



The Serpent Column: A Cultural Biography (Onassis Series in Hellenic Culture)

By Paul Stephenson

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The Serpent Column, a bronze sculpture that has stood in Delphi and Constantinople, today Istanbul, is a Greek representation of the Near Eastern primordial combat myth: it is Typhon, a dragon defeated by Zeus, and also Python slain by Apollo. The column was created after the Battle of Plataia (479 BC), where the sky was dominated by serpentine constellations and by the spiralling tails of the Milky Way. It was erected as a votive for Apollo and as a monument to the victory of the united Greek poleis over the Persians. It is as a victory monument that the column was transplanted to Constantinople and erected in the hippodrome. The column remained a monument to cosmic victory through centuries, but also took on other meanings. Through the Byzantine centuries these interpretation were fundamentally Christian, drawing upon serpentine imagery in Scripture, patristic and homiletic writings. When Byzantines saw the monument they reflected upon this multivalent serpentine symbolism, but also the fact that it was a bronze column. For these observers, it evoked the Temple's brazen pillars, Moses' brazen serpent, the serpentine tempter of Genesis (Satan), and the beast of Revelation. The column was inserted into Christian sacred history, symbolizing creation and the end times. The most enduring interpretation of the column, which is unrelated to religion, and therefore survived the Ottoman capture of the city, is as a talisman against snakes and snake-bites. It is this tale that was told by travellers to Constantinople throughout the Middle Ages, and it is this story that is told to tourists today who visit Istanbul. In this book, Paul Stephenson twists together multiple strands to relate the cultural biography of a unique monument.

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Editorial Review

Review

"In the course of this 2500-year history, the Column has worn many hats. It has served as a thank-offering, an evocation of imperial power, a talisman against evil with a special knack for repelling snakes, and a draw for antiquarians and tourists. Yet the casual observer might find herself hard pressed to imagine such an impressive record. Rising headless from a base several meters below the current ground level, the Column now looks like nothing so much as scrap metal, the stick for Yeats' tattered cloak. The fenced pit, in which it stands, lined with electrical wires and littered with the inevitable bits of trash that are the stuff of urban life, does nothing to encourage imagination. In the interests of rectifying this sorry state, Paul Stephenson's new monograph should be required reading." --Sarah Bassett, *Bryn Mawr Classical Review*

"Paul Stephenson's book is a brilliant study of the bronze column erected at Delphi in 479 BC and visible even now in Istanbul. He gives a fascinating account of its changing reception over 2,500 years, and the power ascribed to it by later generations. As he shows, the Serpent Column can still convey surprising messages today." -Averil Cameron, University of Oxford

"In this magisterial book, Paul Stephenson takes his readers on an immensely fascinating and fruitful journey across time and space. Adopting the approach of cultural biography, he recounts in vividly written prose the story of the Serpent Column in Istanbul, tracking its changing manifestations and meanings from the ancient Greeks to the present." -Thomas Gallant, University of California, San Diego

"Readers looking for a connecting thread through Greek, Byzantine, and Ottoman history will find here a fascinating exploration of the rich 2,500 year-history of the world's oldest standing bronze sculpture. From ancient Delphi to Byzantine snake charms and Ottoman manuscript images, Stephenson delivers." -Anthony Kaldellis, The Ohio State University

About the Author

Paul Stephenson is Professor of History and Head of the School of History and Heritage at the University of Lincoln.

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