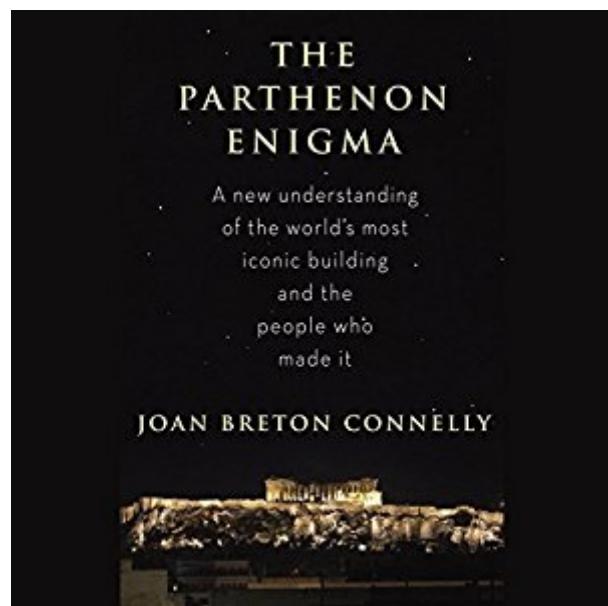


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The Parthenon Enigma



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.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This was an amazingly good book. I am a fan of Classical Greek culture with some background, having taught an interdisciplinary course on The Classical Age 9 times over a period of 20 years at Virginia Tech. I know a good deal about Classical sculpture and architecture, and was pleased to find that I haven't been misleading my students about anything, except...the Parthenon frieze. While this book is incredibly wide-ranging, its real contribution to scholarship is a reinterpretation of the frieze. It is traditionally thought to represent the Panathenaic Procession, an annual event (though more significant every 4 years) staged for several centuries from the 5th Century BCE until a Roman emperor outlawed pagan celebrations in the 4th Century CE. The author does a very respectable job of questioning and marshaling evidence for interpretations. Her theory is that the frieze represents the sacrifice of the daughter of Erechtheus, required by the Oracle at Delphi for an Athenian victory pitting Athena and her allies against Poseidon and his allies (who had wanted to be the local god). This general conflict between Athena and Poseidon is known from the West Pediment. The story of the family of Erechtheus and his daughters is only known from a fragmentary play by Euripides named "Erechtheus." She apparently first put forward this hypothesis over 20 years ago, and has been building her case ever since. That mythical event was apparently the origin of the Panathenaic Procession, so the traditional interpretation is not wildly off. But she argues, for instance, that the Procession was a contemporary event, and no other art on the Parthenon (or really anywhere on temples) depicted contemporary events.

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