



# LINGUE CULTURE MEDIAZIONI LANGUAGES CULTURES MEDIATION

8 (2021)

1

La Grecia degli altri: percorsi letterari, geografici e culturali  
nella Grecia contemporanea

Foreign People's Greece: Literary, Geographic  
and Cultural Paths in Contemporary Greece

*A cura di / Edited by*

*Luca Gallarini, Dino Gavinelli, Thomas Maloutas, Mauro Novelli*

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# *Walk the Wall Athens: An Experiential Walk in the City*

*Maria Karagiannopoulou*

DOI: <https://dx.doi.org/10.7358/lcm-2021-001-kara>

## ABSTRACT

Athens is a historic capital widely known for its legacy left to Western civilization and its publicly recognized and well-studied monuments of world heritage. But what do we really know about the Athenian antiquities that have been integrated into the city's modern canvas? In how many ways can the urban landscape of Athens be re-introduced to the modern traveler? *Walk the Wall Athens* is a bilingual mobile application that allows the user to wander, literally and metaphorically, through the streets of Athens in order to explore the traces of the Themistoclean city wall and to recover this important monument from oblivion. Just as the ancient city wall surrounds Athens as a historical chain that crosses all the neighbourhoods of the modern city's historical centre, the route provided by the interactive map of the application introduces the visitor to the layout of the modern Athenian metropolis. Through a walk on the remains of the ancient fortification, the application *Walk the Wall Athens* attempts to spark the interest and excite the curiosity of the Athenian traveller of the 21st century, introducing him to a journey of 2,500 years of history.

*Keywords:* audio walk; city wall; cultural heritage; digital archaeology; urban history.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION TO THE CITY OF ATHENS

Athens stretches in the Attica basin between five mountains and is surrounded by several hills. In antiquity, three rivers flowed by the city: to the west the Kifissos River, to the east the Ilissos and from the southern slopes of Lycabettus flowed the Eridanus. The emergence of the Athenian city is associated with the *synoikismós* (dwelling together),

the unification of small towns in Attica under one unity. This is the reason why, in Ancient Greece, the city was referred to in the plural as Αθῆναι reflecting this unification, which according to mythology, was performed by King Theseus. The first settlement was founded in the Neolithic age on the steep slopes of the Acropolis rock, and in the following centuries Athens developed into a strong city-state, the birth-place of democracy and of so many other values that became common cultural heritage in the modern era. In 1834 it evolved into the capital of the newly established Greek state. Throughout its long history, the city transformed into a rare historical palimpsest. The continuing habitation for about six millennia subjected Athens to constant interventions in the landscape. With the establishment of the Modern Greek state, large scale excavations began in Athens to uncover the traces of the past, and the ancient remains gradually came to light within the built-up centre of the city. In the mid-1950s, prevailed the view that antiquities had to be protected for future generations. Preserving antiquities immediately raises more questions than answers. What is the history of the relics themselves? What memories do they carry, and how do they fit in and define the modern city?

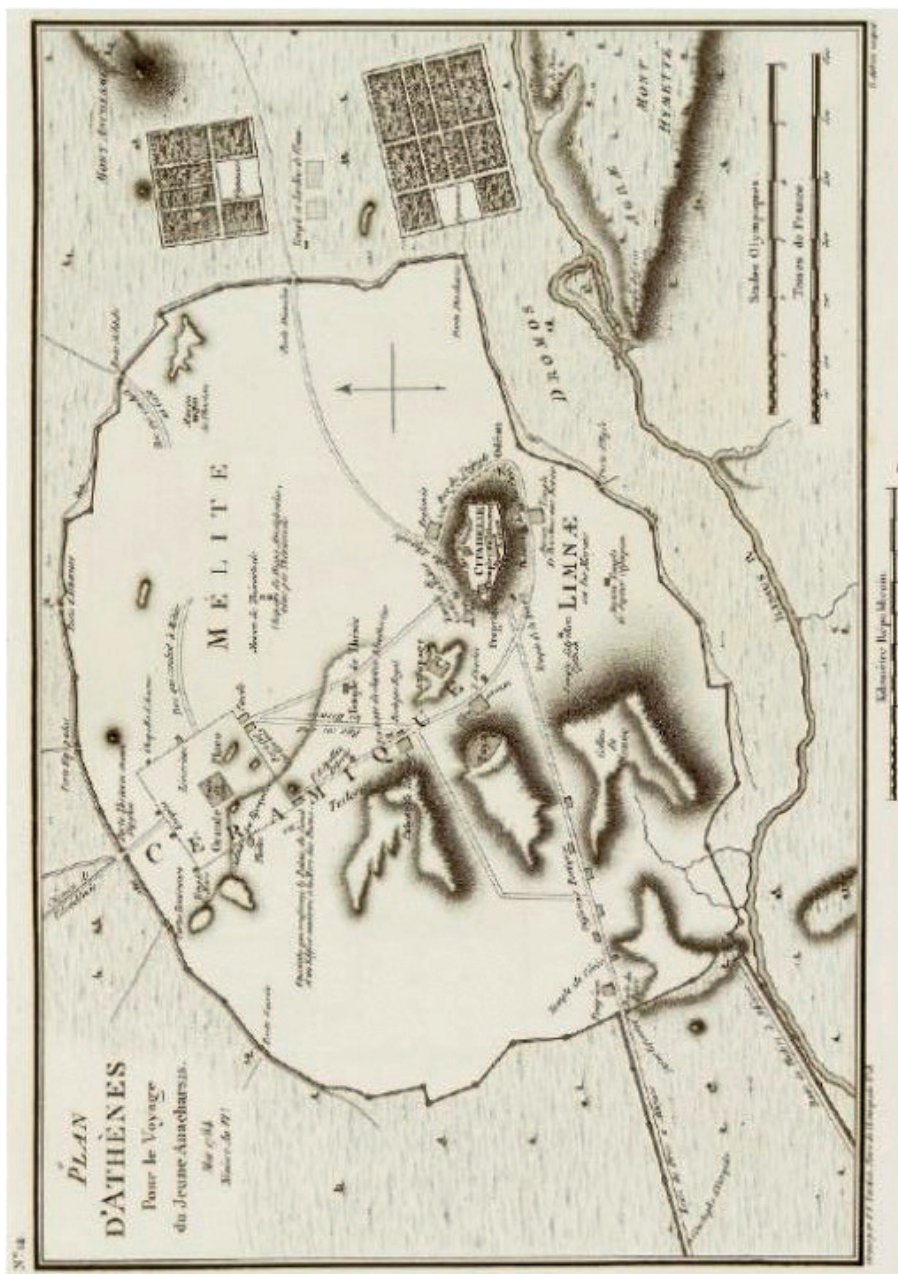
### 1.1. *Immersion in the Athenian palimpsest*

To distinguish the layers of this palimpsest, one must be introduced to the topography of the city in order to fulfil a journey in the history of about 6,000 years. Except for ancient remains of monumental significance, the history of Athens is reflected in its cityscape. An alternative way to explore Athens is by wandering its streets to discover all the visible and invisible faces of the city. How can every aspect of this city be approached? Is the only best way really through the monuments protected in archaeological sites?

A key to exploring the invisible antiquities of Athens is through the ancient city walls, as these are a fundamental element of ancient topography. The ancient walls were an immense and expensive public project as important as the agora, the civic buildings and the sanctuaries of the city. The ancient walls protected the city, its people and their households, and at the same time symbolized the strength of the city. An imposing city wall was thought of as an adornment to the city that lent prestige and grandeur to its inhabitants. In peacetime, the fortification course defined the boundaries of the cities while the gates marked the

main communication roadways. As for every ancient city, so for Athens, the curtain wall comprised a fundamental element. The Themistoclean wall, named after the Athenian statesman Themistocles, was built immediately after the repulse of the Persian threat in 479 B.C. After the battle of Plataea, the Athenians returned to their city, but found it looted and burned. According to Thucydides, who describes the construction of the wall, Themistocles gave the order and men, women and children employed all kinds of stones from the ruins to build the new fortification in an impressively short time: “Meanwhile the whole population of the city, men, women, and children, was to take part in the wall-building, sparing neither private nor public buildings that might be of any use to the work, but demolishing them all” (Thuc. 1.90.3). The construction of the Themistoclean wall was a colossal collective effort and marked the reconstruction of Athens.

Sections of the Themistoclean wall have been standing for more than 2,500 years. During antiquity, the wall was destroyed, rebuilt and reconstructed several times due to invasions in the city of Athens, thus redefining the boundaries of the urban nucleus. The ancient wall still surrounds Athens as a historical chain embracing monuments such as the Acropolis and the Athenian Agora, which are well known. Compared to these famous archaeological sites, the “destiny” of the city wall was different in terms of preservation of its remains. Therefore, a spatial narrative would be needed, one that would re-introduce the least known antiquities of Athens: the city of Themistocles intertwined with the foundations of a modern megalopolis of contrasts. The relationship of the visible remains to the modern city, combined with digital technologies, gives a new perspective to this approach, composing a digital wandering, named *Walk the Wall Athens*. Wandering involves the process of deconstruction as it renounces the modern urban fabric and sheds light to the invisible foundations and underground components of the contemporary city (*Fig. 1*).



## 2. AN EXPERIENTIAL WALK

*Walk the Wall Athens* is a bilingual mobile application (English-Greek) available for free, which allows the user to wander, literally and metaphorically, through the streets of Athens in order to explore the Themistoclean fortification wall.

The *Walk the Wall Athens* project was created by archaeologists specializing in the study of ancient topography. The Dipylon Society, which is the non-profit organization that designed the application, had the vision of using digital technologies to enhance a mostly non-visible and fragmented monument that has passed into oblivion, generating a project that aspires to contribute to the preservation and enhancement of Europe's archaeological heritage in the everyday urban context.

The application aims to remove the seemingly contradictory relationship between ‘ruin’ and ‘present’ by exploring the possibilities of a reciprocal relationship among identification and development. Considering the new opportunities offered by digital technologies in non-intrusive strategies for preserving and enhancing architectural heritage, the development of this application is proposed as a means of preserving and integrating the invisible elements of the city in the modern urban fabric and the local community.

The remains of the ancient fortification wall were visible for a long time until the establishment of the Modern Greek state. But then, the urban development of the city led to the gradual destruction and burial of its remains. Despite its high historical and educational value, the intensive reconstructions of the city and the need for modernization of Athens, particularly in the decades of 1960s and 1970s, threatened the wall on several occasions. The intense building activity in the city created great pressure and stress on the work of archaeologists who worked hard to “rescue” the ancient remains. The in situ preservation of the physical remains of the ancient wall became a great challenge as it was often seen as an obstacle for modern construction plans. The difficulties encountered during the implementation of measures for preserving the wall intensified the need for a non-invasive and sustainable way in order to promote the interest in keeping this monument as intact as possible while engaging people in their past. The ancient wall, which protected the city and its people for centuries, now needed the help of people.

Mobile applications such as *Walk the Wall Athens* incorporate the archaeological value and suggest “action” within the urban landscape and cultural dynamics. By linking the fragmented remains of the ancient



wall, an experiential walk is born; a walk that conceptualizes the remaining stretches of the ancient wall as parts of a whole concerning society itself as a cultural asset. The mobile application concept is to uncover parts of the wall, visualize it as a single monument, and transfer scientific knowledge in a simple and entertaining way. Moreover, the fortification wall was selected because of its urban context while creating a cognitive process through the spatial experience. It highlights the relationship of the city to the surrounding environment and enables at the same time the user to understand the size and historical boundaries of both the ancient and modern city.

From a total of 180 sites where the fortification wall has been excavated, the interactive map provided by the application will guide you step by step to 35 Points of Interest (POIs) with precise coordinates. It will take you to squares and narrow streets, lead you down the basements of buildings and through the arcades of the city centre, it will have you look through glass floors and shop windows, all the while providing you with a beautifully narrated audio tour by professional actors and with additional specialized information in the form of texts, images, drawings and accurate coordinates; a glossary and a timeline are also included.



*Figure 2. – The diateichisma or cross-wall along the ridge of the Hill of the Muses (Philopappos). Source: Theocharaki 2020, 198.*



By exploring the traces of the ancient wall, the city will reveal to the inquisitive walker its well-hidden archaeological treasures, which are literally under one's feet and yet remain unknown even to the locals. It is fascinating how following the course of this ancient monument one can discover various neighbourhoods of Athens and get tuned to the modern vibrations of the city. The Themistoclean wall has been integrated into the city in which we live; although most of the physical remains of the wall are kept hidden in basements, one may find that many of these relics are preserved along common routes of passers-by (Fig. 2).

### 2.1. Archaeological data and historical evidence

The application *Walk the Wall Athens* combines archaeological data and historical evidence related to individual periods of archaeological excavations and to synthetic studies on ancient topography, enhanced with rare iconographic material. The composition of the scattered scientific material attempts to reconstruct the history of the walls.

In terms of archaeological data, the published material about the ancient fortification is primarily contained in the excavation reports of archaeological interventions carried out at specific land plots prior to residential development and public infrastructure works, typically found in the annual volumes of the *Archaeological Bulletin* (*Archaïologikon Deltion*) (Figs. 3-4).



Figure 3. – Excavations of the Athenian city-wall.



*Figure 4. – On the left, view of the excavation of the plot at the corner of Aioulou and Sophokleous Streets (1974). Source: Lygouri-Tolia 1999, 2.  
On the right, the corner of Aioulou and Sophokleous Streets;  
construction phase of the project for the in situ preservation of the remains  
of the fortification in the semi-open area of the building.*

Also, several scholars have gathered the archaeological data of the excavations in the city in a series of comprehensive studies (Judeich 1931; Travlos 1960; Travlos 1971; Karydis 1981; Vavylopoulou-Charitonidou *et al.* 1989; Costaki 2006; Tsoniotis 2008; Theocharaki 2011, 2020; Dimitriadou 2019), or in volumes publishing some of the finds of major projects, such as the excavations for the Athens Metro. In addition to the aforementioned studies, there is rich archival material for the study of the ancient Athenian fortification. Often, among the surviving records are rough drawings or sketches, alongside handwritten notes kept in personal notebooks or letters.

Regarding the historical data of the ancient wall, there are various types of sources that provide us with a wealth of information. There are several mentions in the ancient Greek literature, while early travelers and antiquarians assembled numerous references about Athens walls during their engagement with the ruins of the past in the form of writings, illustrations and maps (*Fig. 5*). To these, we may add a wealth of visual imagery from the 15th century onwards comprising illustrations, sketches, paintings and photographs (*Fig. 6*). Earlier evidence usually depicts surviving parts of the fortification within its contemporary city

context; sometimes, they also testify the appearance of the surrounding landscape and document different temporal benchmarks in the life-span of curtain wall remains. Even the daily press of the 19th century has provided interesting information on archaeological finds.



*Figure 5. – Map of the antiquities of Athens by the French vice-consul Fauvel (ca. 1787).  
Source: Bibliothèque nationale de France, Cartes et plans,  
Ge DD 6318 f.71r. Plan d'Athènes.*



*Figure 6. – Oil painting attributed to J. Carrey dimensions 5,20 × 2,60 m.  
It depicts Athens with the Acropolis, 1674. Source: Museum of the City of Athens,  
Vouros-Eutaxias Foundation. Permanent loan from the Museum  
of Fine Arts of Chartres, France.*

For the first time, all the scattered archaeological and historical data are united into one route and integrated into the modern canvas of the city, with the help of digital technology.

## 2.2. *The echo of the Themistoclean wall in modern Athens*

The walk invites the user on a virtual journey through space and time. It starts from the world of the Themistoclean wall, that is, the world of Classical Athens, reflecting the stories that unfolded around the wall and exploring the memories that it brings during its 2,500 years of life; memories of war and memories of peace. Through the tour of *Walk the Wall Athens*, the ancient wall guides us not only to the secrets of the ancient city but also to those of the modern one. On the occasion of the narration of the history of the wall, the route transports the user to all the corners of the historical centre of the modern capital, reconstructing the evolution of the city as it was formed and transformed over the centuries.

A typical example of such a narrative is the case of Eleftherias Square, where the remains of the fortification moat and the pro-teichisma of the city wall came to light during excavations in 2013. The first excavations in the area date to the last decades of the 19th century and had revealed a large ancient cemetery rich in burial goods, including the famous Geometric vase of the Dipylon painter. In those years, the ancient ruins were preserved to a considerable extent. The Ephor of Antiquities was Panagiotis Efstratiadis, who lived the first stages of the urban development of the city. From his writings, we understand that he made overwhelming efforts to save the ancient ruins, which at that time were often used as a building material for the new residences of the Athenians. In the 19th century, this part of the city was the centre of secular Ottonian Athens and was referred to by the German architect Leo von Klenze as “Louis Square” to honour King Otto’s father. After the ousting of the king, the square was renamed *Eleftherias Square* (*Liberty Square*) and is the official name of the square until today. The square was known for its neoclassical residences, including the mansion of Prime Minister Alexandros Koumoundouros, an important political figure of the then newly formed Greek state. The historic Koumoundouros mansion was demolished, only some of its walls are currently preserved and the square remains known as Koumoundourou square, echoing another era (*Fig. 7*).



*Figure 7. – The semi-circular configuration of Kranaou Street with its mansions, on the southern edge of Koumoundourou Square. Source: Skopelitis 1975, 4-5.*

This is a neighbourhood of historic buildings such as the Municipal Nursery, which was built in 1874 and today houses the Municipal Gallery. The square did not stop being remodeled according to the needs of the turbulent modern capital. In its current form, the area of the square has been transformed into an open-air theatre; a reference point of the public space, in the vicinity of the district of Psyri, known in recent decades as a district of craftsmen.

This part of the city is just one of the many points of interest along the ancient wall, which summarizes countless stories about the history of the people of this city.

### 3. “WALK THE WALL ATHENS” AS A TOOL FOR CULTURAL AND SOCIAL INTEGRATION

The journey into the study of the ancient wall can re-activate the informational capacity of segregated evidence and improve the understanding of the diachronic transformations of the fortifications of Athens and the city itself. On the footsteps of the experiential tour provided by *Walk the Wall Athens*, new perspectives on the cultural landscape of Athens are born, thereby raising cultural awareness.

Combining the tour’s digital approach with the physical interaction with the monument turns the application into an educational tool and develops the contemporary consciousness of cultural heritage within



urban environments and historic capitals, such as Athens. The application has been well received within the local community, acting as a bridge between academia and the public. It has been actively used as a teaching tool for high-school and university students, as it offers an interactive experience that assists the user to imagine and reconstruct the past of the city wall. The educational character of the walk is not only addressed to students, but to people of all ages. The *Walk the Wall Athens* tour succeeds in turning the city into a playground for adults, inviting them to an exploration reminiscent of a treasure hunt. Precisely, to maintain the educational and entertaining character of the tour, the structure of the application is designed to be simple and to address as large an audience as possible, without requiring knowledge of any technological capabilities. The application is structured so that it can be used by the wider public and attracts the interest of visitors regardless of age. The user's on-site visit, in combination with the accompanying audio-visual material and the selected archival resources, create a complete experience and help the visitor to both understand and feel in his own way how the ancient remains have been connected in intricate ways to the modern Athenian landscape.

The tour is designed to allow the visitors to configure their personal path; it provides the ability to design their own route and select either a few points of interest or to divide the route into neighborhoods without having to follow all points of the app tour. The autonomy of each point of interest and the flexibility provided to the visitors allows them to create their own paths in space and history, and in fact, at their own time. The user of the app is placed in the centre of the activity and the ancient wall becomes the host of the modern city. The visitor fulfils an unconventional engagement in the open and living museum of the city. The historical tour along the ancient fortification line achieves a connection between the present and the past, making the past more relevant to modern society.

#### 4. ADDENDUM

The *Walk the Wall Athens* project has made more and more people interact with such an important, yet invisible, monument as the fortification wall and has enhanced part of the cultural heritage of Athens. Considering the city as a living organism and its monuments as part of



urban ecology, such works are offered to anyone interested, regardless of age, as a tool that allows everyone to tour the city and its different time layers, along the ancient fortification.

*Walk the Wall Athens* constitutes a long-term contribution to the preservation of European Archaeological heritage in the everyday urban encounter and also cultivates the sensibility towards the historical landmarks of Athens. This attempt aims to play a part in ensuring that the ancient fortification wall may spark the interest and excite the curiosity of the Athenian traveler of the 21st century.

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