

RETAILING IN CLASSICAL ATHENS: GLEANINGS FROM CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE AND ART

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ABSTRACT

Knowledge of the Agora in Classical Athens is available from architectural remains, artifacts, especially painted vases, and literary fragments. The types of retailers, goods and services sold, the attitudes of buyers and sellers, and buying influences are described.

INTRODUCTION

Although the origins of market trade are lost in prehistory, markets were well known in ancient Greece. In the fifth century B.C., the Greek historian Herodotus takes the existence of markets for granted; he uses the times when the market is busy and when it is closed to indicate the time of day that battles and other events occurred (5th c. B.C., II, 173; III, 104; IV, 181; VII, 223). However, markets were not ubiquitous; the Greeks "have markets for buying and selling, unlike the Persians who never buy in open markets, and indeed have not a single marketplace in the whole country." (5th c. B.C., I, 94) It is not known whether markets first appeared in Greece, but certainly the first retail market that we know much about is that of classical Athens.

Greece had been an important trading center in Mycenaean times, but its influence ceased during the Dark Age (1150-800 B.C.) when a series of invasions destroyed Near East civilization. Homer offers some evidence of trade in the Dark Age; for example the *Odyssey* mentions Phoenician merchants who hauled their ship on shore, and exchanged trinkets for local products (Homer n.d., XV, 506). This trade took the form of barter, and values sometimes were expressed in numbers of oxen. However, money was known to Homer. In Book 23 of the *Iliad* a prize in a foot race is a half-talent of gold; in a chariot race, the prize is four gold talents.

Revival from the turmoil of the Dark Age was especially rapid in Greece, partly because destruction by invaders was less severe than in other regions. Another factor was emigration, which led to the establishment of Greek colonies in the western Mediterranean, on the northern coast of Africa, and along the Aegean and Black Sea. These colonies stimulated trade by supplying the mainland with raw materials and slaves, providing markets for manufactured goods, and serving as ports of entry for trade routes to interior areas. These colonies were supplemented by a chain of trading centers. One sea route led northward through Byzantium and the Black Sea to Russia, which was an important source of grain, minerals and fish. Another route, leading eastward to Phoenicia and Egypt, was important for timber, minerals, papyrus, gold and ivory. A third route to the west provided access to amber from northern Europe, and minerals from Italy, Spain and Britain.

The extent of Athenian overseas trade has been inferred from archaeological discoveries of pottery, which is more likely to survive than other manufactured goods. Pottery workshops existed in many parts of Greece, and by the sixth century Athenian pottery had become an important element in trade. Since the work of many Athenian potters can be identified, the distribution of their output can be traced, and patterns of trade determined. Other manufactured goods that were traded included armor, swords, cauldrons, textiles and clothing. Much trade was in luxuries, but Greece depended upon imports for many necessities especially grain, ship timbers and papyrus. As Greece began to displace Phoenicia as the dominant trading force, goods were produced not only for domestic needs but also for interregional trade. Attica was an especially important trading center.

ATTICA AS A COMMERCIAL CENTER

Attica is a small triangular peninsula of mountainous land, approximately fifty miles on each side, projecting into the Aegean. Attica became an important interregional trading center in Greece because it had good harbors and provided access to the land route to the north, and sea routes to the east, west and south. The political system that developed in Attica provided a suitable environment for market exchange. The geographical fragmentation caused by the Attica's mountainous terrain made it difficult for any political power to extend across a wide area. The Greek oligarchs had to cooperate with one another to deal with outside threats, so that government by mutual consent became the rule. This was the foundation of the democratic government that contrasted with the absolute monarchies of Archaic Greece and that still existed in neighboring territories.

As trade expanded, barter began to be replaced by a money economy. According to Herodotus "So far as we have any knowledge, [the Lydians] were the first to introduce the use of gold and silver coins, and the first who sold goods by retail." (5th c. B.C., I, 94) The association of the earliest coinage with retail trade is questionable because the value of gold and silver coins was too great for retail exchange. These early coins may have been objects to be traded rather than means of payment. It was not until the end of the fifth century that silver and bronze coins became widely available to serve as the small change needed for retail trade (Price 1968, p. 92).

Agriculture was the focus of economic activity in Attica; most exchange involved raw materials, and local craftsmen mainly supplied domestic needs. But although the rural population was largely self sufficient, a means of selling produce and household production, and purchasing specialized craft items was needed. One source for rural needs and an outlet for rural production was the fair, often associated with religious festivals and games such as those at Olympia. A passage in a play provides an example of household production to be sold at a fair:

For I, poor girl, was working within,
Holding my distaff heavy and full.
Twir-r-r-rling my hand as the treads I spin,
Weaving an excellent bobbin of wool:
Thinking 'Tomorrow I'll go to the fair,
In the dusk of the morn, and be selling it there.'
(Aristophanes 405 B.C., 1346-1351)

Town markets provided another opportunity for market exchange. Figures 1 - 4 represent different means of transport to local markets. Figures 1 and 2 showing fifth century fishermen carrying baskets of fish, illustrate the most common form of transportation. Figure 3, showing a pack donkey, is taken from a pottery cup produced in Attica, c. 480 B.C. Figure 4, from a sixth century, vase, shows the most capital intensive means of travel; a two wheeled cart drawn by two mules carries large pottery jars of grain. In all these illustrations the quantities of goods carried are small and the means of transport suggest that market catchment areas were limited.

Although town markets were becoming more important, market exchange conflicted with the traditional ideal of self sufficiency. A character in an early play laments the shift from self sufficient village to the market dominated town:

Loathing the town, sick for my village-home,
Which never cried, Come, buy my charcoal, or
My vinegar, my oil, my anything;
But freely gave us all; no buy-word there.
(Aristophanes 425 B.C., 33-36)

Figure 1 - A Fisherman Going to Market, 5th Century B.C.



From Cloche, Plate XXXVI.

Figure 2 - A Fisherman Going to Market, 5th Century B.C.



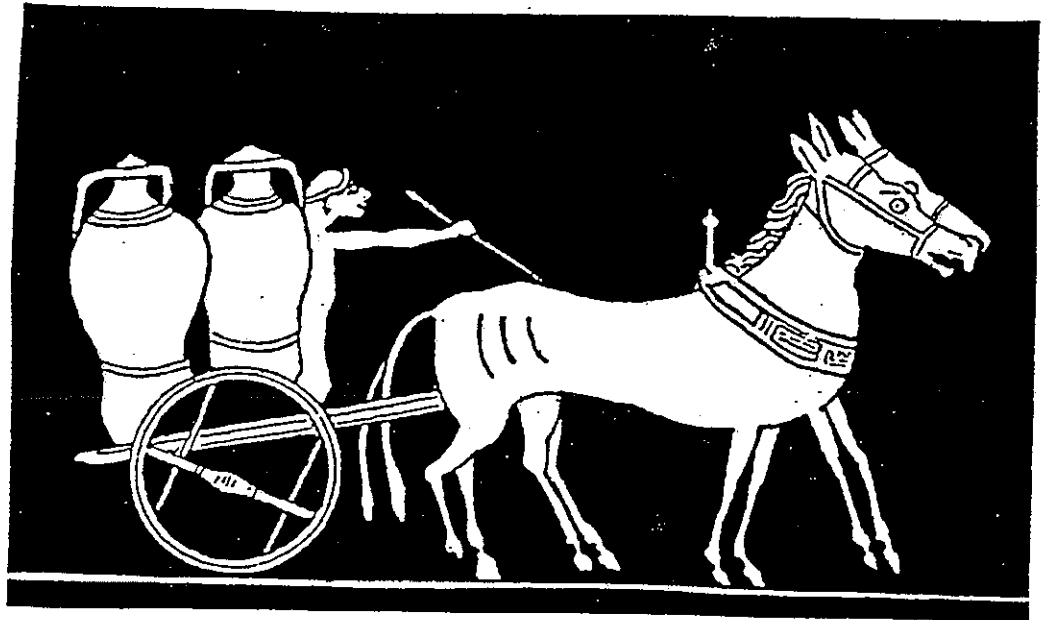
From Cloche, Plate XXXVIII.

Figure 3 - A Pack Donkey, c. 480 B.C.



From Cloche, Plate XXXVII.

Figure 4 - Grain Transport, 6th Century B.C.



From Cloche, Plate VIII.

Even in the towns craftsmen were not specialized; a contemporary writer noted that: "In small towns the same workman makes chairs and doors and plows and tables, and often this artisan builds houses, and even so he is thankful if he can only find employment to support him." This lack of opportunity for specialization makes it "impossible for a man of many trades to be proficient in all of them." (Xenophon 4th c. B.C. a, VIII, ii. 5.) The situation was different in Attica's urban center.

ATHENS AS A COMMERCIAL CENTER

Athens had workshops specializing in particular crafts, in contrast to the traditional self sufficient existence and non-specialized craftsmen of the small towns and rural households. The demand for specialized crafts emerged as Athens became the religious and political center of Attica. The construction of temples and other public buildings required specialists such as painters, potters, and metal workers.

Economic activity began to be differentiated from other social activity and was analyzed by Aristotle and his students, Plato and Xenophon. Market institutions and government regulation of market exchange developed. Social control of the market was achieved by officials such as the agoranomoi, and metronomoi, who maintained order in the market and supervised weights and measures. Generally there were few restrictions to trade. The main exception was the sale of grain, for which Athens largely depended on imports. Merchants were required to bring two-thirds of the grain imported by sea to a special warehouse in the port of Piraeus; grain guardians or sitophylakes fixed the price of grain, and regulated the price of bakery products according to grain prices.

Athens was the central point in Attica; no place in the region was more than thirty miles from the city. The main port, Piraeus, was four miles away. A small city, Athens encompassed an area of less than one square mile, centered on the Acropolis. In the fifth century the population of Athens was approximately 52,000 (Webster 1973, p. 40); the population of the city and its environs, and the port of Piraeus, was roughly 155,000; the rest of Attica contained an equal number (Gomme 1933, p. 47).

The city was a jumble of narrow streets, fifteen feet wide or less, and was crowded with an estimated 6,000 houses, mostly one story, butting each other. Although crafts were specialized, most Athenian workshops were small; artisans worked in their homes and sold their goods in the market, from their courtyards or from small shops set into an outside wall of their houses. In the classical Greek language the word for workshop was the same as that for shop (Aristophanes 424 B.C., 744). Typically the artisan worked with two or three apprentices and slaves. Contemporary illustrations suggest that retail transactions were not large and workshop inventories were very limited. Figure 5, from an oil jar, c. 460-450 B.C., depicts the sale of perfumed oil. A customer holds out her hand toward the seller, who has a funnel in his left hand to fill the bottle held in his right hand. The stock of perfumed oil is kept in the jar on the ground in front of the seller. Figure 6, from a fourth century vase, shows a man examining a display of vases, holding a purse in his left hand.

Although workshops were small, not all were individually owned. One source refers to three perfume shops owned by the same person: "Now this man, being a perfume seller following a family tradition of three generations, sitting in the market day by day, owning three perfume shops and getting monthly reports from them." (Oikonomides 1964, p. 94) Some workshops were large. For example, a large proportion of the Athenian black-figure vases whose makers have been identified was produced in five shops. Xenophon describes the extent of specialization, using a shoemaker as an example:

One trade alone, and very often less than a whole trade, is enough to support a man: one man, for instance makes shoes for men, and another for women; and there are places even where one man earns a living by only stitching shoes, another by cutting them out, another by sewing the uppers together, while there is another who performs

Figure 5 - Buying Perfume, c. 460-450 B.C.



From Sparkes and Talcott, # 47.

Figure 6 - Buying a Vase, 4th Century B.C.



From Cloche, Plate XXXII.

none of these operations but only assembles the parts.

Thus the best quality goods are found in the city because of the specialization made possible by so many people demanding goods from each type of craft: "He who devotes himself to a very highly specialized line of work is bound to do it in the best possible manner." (Xenophon 4th c. B.C. a, VIII, ii. 5)

Trade was not as specialized as craft work. Those persons who specialized in trade generally were called kapelos, naukleros or emporos, but word usage was not consistent. The kapelos usually was a local merchant, most likely a retailer. Artisans typically retailed the goods that they produced, but some retailers resold goods produced by others. Plato speaks of the retailer whose job is to be in the market and to "give money in exchange for goods to those who desire to sell and to take money from those who desire to buy." The retailer acts as an intermediary for the farmer and artisan, so that anyone "who brings the goods to the market need not sit idle in the marketplace, taking a holiday from his work while waiting for customers." (4th c. B.C., I, 632-634)

The naukleros was a ship owner, operating his ship and trading on his own account, but also carrying other merchants and their goods. The emporos was a traveling merchant, and when traveling by sea might take passage on a ship owned by the naukleros. Figure 7, from an early fifth century vase painting, shows Odysseus tied to the mast to avoid steering his ship on to the rocky shore where the sirens are singing seductive songs (Rostovtzeff 1926, Vol. I, p. 223). This has been thought to represent a typical early Greek trading ship, but recently the remains of a much larger ship have been discovered (Wilford 1993).

The terms naukleros and emporos sometimes were used as synonyms, and both often were wholesalers. However, traveling merchants need not have sold only at wholesale. Sea voyages were limited to the summer months so that these merchants could have sold their goods to final buyers during the remainder of the year. Other than in the case of grain imports, which were sold by the importers to local resellers according to government regulations, it is not possible to describe marketing channels precisely. However, intermediaries must have existed in several lines of trade. Figure 8, from a c. 550 B.C., shows goods being weighed. The size of the balance, and the amount of merchandise suggests that this is a wholesale transaction. Imported wine probably was resold by importers to innkeepers, and the large quantities of salt fish imported by Athens probably also were sold at wholesale. Some fresh fish were sold by fisherman, but intermediaries also collected fish from fishermen on the shores of Attica to resell in the market. Some olive oil was sold at the olive groves, and it is likely that some of these buyers were resellers.

Whatever their source of supply, sedentary retailers sold goods in the market that they had not produced, and roving retailers sold provisions and other goods throughout Athens and at the city gates. Wine sellers went from house to house with samples in flasks; wine also was sold near city gates (Isaeus 4th c. B.C., 21). Other foods sold at the gates are mentioned in a contemporary play.

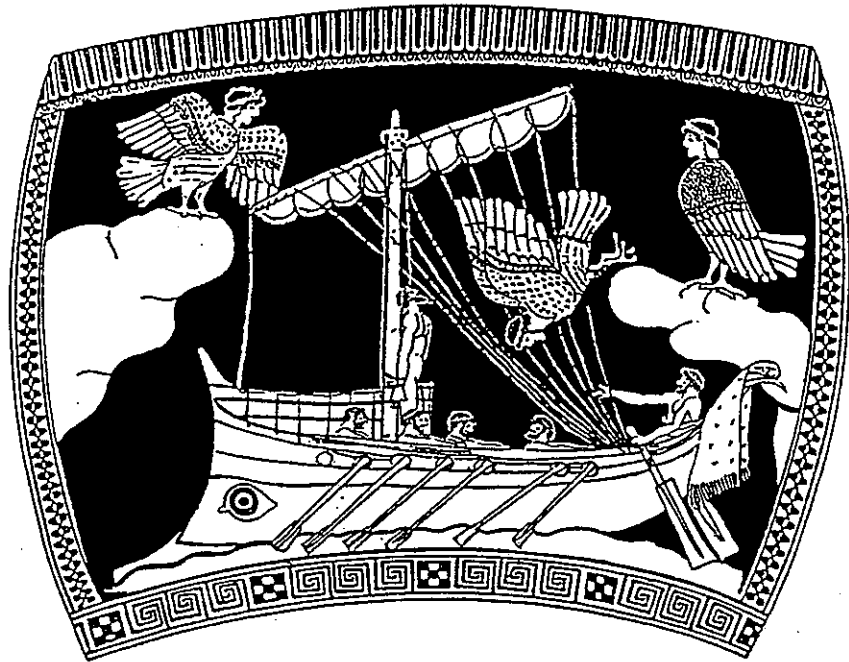
- A. Where did you sell your sausages? Did you stand
Within the Agora, or besides the Gates?
B. Beside the Gates, where the salt-fish is sold.
(Aristophanes 424 B.C., 1245-1248)

Although retailing occurred throughout Athens, our interest is in the central market, found in the Agora.

THE AGORA

The Agora was the heart of Athens, much like the great piazzas and squares of medieval European

Figure 7 - An Early Greek Trading Ship



From Rostovtzeff, Figure 25.

Figure 8 - Weighing Goods, c. 550 B.C.



From Schreiber, Plate LXVI and Boardman, Figure 125.

cities, where public functions such as political assemblies and elections, festivals, athletic contests, parades, and markets were held. It was a large open space, about 200 meters east and west and about 250 meters north and south, intersected by the Panathenaic Way, a broad street connecting the Dipylon, the city's main gate, and the Acropolis. The Agora is an early example of city planning; a conscious decision to make the Agora a center of public life was made at the beginning of the sixth century. First, private construction was prohibited, and later existing private buildings were removed, so that the open space could be extended. The marketplace for Athens had been near the entrance to the Acropolis, but it was moved to the Agora in the early 6th century.

Public buildings, temples, altars and statues of honored citizens were erected on the borders of the Agora. Among the public buildings was one, now called the South Stoa, built along the south side of the square in 430-420 B.C. to house the officials directly concerned with the administration of the commercial life of the city. A stoa was a long building with solid walls at the back and ends and a row of columns in front, built to provide shelter for large numbers of people visiting shrines and engaged in other activities. The South Stoa consisted of a double colonnade with sixteen rooms behind (Camp 1986, p. 122). It is unlikely that these rooms were used for retail sales, but one source refers to a shopper in a stoa: "Amphikles burst into the stoa, then indicated two paunches hanging on a hook, and said [to the seller], 'send me those two, if you can see them.'" (Oikonomides 1964, p.92)

A large area southwest of the Agora was crowded with workshops, and others were situated near the east and northeast borders of the square. The importance of a location near the Agora is recognized in an address to the Athenian Council by Lysias, a fourth century orator: "For each of you is in the habit of paying a call at a perfumer's, a barber's, a cobbler's shop, and so forth; in most cases it is to the tradesmen who have their establishments nearest the Agora, and the fewest those who are furthest from it." (Lysias 4th c., I, 20)

Like the public buildings, these shops also served as social centers. Men would spend much of the day in the Agora: "There are something like twenty thousand citizens in all. Every single one of them frequents the marketplace on some business (you may be sure) either public or private." (Demosthenes 4th c. B.C. a, I, 50-53) According to Aristophanes (409 B.C., 338; 414 B.C., 1441) and Xenophon, (4th c. B.C. b, IV, 2, 1) hair dressers, perfume sellers and ointment-sellers provided meeting places for socializing. A fragment of a wine cup bearing the name of Simon was found near a boundary stone in the southwest corner of the Agora (Boersma 1970, p. 247), and it is thought that this is the shop that Socrates spoke of visiting (Diogenes Laertius 3rd c. B. C., 13). Figure 9, from a vase c. 500 B.C., depicts such a shoemaker's shop. A customer is standing on a piece of leather spread on the top of a table so that a pattern may be made and the leather cut to fit his foot.

It was difficult to disperse the many social gatherings in the Agora so that citizens could perform civic duties, such as attending the Assembly. Market officials cleared the Agora by drawing a long rope across the square. This rope was saturated with red dye so that the robes of loiters would be marked:

And now, when here's the fixed Assembly Day,
And morning come, and no one is the Pnyx.
They-re in the Agora chattering, up and down
Scurrying to dodge the vermeil-tinctured cord.
(Aristophanes 425 B.C., 19-22)

Within the market square some sellers went about crying their wares; sellers of charcoal, vinegar and oil are mentioned by Aristophanes (425 B.C., 33). Figure 10, from a fifth century vase painting, depicts a seller of oil calling out to prospective customers. The open square was crowded with stalls or booths separated by wicker screens, (Demosthenes, 4th c. B.C. b, 284) Goods also were displayed on tables and benches, sometimes under awnings. All of these structures were temporary because the square often was cleared for other uses (Demosthenes, 4th c. B.C. b, 173-174).

Figure 9 - A Shoemaker, c. 500 B.C.



From Cloche, Plate XXX and Schreiber, Plate LXXI.

Figure 10 - Oil Seller, 5th Century B.C.



From Cloche, Plate XXXIV.

Sellers were grouped by product category, such as fish, meat, perfume, flour, incense, cheese, honey, wine, oil, and slaves. Each of these areas, or "circles" was known by the name of the items sold there. Many types of goods were sold; Aristophanes lists sellers of oakum, sheep, leather, sausage and salt fish, bass and pilchards from the fish seller's stall (424 B.C., 129-144), a potherb-girl selling leeks (422 B.C., 491-489) and an omelette seller (409 B.C., 427). Aristophanes described the sellers of birds in detail:

Him who strings and sells the finches,
Seven an obol, at his shop,
Blows the thrushes out and, rudely
To the public gaze exposes,
Shamefully entreats the blackbirds.
Thrusting feathers up their noses.
Pigeons too the rascal catches,
Keeps and mews them up with care,
Makes them labor as decoy-birds,
Tethered underneath a snare.
(Aristophanes 414 B.C., 1080)

SHOPPING IN THE AGORA

The proliferation of retail sellers in the Agora meant that there was a wide variety of goods from which buyers could choose, but some goods were not affordable for all citizens. One fourth century writer noted that "To see a market full of buys is a great joy for anyone who has money; a great torture for those who have not." (Oikonomides 1964, p. 90)

The Agora market opened in the morning (Herodotus III,104; IV, 181) but closed at mid day. In contrast, shops opened early in the morning (Aristophanes 409 B.C., 1120) and stayed open until late at night; Lysias mentions the purchase of torches from a shop (4th c., I, 24). The opening of the market was signaled by a bell rung by a market official.

The arrangement of sellers in "circles" simplified the shopper's task:

When you tell any one of the servants to buy something for you from the Agora, he is never at a loss - every one of them knows where he must go to get each kind of good. The reason for this, I said, is simply that everything is kept in its appointed place (Xenophon 4th c. B.C. c, VIII, 22).

Sending a servant to do the shopping was typical. Men might go shopping, especially for special occasions, but would be attended by a slave to carry their purchases. Only a "parsimonious" man or "buffoon" would go shopping himself. The parsimonious man "will come home from the market carrying his own buyings of meat and potherbs in the fold of his gown." (Theophrastus 3rd c., XXII) The buffoon not only will do his own shopping but also "He will show his friends the goods things he has bought ... and will stand beside the shop of the barber or the perfumer, and tell the world that he is about to get drunk." (Theophrastus 3rd c., XI)

Instructions given in the fourth century to a slave about to go shopping for fish are suggested by a contemporary fragment:

- A. But buy cheaply, for anything will do.
- B. Just say how, Boss.
- A. Don't be extravagant, though not mean or stingy;
Whatever you buy will be enough.

Some squids and cuttle fish, and should there be
Some lobsters in the market, one would be fine
Though two look well on the table. Now some eels
Come in from Thebes sometimes. Get some of them.
(Oikonomides 1964, p. 91)

Only a distrustful man would refuse to entrust money to a slave; such a man "will send one servant off to market and then another to learn what price he paid; and will carry his own money and sit down every furlong to count it over." (Theophrastus 3rd c., XVIII)

Repeated references to buying fish reflect its importance in the average Athenian's diet. Some idea of the instructions given to a man going to buy fish, and his probable response, is apparent from a contemporary play:

A. Popsy, would you like to go to market
And buy some fish for me?
B. What shall I buy?
A. Some grown up fish, my father, no small babies.
B. Do you not yet know the value of money?
(Oikonomides 1964, p. 91)

Written sources indicate that women, except for the lowest classes, did not go shopping. However, Figure 5, showing a woman customer in a perfumer's shop, suggests that there were exceptions. Although women may not often have been shoppers, they seem to have represented an important buying influence:

'Tis all our fault; they'll never know their place,
These pampered women, whilst we spoil them so.
Hear how they talk in every workman's shop.
Goldsmith, says one, this necklace that you made,
My gay young wife was dancing yester-eve.
And lost, sweet soul, the fastening of the clasp;
Do please reset it, Goldsmith. Or again,
O Shoemaker, my wife's new sandal pinches
Her little toe, the tender, delicate child.
Make it fit easier, please.
(Aristophanes 412a B.C., 404-417)

A Shopping List

The items purchased during an ordinary shopping trip are unknown; however, a fragment said to be a shopping list survives:

long loaves
dishes
platters, mid-size
little dishes, cups
oil-flask
half-chous
bowl
(Lang 1974, #49)

This list raises many questions. The long loaves are large loaves of bread baked on spits; an illustration

from a water pitcher (Lang 1974, #50) shows two men carrying a long loaf on their shoulders. This was not the form in which bread ordinarily was sold in the Agora. Bakers either carried loaves on trays to sell or sold round loaves from tables (Aristophanes 422 B.C., 240). The unlucky passer-by who upset one of the pyramids of bread on a table was subject to verbal abuse. Bread sellers seem to have been especially ill-natured: "Tis not meet for poets To scold each other, like two baking girls." (Aristophanes 405 B.C., 855- 856)

Athenaeus reports that the prices of goods displayed by retailers were indicated on tablets or signs (2nd c. B.C., III, 117). Nevertheless, haggling about price was common (Theophrastus 3rd c. B.C., XVII) and must have added to the market clamor. An example of the process of bargaining with a fish seller is provided by Athenaeus:

If you ask, 'How much are you offering those two mullets for,' he replies, 'Ten obols.' 'Too steep! Will you take eight?' 'Yes, if you will buy the one next to it.' 'My good man, take my offer, and stop joking,' 'At that price? Run along!' (2nd c. B.C., VI, 224)

Figure 11, from a fourth century vase painting, depicts bargaining between a customer and fish seller behind a table such as one would find in the Agora. The buyer holds a coin in his right hand to indicate the amount which he will offer for a piece of fish.

The dishes, platters and cups that appear on our "shopping list" might have been rented. Chefs could be hired in the market, along with suitable table services, for special occasions, such as weddings. The oil flask would have been a common purchase because olive oil was an important consumption good. A half-chous is a unit of liquid measure; a chous equaled about three quarts. Unfortunately the absence of any additional words on the fragment leaves doubt as to whether a container of this size, or some liquid of this amount was meant. The same problem occurs with the final entry.

No matter what the intended purchase, shoppers would have to have been alert because cheating was not unknown. One reference mentions a fig dealer putting good figs on the top of the basket and poor ones underneath. Aristophanes mentions the wool-seller "Wetting his wool, to make it weigh the more," (405 B.C., 1386-1387) and the seller who "Gives us short measure in our drinking-cups." (412 B.C. b, 347- 348) Figure 12 shows just such a dispute; the buyer is complaining that the seller has not put the proper amount of oil in the jar, and the seller asserts that the jar is so full that it is overflowing. On the other hand, pilfering by customers was not unknown (Theophrastus 2nd c. B.C., II).

THE ULTIMATE SHOPPING FACILITY

Athens recognized the significance of the market, and the need to integrate market activity with other social behavior, by bringing the market to the open square of the Agora in the sixth century. As public construction programs continued through the centuries, the open square was filled in by additional buildings. In the second century B.C., when the Agora was at the height of its development, the Stoa of Attlos, "the most splendid of all the buildings in the Agora," (Thompson 1959, p. 2) was added on the east side of the Agora.

The ground floor of the Stoa of Attlos had a double colonnade, behind which were twenty-one shops. The same arrangement was repeated above, so that the Stoa contained forty two shops, each fifteen by sixteen feet. The shops could be closed by double doors supported by sockets set in the thresholds and secured by cross-bars, so that valuable goods, like perfume, jewelry, textiles, and works of art could be sold there. Presumably the shops were rented by the state, and the revenue used for the upkeep of the building.

The Stoa was impressive because of its size, 66 x 382 feet, the depth of the two colonnades, the

Figure 11 - Buying Fish, 4th Century B.C.



From Cloche, Plate XXXVI.

Figure 12 - Buying Oil, A Dispute, c. 520-500 B.C.



From Cloche, Plate XXXII, and Schreiber, Plate LXVI.

number of closed rooms, and the construction of two stories rather than one. "With the erection of the Stoa commerce presented a splendid and dignified facade; the colonnades in front of the shops provided elegant promenades. The ramshackle bazaar district was masked and kept in the background." (Thompson and Wycherley 1972, p. 172) The Stoa of Attlos was a precursor of the modern shopping mall.

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