

Athenian Altars for the Unknown Gods

In Acts 17:23, Paul preaches to the Athenians and mentions that he sees an altar to the unknown god. The inscription Paul mentions about an altar to the unknown god has not been found by modern scholars and is even determined by Henrichs to be a misreading by Paul. While a singular altar is doubted and unfound, there is evidence to partially back up Paul's interpretation of Athenian religion because, while there are no mentions of an unknown god, there are indeed mentions of unknown gods. The ancient Greeks had altars to unknown gods according to Pausanias (1.1.4 and 5.14.8), and there is evidence of worshipping gods as unknowns in Plato (*Cratylus* 400d-401a), Aeschylus (*Agamemnon* 160-164) and Euripides (*Trojan Women* 884-888). I propose that, based on the well-known worship of gods as unknowns proposed by Fraenkel, supported by the previously mentioned evidence, there was an altar to the unknown gods within the walled city of Athens, as the literary and archaeological evidence suggest.

In the literary evidence, Diogenes tells a story of how Epimenides purified Athens of a plague and the Athenians constructed nameless altars in the 6/7th century (*Lives of Eminent Philosophers* 1.10). Since Epimenides released the sheep he used to purify Athens of the plague from the areopagus, it makes sense that there would be a nameless altar in the Agora, being just downhill from Areopagus. The nameless altar could have then been built several times over the history of Athens to rid plagues.

There is also relevant archaeological evidence. One option for an altar to be used for unknown gods is the triangular shrine in the Agora written about by Lalonde in 1968. With the inscription *TO HIERON*, the shrine does not assign any specific god or hero to be worshipped.

The triangular shrine with the inscription *TO HIERON* can be an example of one of these unnamed shrines because there is no god or hero associated with the monument. Instead, there is a place to worship all of the gods and all of the names they go by. It is also a place for people to worship the gods if they believe the names to be unknowable as in Plato. I propose that this triangular shrine in the Agora was part of the worship of the unknown gods in Athens.

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