



The Ancient Near East Today

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Visualizing Ancient Athens in 3D

By Dimitris Tsalkanis

Today Athens is a city of some 3.75 million people, a far cry from antiquity. [Ancient Athens 3D](#) is an effort to digitally reconstruct the city of Athens the way it was in several historical periods spanning over approximately 3000 years.

At this point, Ancient Athens 3D contains hundreds of models in seven different historical periods between 1200 BCE to 1833 CE. The journey of my website begins with the Mycenaean era and ends with the complete liberation of Athens from the Ottoman Empire. However, the most complete periods are those of Classical to Roman times, what is widely known as “classical antiquity”.

https://youtu.be/8UMI_DsvSNk



The Acropolis of Athens during the Roman Period.

The project has evolved over the year, not only as I have gained more experience in 3D modeling but also because I have come to better understand the methodology and fundamentals of historical reconstructions. The unexpected success of my website has contributed to this evolution.



The Parthenon after the conversion into a mosque with the minaret in the southwest corner (1600s).

There is often a misconception when watching a 3D reconstruction that “this is how it actually was,” This is obviously not true. For many monuments we cannot know with 100% certainty what they really looked like in any given period while for others we know almost nothing. As a result while creating a “visual reconstruction” you need to have some sort of methodology in mind beforehand. There is no reconstruction of any kind that is perfect (unless we invent a time machine).

You need to know what your goal is and, most importantly, the audience that the work is addressing. The general public and students have different needs than scholars who tend to focus on detail. There are certain needs when making a reconstruction for children and other when creating for archaeologists. One group requires a visually engaging and exciting presentation while the other tends to focus on details and ‘accuracy.’ Having said that, the main purpose of Ancient Athens 3D is to serve as an educational tool and to give an overall impression on how a monument or an ancient city might have looked like.



View of Classical Athens (4th century BCE).

To this purpose, the monuments are depicted in an “artistic” or “stylistic” way. This means that every part of a building, even the hypothetical ones, must be completely restored. Of course, before every building is modeled, there is a great amount of research conducted. I read as many scientific publications as possible, which add to the final accuracy of the reconstruction. Nevertheless, there are always parts of the city and monuments that remain unknown. These parts are restored in a way that although hypothetical, are based on testimonies and actual facts (similar constructions, samples from other cities of the same period etc).

<https://youtu.be/mZN77PdUtiE>

Apart from my own studies, I have received help from specialists who are willing to share their knowledge and help this project grow. The most recent example is my collaboration with [Chrysanthos Kanellopoulos](#), Professor of Archaeology in the University of Athens. This collaboration has helped the project move to another level of quality and accuracy and the results were very positively received. The most demanding of the buildings created in collaboration with Professor Kanellopoulos were the Library of Hadrian and the Temple of Olympian Zeus.



The Library of Hadrian (132 CE).

3D technology is a great tool which helps us not only visualize the past but get more acquainted with the people who lived 2,500 years ago in the ancient city of Athens. It helps us experiment with reconstructions without harming the actual monuments and it can be very flexible in means of presentation for scholars and the public. People today and especially the younger generations are used to this way of visualization and that turns 3D into a powerful educational tool.



The Agora of Athens, 5th century BCE.

Ancient Athens 3D continues to evolve as a hobby – a personal project but the combination of limited time and expenses make progress very slow. For the time being, I am trying to replace the very old models with new and more accurate ones and create more educational videos on [Ancient Athens 3D YouTube Channel](#). In the future I will add new historical periods, monuments, and areas of the city.

Dimitris Tsalkanis is a Digital Artist and Video Editor based in Athens, Greece. Users of Athens 3D can support his work at <https://www.patreon.com/AncientAthens3D>

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