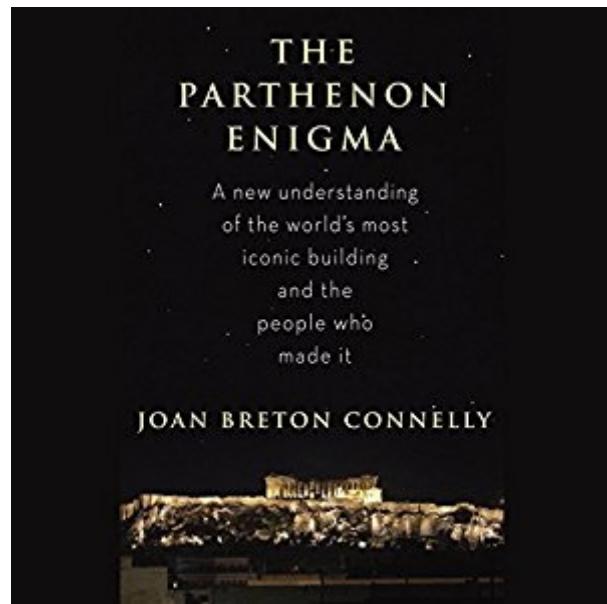


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The Parthenon Enigma



Synopsis

Built in the fifth century BC., the Parthenon has been venerated for more than two millennia as the West's ultimate paragon of beauty and proportion. Since the Enlightenment, it has also come to represent our political ideals, the lavish temple to the goddess Athena serving as the model for our most hallowed civic architecture. But how much do the values of those who built the Parthenon truly correspond with our own? And apart from the significance with which we have invested it, what exactly did this marvel of human hands mean to those who made it? In this revolutionary book, Joan Breton Connelly challenges our most basic assumptions about the Parthenon and the ancient Athenians. Beginning with the natural environment and its rich mythic associations, she re-creates the development of the Acropolis - the Sacred Rock at the heart of the city-state - from its prehistoric origins to its Periklean glory days as a constellation of temples among which the Parthenon stood supreme. In particular, she probes the Parthenon's legendary frieze: the 525-foot-long relief sculpture that originally encircled the upper reaches before it was partially destroyed by Venetian cannon fire (in the 17th century) and most of what remained was shipped off to Britain (in the 19th century) among the Elgin marbles. The frieze's vast enigmatic procession - a dazzling pageant of cavalrymen and elders, musicians and maidens - has for more than two hundred years been thought to represent a scene of annual civic celebration in the birthplace of democracy. But thanks to a once-lost play by Euripides (the discovery of which, in the wrappings of a Hellenistic Egyptian mummy, is only one of this book's intriguing adventures), Connelly has uncovered a long-buried meaning, a story of human sacrifice set during the city's mythic founding.

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Customer Reviews

A breakthrough book by one of the finest authors working today in the archeology field. Connelly is also author of "Portrait of a Priestess"--if you don't already have it, find a copy, as it similarly reevaluates an area of ancient studies that was in need of a thoroughly unique analysis. Connelly, in both of these texts, reinterprets long-standing beliefs about Athenian thought. In addition to the "Parthenon Enigma" being an engrossing read, it becomes a sweeping look at the ancient Mediterranean world. I read it front to back in about 10 days, finishing it would a small "Wow." I'm currently rereading the book. Highly recommended.

In perhaps one of every 20 academic books I read, I find a very very good crossover that will also appeal to a popular audience. Prof. Connelly not only offers a new interpretation of the Parthenon, but she explains Athenian culture and politics with an extraordinary and exciting lucidity. I felt like I was re-discovering Periklean Athens all over again: it was fresh, brilliant, and original. The object in question is the Parthenon, which is supposed to represent the birth of the West and the concept of democracy, according to its Enlightenment interpreters. It combines form with sculptural representation, though no one really knows what exactly most of the sculptures are supposed portray or even what the true purpose was. Many have assumed that the statues depicted recent events. Connelly begins with the assertion that - unlike monotheistic cultures that have a single, sacred text as an irrefutable canonic reference - the Classical Athenians turned to local ritual and architecture to embody the essence of the city state's culture, ideology, and narrative. As such, the Athenians (and the others of classical Graeco-Roman world) lived in a more ambiguous world, where collective interpretations left much implied but unsaid, in part secret, in part assumed in conventions that remain mysterious to us. What Connelly does in this masterful book is offer an interpretation of this gestalt, as expressed in the Parthenon. (Keep in mind that Athens, and possibly Sparta, is only one of exemplar of a vast culture that was spread through the entire Mediterranean. It's enough to leave one awestruck - it's why I majored in classical civilization in college, so this book is a return to my youthful inspiration.) According to Connelly, the sculptures begin by depicting King Erechtheus and Queen Praxithea, whose sacrifice of their daughters helped to found Athens as legitimate in the eyes of the Olympian Gods, a unique entity that sprung from the soil in mythic time. Also portrayed, Athena and Poseidon competed for the patronage of Athens, which the former won, creating a jealous enemy in Poseidon. They also sprung from the seed of Hephaestus, as scraped off of Athena's thoroughly uninterested thigh. Unique by this mandate, the Athenians went on to do great things: they believed in themselves, in their unique origin as spawn from the earth

around Athens. Connelly develops this narrative into an interpretation of the experience of Athenians, who reinforced their sense of solidarity through rituals and celebratory festivals connected to the Parthenon. In her scheme, religion was inseparable from the politics and ideology of Athens, a sense of superiority that enabled them to dominate their allies in the Delian League and finance colossal expenditures on their behalf to beautify Athens, i.e. a repressive democracy based on unique privilege and naked self interest. If this sounds contradictory, it indicates how completely different the conception of democracy and citizenship was then: it was less about individual rights than contributing to the well being of an elite city that was destined to dominate its brothers in the Greek diaspora. Democracy was a duty to serve the community, which excluded outsiders by its very nature and sense of uniqueness. A narrative thread through the book is the steps of discovery that Connelly took, including a manuscript fragment by Euripedes to very technical archaeological excavations that demonstrated the use of paint on the statues. You get the story of the Elgin marbles, complete with the current controversy regarding their return to Greece. I found it a dazzling example of how classicists reason. Nonetheless, I have some caveats to add. First, like all classicists who focus exclusively on the West, Connelly takes for granted that it was superior. I would have like more context and comparisons with the other great empires, e.g. Persia and Egypt, whose architecture the Parthenon has been accused of copying. Second, many of her colleagues have criticized her new interpretation; perhaps it is too early, but I would like to hear her rebuttals. Recommended with the greatest enthusiasm. The text is pretty much at the undergraduate level.

A total eye-opener, this book brings ancient Athenian spirituality back to life in a way I haven't experienced since Roger Lipsey's "Have You Been to Delphi?" Connelly writes so lucidly, you can vividly feel yourself strolling through the Parthenon 2500 years ago. (Such skill in taking readers on a journey into the past is regrettably rare in archeological writing!) Connelly's insights into the foundation myth of Athens are amazing and thoroughly convincing. Fascinating, readable, revelatory.

I loved this book. The pages of my copy are now filled with penciled notes and every other page sent me 'googling' on my phone to learn - just what the heck Dr. Connelly was talking about. The story of Pierre Jouquet's findings at Medinet-Ghoran and later interpretations of papyrus scraps by Colin Austin of the lost play by Euripides, alone, is worth the price of the book. As an architect, I think this should be required reading for all architecture students - we've all loved and studied the

FORM of the Parthenon....but the meaning and the connections it makes to the culture, history, art, even the the cosmos, etc., makes it so much richer as a masterpiece of architecture.....I see another trip to Athens in my future. :-)

A bit slow here and there but ESSENTIAL for anyone going to Athens (as I was when I read this) who intends to go to the Parthenon and the new and fabulous Parthenon museum. The subject is the meaning of the band of decorative sculpture that used to surround the building -- so high up it was not easily visible from the ground. But that set of sculptural panels is now wonderfully displayed in the museum and you can look at it and really consider Connelly's argument. Her view is that it depicts the preparations for the sacrifice of the young daughter of an early (and possibly mythical) king of Athens--to ensure victory in a critical battle. This is not how we like to think of the "rational" Greeks but she persuasively argues they were a far more superstitious and "Gods-fearing" people than we learn about in middle school. Friends in the field tell me her view is still very controversial but it really made my visit much more interesting.

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