has written that “archaeologists should not assume that religious practices can be discussed only when there are texts available as guides.”<sup>12</sup> In an essay introducing a series of articles on ritual deposits, he lays out a series of fundamental questions that should be addressed. How do we recognize a ritual deposit? How do we account for what was deposited (and, I would add, for the way in which it was deposited)? And why was this place chosen? These are some of the questions that I will attempt to answer in this study of the Agora saucer pyres.

8. Only one excavator (D. B. Thompson) provided an explanation: “Miltiades had them [the pots] out before I could photograph” (Notebook Φ VIII, p. 1518; pyre 58).

9. Notebook Ψ VII, p. 1379.

10. The deposit is known only from the inventoried pottery and a note in pottery notebook T XXIX,

p. 5622: “disturbed pyre burial. Frags of saucer.”

11. That so learned a scholar of Athenian religion as Robert Parker could do no more than style them “enigmatic domestic rituals” (2005a, p. 20, n. 55) suggests that they truly are unattested in written sources.

12. Osborne 2004, p. 1.

## THE PYRES EXPLAINED: EARLIER SCHOLARSHIP

Over the years, a wide variety of interpretations have been advanced to account for the saucer pyres. As early as 1935, Rodney Young remarked in his field-notebook account of the excavation of pyre 23 that it might be either a cremation burial, on the one hand, or “merely a dump of pottery, perhaps from a kitchen,” on the other.<sup>13</sup> The first published account, in Homer Thompson’s report of the 1947 excavation season, expands on the first of these hypotheses. Thompson described four pyres found among houses to the southwest of the public square,<sup>14</sup> remarking on the presence of bone and of pottery “obviously made for funerary use.” Because of the miniature size of much of the pottery and the “thinness of the bones,” he interpreted the pyres as the cremation burials of children and remarked that “the whole series deserves a special study.”<sup>15</sup> Such a study was soon undertaken by Young as part of his voluminous examination of the “Industrial District” southwest of the public square, where he had excavated many examples. The pyres, “somewhat reluctantly” interpreted as infant cremations, were published in his 1951 article on burial within the city, most of which was devoted to the Archaic cemetery that lay in the Industrial District.<sup>16</sup> From among the two dozen or so pyres that had been excavated up to that time, Young selected 14 of the least disturbed for full publication.

In support of his conclusions, Young first noted the similarity of the pyres to deposits he had excavated in the nearby Archaic cemetery, in terms of dimensions, the nature of the burning, and the placement of offerings. He pointed also to the funerary character of some of the objects in the pyres: dummy poros alabaster, clearly symbolic and of a shape frequently associated with burials; and ribbon-handled plates, known from earlier graves but almost totally absent from deposits of household pottery. He noted furthermore that pyre lekanides, chytridia, and lopadia had not been found in household deposits and expressed the opinion that their small size was appropriate to children. He was also able to point to a few examples of such shapes that had been found in graves.<sup>17</sup>

Young’s (and Thompson’s) thesis has met with mixed reviews. Robert Garland accepted the conclusion without reservations,<sup>18</sup> while Jean Rudhardt expanded it further, postulating that the deceased were not ordinary children, but those who had died very young, either naturally or by exposure, and that the pyre ritual did double duty as cremation and purificatory sacrifice.<sup>19</sup> Donna Kurtz and John Boardman, in their survey of Greek burial customs, were more circumspect; they cited the Agora pyres as a possible rare instance of infant cremation, but pointed out that they could also be explained as remains of burnt offerings, and not necessarily of a funerary character.<sup>20</sup>

Most scholars, however, rejected Young’s conclusions, though some perpetuated the idea of a funerary element. Brian Sparkes and Lucy Talcott considered the pyres briefly in the context of their 1970 study of the Archaic and Classical pottery of the Agora. Pointing to similar deposits that had, by that time, been found in Attic cemeteries, they preferred to see the pyres as the remains of purificatory or funerary offerings that might

13. Notebook B’ V, p. 811.

14. Probably pyres 37, 43, 44, 46.

15. Thompson (1948, pp. 166–167, pl. 46:3) illustrated the objects from pyre 37. He repeated this interpretation in his report for the following year (1949, pp. 215–216).

16. Young 1951b, pp. 110–134. The architectural contexts in which they were discovered were treated in a separate article in the same issue of *Hesperia* (Young 1951a).

17. Young 1951b, pp. 111–112.

18. Garland 1985, pp. 82, 161.

Ingrid Metzger put forward the same explanation for similar deposits at Eretria (Metzger 1978a, p. 4).

19. Rudhardt 1963.

20. Kurtz and Boardman 1971, p. 99.

be made either at graveside or in the home.<sup>21</sup> Two years later, Thompson and R. E. Wycherley elaborated on this notion, suggesting that the pyres documented ritual meals in memory of the deceased.<sup>22</sup> T. Leslie Shear Jr., however, divorced the ceremony from burial ritual, associating it purely with activities in the structures within which the pyres were found. The deposits, he believed, were best viewed as the remnants of sacrifices commemorating the construction or remodeling of the building, or purification rituals carried out when old tenants moved out and new ones moved in.<sup>23</sup> John Camp later noted, echoing Thompson's earlier comment, that the presence of animal bones (of which some clear instances had by then been found) and miniature cooking pots pointed to ritual meals, without suggesting their possible purpose.<sup>24</sup>

Meanwhile, similar deposits began to be found outside the area of the Agora Excavations (see Appendix II and Fig. 125). In 1981, Ursula Knigge and Wilfried Kovacovics reported *Opferstellen* (offering places) with the characteristic combination of drinking cups and miniature vessels, very much like the Agora pyres, under the floors of Building Z, just inside the city wall at the Kerameikos; more pyres subsequently came to light under the floors of two neighboring structures, Building X and Building Y.<sup>25</sup> Knigge and Kovacovics rejected the funerary connection, insisting that the deposits must be related to events in the history of the building in which they were found.<sup>26</sup> In her final publication of Building Z, Knigge presented these pyres, along with other groups of objects found under the original floors of the building, as undoubted *Bauopfer* (building offerings) documenting rituals associated with the construction and, in one case, minor remodeling of the building.<sup>27</sup> This interpretation has subsequently been applied to the Agora pyres. Two recent dissertations, by Rita Müller-Zeis and by Stefan Weikart, have included the Agora pyres in their catalogues and discussions of *griechische Bauopfer*.<sup>28</sup> Similarly, Ioanna and Elias Andreou have compared them to deposits of miniature vessels frequently found under the original floors of houses in Ambracia, which they associate with the construction of the houses.<sup>29</sup> Because such deposits have been found only in Ambracia, and not in the surrounding settlements, they see the ritual as a Corinthian custom, practiced by the descendants of the original founders of the city, but not shared by the ethnically different population of its hinterland. They attribute the sudden introduction of the custom at Athens (an issue that had not previously been addressed) to the immigration of Corinthian metics into the city at the end of the 5th century.

21. *Agora* XII, p. 45.

22. *Agora* XIV, p. 16.

23. Shear 1973a, p. 151, n. 68; 1984, pp. 45–46. See also Bettalli 1985, pp. 31–32.

24. Camp 1999, p. 278; 2003, pp. 247–249.

25. Knigge and Kovacovics 1981, p. 388; Knigge et al. 1984, p. 44, fig. 27; Freytag gen. Löringhoff 1987,

p. 488, fig. 14; Knigge 1993, pp. 127–129, 134, figs. 3, 17, 18; Knigge, Freytag gen. Löringhoff, and Kuhn 1995, pp. 627–628.

26. Knigge and Kovacovics 1981, p. 388.

27. *Kerameikos* XVII, p. 50. Subfloor deposits of a ritual character were also found in earlier phases of the building, though their contents are not the same

as those of the Agora pyres (pp. 6–7, 29). See pp. 57–60, below, for further discussion of foundation deposits and arguments against this interpretation of the pyres in Building Z.

28. Müller-Zeis 1994, pp. 53–57, 92–96; Weikart 2002, pp. 81–102, 171–177.

29. Andreou and Andreou 2000.

More recently, a large number of pyres have also come to light in the course of excavations preparatory to the construction of the Acropolis Metro station and the new Acropolis Museum, among the foundations of private houses and shops.<sup>30</sup> Stamatia Eleftheratou, who published two of the Metro pyres in detail, has reiterated the view that they reflect construction, renovation, or reuse of the relevant structures. She raises again, however, the issue of the funerary character of the deposits, suggesting that the recipients were chthonic divinities. The pyres, in her view, record chthonic rituals associated with the building, and they are purificatory, apotropaic, or expiatory in their intent.<sup>31</sup>

Back at the Agora, Lynn Snyder's zooarchaeological analysis of the burnt bone from the Agora pyres, undertaken in response to the discovery of several new pyres in the late 1990s, has confirmed earlier suspicions that it belongs exclusively to animals, and added the discovery that it represents precisely those parts of the animal that ancient texts stipulate, and that sacrificial deposits elsewhere confirm, were the gods' portion.<sup>32</sup>

In summary, the pyres have generally come to be regarded as building deposits of some sort, associated with construction or renovation of the structures within which they were buried. Before considering the virtues of this conclusion, however, it is necessary to review in full both the contents of the pyres and the stratigraphic evidence for their deposition, as it has been revealed by excavations at the Agora.

30. Nine were unearthed in the Metro station excavations, three of which have been published (Eleftheratou 1996–1997; Parlama and Stampolidis 2000, pp. 92–103). Pyres from the Acropolis Museum excavations remain unpublished, but one is on display near the entrance of the new museum (Eleftheratou 2006, p. 8).

31. Eleftheratou 1996–1997, pp. 115–116.

32. Snyder and Rotroff 2003.