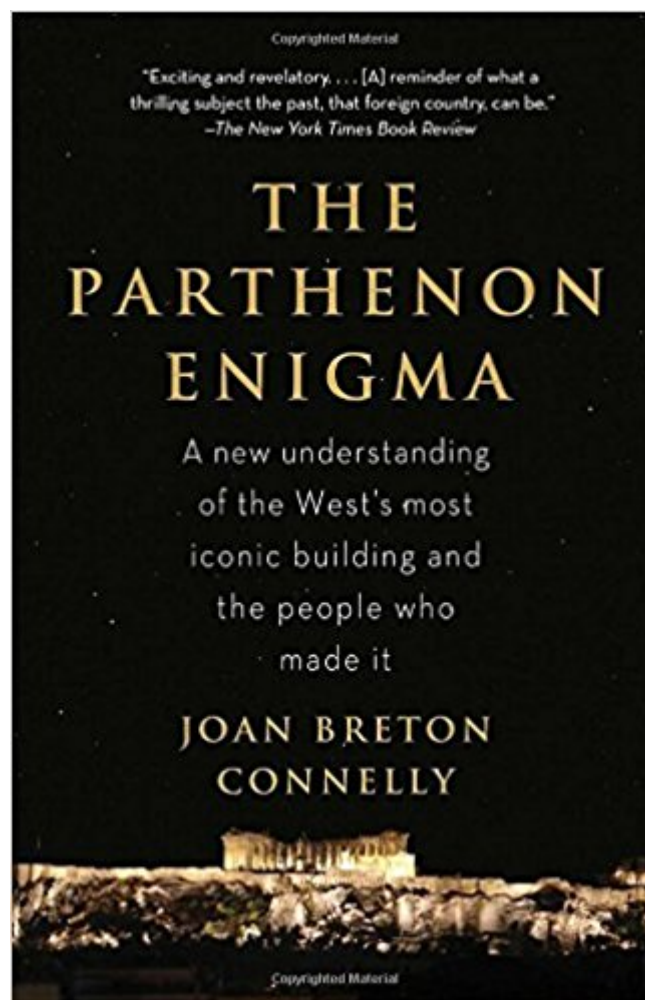




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# **The Parthenon Enigma: A New Understanding Of The West's Most Iconic Building And The People Who Made It.**



## Synopsis

A New York Times Notable Book and one of The Daily Beast's Best Books of the Year Winner of the Ralph Waldo Emerson Award Since the Enlightenment, the Parthenon has been the greatest example of Athenian architecture and has been venerated as the definitive symbol of Western democratic values. Here, Joan Breton Connelly challenges this conventional wisdom, drawing on previously undiscovered sources to present a revolutionary new view of this peerless building. Reaching back across time to trace the Parthenon's story from the laying of its foundation, Connelly finds its true meaning not in the rationalist ideals we typically associate with Athens but in a vast web of ceaseless cultic observances and a unique mythic identity, in which democracy in our sense of the word would have been inconceivable. Marshalling a breathtaking range of textual and visual evidence, and full of fresh insights woven into a thrilling narrative that brings the distant past to life, *The Parthenon Enigma* sheds a stunning new light on the ancient Athenians from whom we claim cultural descent and on Western civilization itself.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

**\*Starred Review\*** Universally recognized as a symbol of Western democracy, the Parthenon emerges in Connelly's bold new analysis as a shrine memorializing myths radically alien to modern politics. Newly recovered classical literary texts and surprising archaeological finds compel readers to acknowledge the implausibility of the usual interpretation of the Parthenon's frieze sculptures as a depiction of fifth-century Athenians celebrating their Panathenaic Festival. To buttress a quite different interpretation, Connelly cites lines from a long-lost Euripides play, so

investing the Parthenon statues with mythical – not historical – significance, enshrining the legendary King Erechtheus and Queen Praxithea and the three daughters they heroically sacrifice to save their threatened city. The discovery that Athenians believed their political order originated with virgin sacrifice may shock readers, despite the ubiquity of human sacrifice in the world’s prehistory and the centrality of blood sacrifice in Christianity. Yet in Athens’s violent founding myth, Connelly sees a reminder of how completely Athenians put community welfare above self-interest. Newly aware of the potent message embedded in the Parthenon frieze as a whole, many readers will endorse Connelly’s concluding appeal to British authorities, asking them to return to Greece the priceless pieces of the frieze that have long been held in London. An explosive reinterpretation of a classical icon. --Bryce Christensen --This text refers to an out of print or unavailable edition of this title.

“Exciting and revelatory. . . . That rare thing: the exposition of a truly great idea, and a reminder of what a thrilling subject the past, that foreign country, can be.” The New York Times Book Review “Joan Connelly’s brilliant study of the Parthenon shows how a myth can reveal as many secrets as a rock or a ruin, and how rethinking what we know about antiquity can help us better understand ourselves today.” George Lucas, creator of the “Star Wars” saga “A detailed portrait.” The Washington Post “More than ingenious. . . . The most convincing explanation of the entire Parthenon program so far put before us.” Nigel Spivey, *Greece & Rome* “Learned, ambitious . . . up to date with the excellent theoretical work of recent decades.” It is time to change the textbooks and the museum labels. “Connelly’s theory is attractive and plausible, and is backed by a considerable breadth and depth of scholarship – archaeological, visual, and textual.” A.E. Stallings, *The Weekly Standard* (London) “Original, insightful and convincing. . . . A very important book: thoroughly researched and written for the intelligent reader. . . . [Connelly] breaks new ground.” Huffington Post “Connelly’s groundbreaking work will forever change our conception of the most important building in the history of Western civilization. By cracking the hidden code of the Parthenon, she reveals the classical world in a radical new light that will reorient how we all view its legacy for the twenty-first century.” Tom Reiss, author of *The Black Count*, winner of the Pulitzer Prize “General readers with an interest in Greek history and architecture will find *The Parthenon Enigma* fascinating. . . . [It reads like a] supremely intelligent riff

on a Dan Brown novel. **Richmond Times-Dispatch** "A careful, learned account and a good read. **The New York Review of Books** "Gracefully written, informative. . . . Engaging and intensely interesting. . . . Thoughtful, stimulating, and unquestionably valuable. **J.J. Pollitt, The New Criterion**

"Connelly's interpretation [offers an] even positive message, one that speaks to the influence of the Parthenon in the fields of architecture, government and the very nature of civilized society. **New York Post** "Learned and elegant . . . a powerful case for a new understanding of the Parthenon, its original meaning as a religious object, and for the fullest possible restoration of its many parts still scattered far and wide. **Donald Kagan, Sterling Professor Emeritus of Classics and History, Yale University, and author of The Peloponnesian War** "Masterly. . . . Connelly's depth of knowledge and scholastic effort shine through brilliantly. **Library Journal (starred)** "Luminous . . . courageously and intelligently starting from scratch, Joan Connelly reconstructs the meaning of the Parthenon. . . . The unfamiliar picture that emerges gives us all a sharper vision of what this timeless monument can still mean to our own troubled world. **Gregory Nagy, Francis Jones Professor of Classical Greek Literature and Professor of Comparative Literature, Director of the Center for Hellenic Studies, Harvard University** "Gripping. **Metropolis Magazine** "Edifying. . . . A book for all who seek direction and are capable of seeing the bigger picture. **Kirkus** "Persuasive. . . . This detailed, smart, and tantalizing study offers much to savor. **Publishers Weekly**

"Connelly's book is one for the twenty-first century, full of new finds and fresh insights. **Angelos Chaniotis, Professor of Ancient History and Classics, Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton**

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 with 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 to 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 Euripides 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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