

BOOK REVIEW

The Serpent Column: A Cultural Biography. By PAUL STEPHENSON. Onassis Series in Hellenic Culture. New York and Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2016. Pp. xxii + 275. Hardcover, \$74.00. ISBN 9780190209063.

This is an all encompassing history of the world's oldest standing bronze sculpture, the Serpentine Tripod, an agalma erected to Apollo in Delphi in 479 BC to celebrate the Spartan led victory over the Persians at the Battle of Plataia. As is the case for all venerable objects, the serpent column's past is one with many mysterious twists and turns, and author Paul Stephenson has brought together a veritable encyclopaedia to tell the story of its "creation, relocation and mutilation" (xiv). The column's story spans over twenty-five centuries and is one whose "strands of meaning and interpretation," (xii) Stephenson has sought to "unwind" in a "cultural biography" (xiii) of 8 chapters, 102 illustrations, 6 maps and 1 table.

Here is what we know. The piece was first placed on the eastern terrace of Apollo's sanctuary at Delphi and was very likely made by master craftsmen from Sparta. Placed atop the trio of snake heads that stretched up and out from the unified braid of their bodies was once a tripod bearing a golden cauldron. It disappeared with the Phokians during the Third Sacred War in 356 BC, but the rest of the column remained. Almost seven centuries later after the Emperor Constantine's defeat of Licinius in September, 324 AD, his agents took the column and moved it 604 miles east to Constantinople to a central position on the eubolis (spina) facing the Hippodrome's kathisma to commemorate the victory and adorn Constantine's new city. There it has stood for centuries- an enduring monument whose talismanic and apotropaic powers have attracted believers and sightseers of all faiths. After being made into a fountain under Theodosius I during the 390s, it remained intact until 1700 when the column suffered a triple decapitation.

One narrative says that during evening prayers on 20 October to the sounds of tree chopping, the heads simply dropped off with no humans present (233–34). According to Aubry de la Mottrye, however, who was the last European to see the three headed column, the decapitation happened not long after the arrival of the Polish ambassador Count Lisinsky and his 600 soldiers in April, 1700. His men were dressed in Turkish chain mail, spoils of war won against the Turks in Vienna,

and their presence not only seemed to have offended the Sipahi (veteran Ottoman cavalry), but led to the beheading of an inebriated Muslim of Polish descent by order of the count, and the subsequent disappearance of the heads during the night.

Almost 150 years later, an upper jaw, in all likelihood part of the column, was found during restoration work on the Hagia Sophia (1845–1847). Today the column occupies its original location between two obelisks, but looking like “scrap metal,” it projects up from a circular pit sunken below ground level that is “lined with electrical wires,” . . . and “littered with . . . the trash of urban life,” to quote from Sarah Bassett’s review (*BMCR* 2017.01.43). Sic transit gloria mundi? Or is Nicolas Cage right to observe that “every great story seems to begin with a snake,” in this case three.

Should the book be reprinted or issued as a paperback the following corrections should be made: note 23 on page 9 needs a period; the reader is told to see “figure 7.13” on p. 22, but there is no such figure; note 85 on page 25 needs a period; the word “Aropolis” on page 33 should read Acropolis; note 50 on page 42 cites “Connelly 2014,” but Connelly is not in the bibliography; the abbreviation BMGS (*Byzantine and Modern Greek Studies*), found in the citation for T. Madden’s article on page 253 is not in the list of abbreviations given on page 243; P. Amandry and P. Amiet and their articles listed in the bibliography on page 246 need to be put in correct alphabetical order, i.e. below the entry for A. Alföldi on page 245; and last there is an amusing error in the list of illustrations on p. xxiii. The phrase “serpent coilumn” in the caption describing figure 8.9 should read serpent column.

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