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The Parthenon Enigma: A New Understanding of the West’s Most Iconic Building and the People Who Made It,
by Joan Breton Connelly. Alfred A. Knopf, 512 pages, $35

For 25 centuries the Parthenon has enthralled the imagination of the West. Even maimed and battered, this temple to Athena, built of 100,000 tons of Pentelic marble and sitting 500 feet above modern Athens on the limestone rock called the Acropolis, has represented for the cultural heirs of the Athenians all the ideals—political freedom, beauty, humanism, and rationalism—that lie at the heart of Western culture. But like the austere, honey-white marble of the Parthenon’s sculptures, which today are missing the bright colors and bronze accents that once adorned them, this Parthenon of the mind ignores the rich, intricate network of meanings it once held for the ancient Athenians.

Recovering those meanings in all their complexity is the theme of Joan Breton Connelly’s masterly and entertaining The Parthenon Enigma. A classical archaeologist and professor of classics and art history at New York University, Connelly’s previous research has focused on ancient Greek religion and the important role of women in cult and ritual. In her new book she weaves together the landscape, architecture, history, religion, myth, folklore, politics, and art of ancient Athens to recreate for the reader the fascinating strangeness of the people who laid the foundations of Western civilization, as well as providing a comprehensive guide to “the biggest, most technically astonishing, ornately decorated, and aesthetically compelling temple ever known.”

For modern city-dwellers whose landscape is generally mediated or obscured by technology, Connelly’s description of ancient Athens’ topography, flora, and fauna is particularly important. “In the days before the urban noise-scape of automobiles, sirens, trains, planes, and factories,” Connelly writes, “it was the song, cry, and croak of the wild that accompanied life’s moments through the day.” The rivers of Athens, like the Ilissos, Kephisos, and Eridanos, and local springs were important not just as sources of water, but also as conduits for the divine—the nymphs who inhabited them, the gods who figured in their origins, and the legendary heroes and ancestors of the Athenians whose lives and deeds were bound up in them. Trees, gardens, woods, and caves were also places of numinous power and ancestral legend. A dozen caves pock the slopes of the Acropolis, and half of them were shrines to various gods whose stories involved the myths, heroic deeds, gods and monsters, and foundational legends that created the Athenians’ unique identity: “The comprehension of divine presence in a human world, of genealogical succession across great spans of time, and of heroic deeds that lie at the very foundation of cities—all this knowledge was inseparable from the local landscape, the earth and water, vegetation and wildlife, that bore witness to how things came to be as they are.”

The landscape of Athens was dominated by the Acropolis. Connelly’s description of the rock, the earlier temples built on it, and especially the Parthenon of the mid-5th century contains a wealth of architectural, historical, and mythic detail and contexts so clearly and
thoroughly presented that it could stand alone as an excellent guide for anyone planning a visit to the temple. Especially fascinating is the blending of the religious, political, and practical in the functioning of the Parthenon. The home of the goddess was about more than ritual worship or pedagogy in stone. The money for building the temple came from the tribute Athens exacted from the subjects of her empire, the one-time fellow members of a defensive alliance whose fleet patrolled the eastern Aegean to keep an eye on the Persians. This tribute by mid-century totaled 600 talents of silver—about 17 tons, worth around $360 million in today’s value. Athena received one sixtieth of this tribute, and by 431 B.C. 170 tons of silver coins were housed on the Acropolis, much of it in the Parthenon. Within the shrine Phidias’s colossal gold and ivory statue of Athena stood 39 feet high, with a over a ton of pure gold—worth today around $41,280,000—sculpted into her robes, shield, and armor. The gold and silver stored in the Parthenon made it the Athenians’ Fort Knox, and the Athenians used the wealth as a “line of credit, removing many details of the frieze have little to do with the historical procession. The many sections showing cavalrymen and chariots, for example, make no sense in historical terms, when the hoplite infantryman was dominant and chariot warfare an anachronism. Most importantly, Greek sculpture rarely if ever depicted conventional interpretations of the Parthenon frieze see them as illustrations of this procession, particularly the sculpture depicting a man handing a garment, presumably the sacred robe, to a young girl. Yet as Connelly catalogues, too many details of the frieze have little to do with the historical procession. The many sections showing cavalrymen and chariots, for example, make no sense in historical terms, when the hoplite infantryman was dominant and chariot warfare an anachronism. Most importantly, Greek sculpture rarely if ever depicted contemporary reality. Connelly finds a more plausible explanation in a papyrus fragment from a lost play of Euripides, the Erechtheus.

Connelly’s account of the discovery of this fragment in Egypt is itself a fascinating detective story. The papyrus, pages of writing discarded because of scribal errors, had been used for making a cut-rate papier-mâché mummy case of the sort used by Greeks living in Egypt during the last three centuries B.C. In the early 1960s a technique was devised for separating the sheets and revealing the writing. Many fragments of ancient literature were recovered, but most relevant for the Parthenon are the 120 lines from the Erechtheus, which joined the 125 lines already known.

The play tells the story of the three daughters of Erechtheus, the mythical king of Athens, who was conceived when the sperm of the god Hephaestus soiled the garment of the horrified virgin Athena. When Poseidon’s son Eumolpos attacks Athens with an army of Thracians, Erechtheus learns that only by sacrificing one of his daughters can Athens prevail. He chooses his youngest daughter, who bravely and willingly goes to her death, followed by her two sisters who voluntarily join her. The Athenians are victorious, though Erechtheus dies, swallowed up by the earth. The fragment of Eurip-
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ides' play recovered from the mummy case contains the words of Athena to Praxithaea, the wife of Erechtheus, after her grievous losses.

As Connelly writes, the words contain the “divine charter” for the Parthenon, the Panathenaia, and the famous frieze. In her carefully argued and fine-grained analysis, Connelly shows “how the goddess's words have reverberated in the Athenian psyche, expressing the very essence of the people's self-understanding, thereby forming a basis for our understanding of Acropolis temples, cults, and rituals.” And the most stunning expression of that understanding is found in the Parthenon frieze, whose details Connelly shows are understandable in terms of this foundation myth and the meaning it held for ancient Athenians. The Parthenon and its friezes were a “mirror in marble” that educated each citizen in “the history, identity, values, and interests into which he has been born,” thus revealing the essence of his—or her—identity. For despite some contemporary fantasies about an Athenian misogynist “phallocracy” in which women were beaten down and locked away, Athenian girls and women were proud citizens, their honor—as much as their fathers’ and brothers’—dependent on the glory of their common city, and on their willingness to sacrifice themselves for her as did the daughters of Erechtheus. Thus this famous temple derives its name “Parthenon” from the Greek word parthenon, “of the virgins,” the daughters of Erechtheus.

In Connelly’s fascinating analysis, the Parthenon and its sculptures were the common school in which Athenian citizens learned the virtues and communal solidarity necessary for this uniquely spectacular city, the pioneer in political self-rule and freedom, one existing in a brutal world of scant resources and hungry aggressors. That ruthless environment, in which the destruction of the community was one bad harvest or violent raid away, made the bonds of solidarity and the virtue of self-sacrifice vital for survival. For urban moderns insulated from that hard and dangerous world, the brutality of ancient myth seems to be evidence of the bloodthirsty savagery challenging the beauty and idealism of Athenian civilization. But such presentism ignores the Greek achievement in creating aesthetic order and civic virtue in the midst of ruthless violence and tragic choices, what Abraham Lincoln called the “awful arithmetic” that calculates that some must die now so more can live later.

The world in which the Athenians lived accounts in part for their strangeness to us. More important, that tragic world made the public art, architecture, and ritual intensely political, all reinforcing the apothegm of the great statesman Pericles in his funeral oration—“Happiness depends on freedom, and freedom depends on bravery.” The Parthenon and its sculptures and rituals made the same point. In Connelly’s words:

For democracy fostered free speech, deliberation, and foresight, all of which clarified the reasons for one’s actions. From this, the revolutionary ideal of self-sacrifice for a greater good was born. Piety, paideia [education], and ritual tradition fueled the bravery needed to sustain this ideal. And it is this courage that enabled Athenians, old and young alike, to face the enormous challenges that winning and defending democracy so urgently required.

The Parthenon Enigma is one of the best books on ancient Athens I have encountered in a long time. In the course of solving the “enigma” of the friezes, the author seamlessly weaves together a wealth of detail about not just Athenian history, art, and myth, but also the meaning of ancient Athens in both its unsettling strangeness and comforting familiarity. For all that the Athenians, in the words of poet Louis MacNeice, were “all so unimaginably different / And all so long ago,” Joan Connelly teaches us how we can imagine ourselves among them.

Bruce S. Thornton is a professor of classics and humanities at California State University, Fresno; a research fellow at the Hoover Institution; and the author, most recently, of Democracy’s Dangers and Discontents: The Tyranny of the Majority from the Greeks to Obama (Hoover Institution Press).
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