

Collecting activity in ancient Greece

from prehistoric times to the hellenistic era

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Introduction

This survey was conducted in order to research the evolution of the collecting activity, which it examines in a broad sense, according to which collecting activity was carried out to satisfy practical, emotional and other human needs, and not in the exact sense of the term used today for museums or private collections. In ancient Greece, the collecting activity started in prehistoric times for practical needs and religious or burial customs, and evolved greatly in the archaic and classical eras as an activity used even for politics. To this practice contributed the fact that the telling of a story, which is related to some exhibits, can be used both for the information of the visitors, as well as for their emotional involvement. (Nikolaou, 2015, pp. 99)

Prehistoric Times: Survival and Burial Practices

Collecting activity has existed since the beginning of human existence, including many kinds of objects and it was able to contribute both to the social cohesion of prehistoric societies and to the stability of groups. (Renfrew and Boyd, 2019, pp. 197)

For thousands of years this activity was mainly about practical survival processes or practices related to the afterlife. People made weapons, tools and other useful items from natural materials, which they grouped according to their usefulness in everyday life. Also, customs of various cultures included placing various objects as offerings next to the dead, which stemmed from the belief that the dead would use all these objects in the afterlife. In practice, however, this custom was essentially an attempt to promote prestige and wealth, especially of prominent families, and resulted in the accumulation of invaluable "collections" underground, as well as the creation of amazing burial monuments and buildings.

In the Mediterranean area, these customs have been flourishing since the third millennium BC in the Ancient Kingdom of Egypt (III – VI dynasty). The majestic pyramids also belong to this period, proof of the great power of both the central government and the burial customs themselves. The custom of burying the dead along with many offerings is also found later in Greece, where the Cycladic, Minoan and then Mycenaean civilization gradually developed. The most characteristic features of the Cycladic culture are the figurines, which must have had a religious use as well. The practice of

burial with grave goods flourished especially in the Mycenaean civilization, where the 'burial collections' included both plain and luxurious objects. In Minoan culture were also other collecting activities, such as collections of toys and jewelry, but also mass deposition of figurines in the most important sanctuaries, a practice that had rather a religious significance. Also, there were mass productions of murals, which give the impression of a kind of "collections of paintings", especially in the houses of the 'high society' of that era.

Archaic Period: Pan-Hellenic Sanctuaries and "Treasures"

A few centuries later, during the archaic period, the Pan-Hellenic sanctuaries of Delphi and Olympia were founded, which gathered great religious and political importance. In Delphi, from the Mycenaean years, the goddess Earth was worshiped in the small settlement that existed in the area. The creation of the oracle and the sanctuary of Apollo began in the eighth century BC, while the autonomy of the sanctuary was established in the sixth century BC, during the First Sacred War, under the protection of the administration of the Amphictyony. From then on, the sanctuary began to grow in size and be enriched with magnificent buildings, statues and, the so called, "treasures".

The "treasures" can be considered as a kind of "Pan-Hellenic collection", as they were small temple-shaped buildings, built next to each other, each one dedicated by a different Greek city-state, to the gods. Inside these "treasures" were kept valuable works of art and war trophies as votive offerings, which can also be considered as a kind of sacred collections themselves. Delphi reorganized its functions and the 'Pythian Games' and gradually gained great influence throughout the Greek world. Unfortunately, this sacred place was looted several times during Hellenistic and Roman times and finally at the end of the 4th century AD it was permanently abandoned by the decree of Emperor Theodosius. The modern visitor today can only see standing in full height the "treasure" of the Athenians, which has been partially restored. It is a small building of Doric style, with two columns on the facade and rich sculptural decoration. This building was built in the sixth century BC by the Athenians to house the votive offerings of the city to the god Apollo (Fig.1).

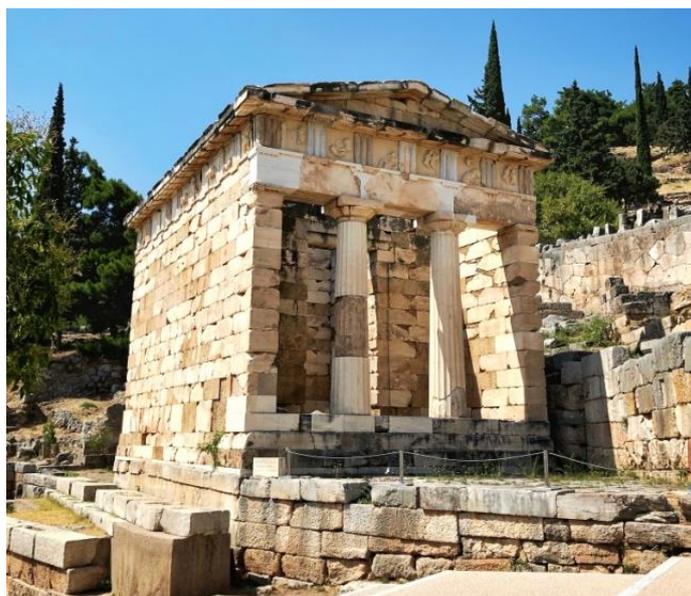


Fig. 1. "Treasure" of the Athenians, Delphi (@malyushev)

Olympia is the place where the Olympic Games were born, held every four years and due to their sanctity, during their conduct, all military conflicts in Hellenic areas were ceasing. Of course, in Olympia there were also "Treasures", filled with offerings for the Olympian Zeus.

These small buildings began to be built in the sixth century BC and were completed in the middle of the fifth. They were gathered, next to each other, at the foot of Kronios Hill. These were simple constructions, with a rectangular nave and two Doric columns, except for the last one in the row, the "Treasure of the Geloon", which had six columns.

It is noteworthy that although Pausanias mentions only ten Treasures in the sanctuary of Olympia, the excavation brought to light a total of twelve. Of these, only five have been identified with certainty, those of Sikyonia, Selinontia, Metapontia, Megara and Gelos.

Classical Era: the cases of Delos Island and Poikili Stoa in Agora of Athens

From the same point of view, in which a group of buildings can be considered as a "collection", when they have been built at a short distance to serve a common purpose, it might not be an exaggeration to consider the whole island of Delos as a "collection of sacred buildings", which hosted on its' small surface a variety of temples, sanctuaries, tributes and votive offerings, from various city-states and for various deities. Delos was the 'seat' of the Delian Alliance for long periods of the classical era and until 314 BC, when it became independent.

The collection of works of art at that time, also took the form of exhibitions of sculptures and paintings, placed on the porches and the entrance of the temples and the sanctuaries. (Latham and Simmons, 2014, pp. 24)

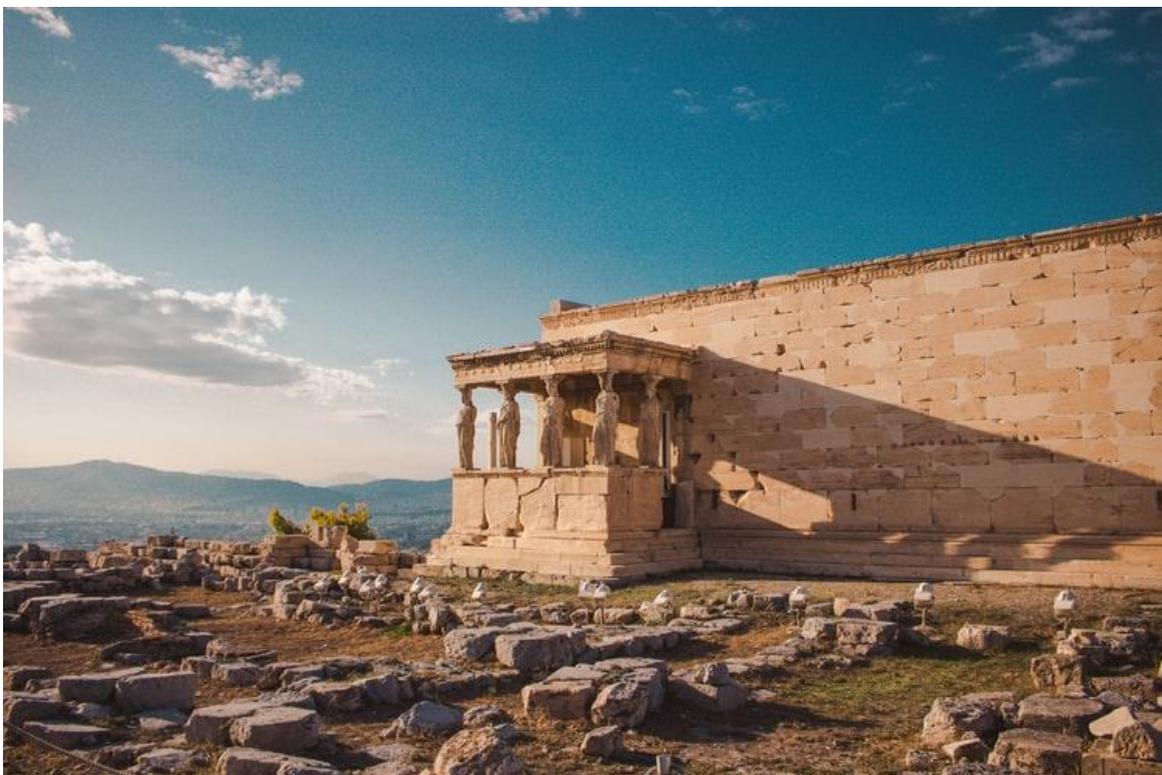


Fig. 2. Erechtheion in Acropolis, Athens (@arthuryeti)

Furthermore, a great sample of typical collecting activity of the classical era that should not be ignored is the one that concerned the public display of important war achievements of the Greeks. For example there were great works of art that were hung in public view, in the Poikili Stoa, in the area of Agora in Athens, as well as in the Propylaea of the Acropolis.

These paintings were created by prominent and renowned artists of the time, such as Polygnotos from Thassos, Mykon and Panainos. On the right wall of the Poikili Stoa was a painting depicting the Battle of Marathon between the Athenians and the Persians. On the left wall was the battle of Oinoi in Argos, while the large side of the portico housed, among other things, the depictions of the Battle of the Amazon and Iliou Persis (the Conquest of Troy). Inside the Poikili Stoa, there were also arms and trophies from the war against the Lacedaemonians and the Scythians, as well as bronze statues of Solon.

It was essentially a public collection, the main purpose of which was to highlight the military achievements to inspire the patriotic spirit of the citizens. After all, it is a fact that a visit to exhibition spaces can lead the visitor to a state of reflection on what he sees and to create interests, in order to find application in the psychology and daily life of the visitor. (Nikonanou et al, 2015, pp. 37—38)

Hellenistic Period: War Trophies

During the Macedonian rule and the Hellenistic era, the collecting activities continued with great devotion to the trophies of the wars from the east, but also with the accumulation of works of art, jewels and other valuable objects in the houses and the burial ensembles of the great rulers.

It was during this period that the concept of "collections" and "museums" began, as people began to realize the need to study their culture and the uniqueness of their own culture in relation to that of areas where they perished. That's when the "charm of the unnecessary" began.

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