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Paul Stephenson

The Serpent Column: A Cultural Biography

Onassis Series in Hellenic Culture. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. 304 pp.; 92 b/w ills. Hardcover \$82.00 (9780190209063)

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The idea of writing a “cultural biography” of the Serpent Column is brilliant. Over the 2500 years of its history, this monument stood in the center of two of the most significant environments of the ancient world: the sanctuary of Apollo at Delphi and the Circus of Constantinople. It witnessed their transformations, and it underwent important alterations itself, both in its physical appearance and in the meanings associated to it.

After a first chapter dealing with the history of its discovery and tentative reconstructions, seven more chapters narrate the life of the column, dealing with its different locations (§ 1, *Plataia*; § 2, *Delphi*; § 3, *Constantinople in Late Antiquity*; § 4, *Constantinople in the Middle Ages*; § 8, *Istanbul*) and functions (§ 6, *Fountain*; § 7, *Talisman*). The book is preceded by a short theoretical preface referring to the anthropologist Igor Kopytoff’s seminal study *The Cultural Biography of Things* (1986). Kopytoff defined “cultural biography” as follows: “A culturally informed economic biography of an object would look at it as a culturally constructed entity, endowed with culturally specific meanings, and classified and reclassified into culturally constituted categories.” Kopytoff was especially interested in the commoditization and de-commoditization of an object during its life: the same object can be considered “common” (“exchangeable with anything and everything else”) in some contexts and “unique” (“not exchangeable with anything else”) in others, depending on the cultural values associated with it. This is precisely what happened to the Serpent Column: after a long life as a unique sacred object, it became for an equally long period little more than an item of street furniture, before entering its third life as a venerable monument of antiquity.

An object is held in high regard if it is “unique,” but that is no longer so once it becomes “common”: accordingly, the column disappears from the extant sources for the whole Byzantine millennium. In this respect, I believe, Kopytoff’s theory proves most useful: the concept of commoditization can explain those stages in the life of an object for which the traditional approaches of cultural or reception history cannot provide much help, since a commoditized object is not normally addressed in textual or visual representations. Admittedly, the silence of the sources makes a history of the significance of Serpent Column in medieval Constantinople hard to write. Here is where the author’s approach diverges the most from what I would have found desirable. Instead of treating this silence as a cultural phenomenon and investigating the reasons behind it, the author puts aside the question using the metaphor of the maypole; the ribbons attached to the pole “are the strands of meaning and interpretation, of biography” (xii) attached to the column over the course of its history:

Some readers might have preferred to observe a single ribbon, firmly attached to the top, unwound clearly and cleanly in a straightforward narrative (more like a Roman historiated column than a maypole). The evidence does not allow for this approach, nor is it a helpful way to present the many receptions of a polyvalent object. Chapters often proceed by inference and suggestion, by the accumulation and conjoining of discreet elements, rather than the systematic manufacture of a singular and convincing argument. However, as a matter of style as well as method I have sought to avoid presenting every part of the book as contingent or conjectural. The reader must also think with the evidence and accept or reject what she or he finds compelling or invalid. (xii)

I must admit to being among those readers who prefer narratives. It is not just a matter of taste, however: the opposition between straightforward narrative and polyvalent objects is artificial and ultimately misleading. Let us begin by stating the obvious: there is no such thing as a straightforward narrative in history. A historical narrative is built through the evaluation of different sources and traditions, with the aim of clarifying the bundle of receptions and interpretations (the ribbons), which surround every object surviving from the past, making it intrinsically polyvalent. The historian’s task lies in the exercise of critical judgment on each of these ribbons, to avoid falling into either the fiction of a falsely unambiguous narrative or the easier but equally acritical accumulation of discreet elements. Renouncing this exercise puts the readers in an uncomfortable position, leaving them with the responsibility to choose what to accept or reject without defining the criteria on which this choice should be based. In this context, the decision “to avoid presenting every part of the book as contingent or conjectural” is all the more dangerous, since the uninformed reader will have no clue to distinguish between truths and guesses.

In accordance with this premise, each chapter is constructed as a sequence of short sections dealing with specific topics related to the column at different levels, being associated either with serpents, bronze monuments, or victories. Although many sources and comments are interesting in themselves, the way they are introduced seems to me quite problematic: every piece of information tends to be presented as equally plausible and equally relevant, while one would have wished for

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them to be organized in a more consistent and hierarchical way. There is no space here to mention all the associations suggested: to give one example, I will limit myself to the fashionable topic of archaeoastronomy (38–48, 58–66, 97–99). According to the author, the victors of Plataea would have chosen a serpentine form for their monument because the night before the battle they saw serpents in the sky: the constellations of Ophis and Draco and the “spiraling tails” of the Milky Way; Constantine, then, ordered the same monument to be brought to his new city because he too saw the same serpents before his victory at Chrysopolis. This “remarkable coincidence” (98), however, is no coincidence at all: Draco, being a circumpolar constellation, is above earth every night, while Ophis, at the latitude of the central Mediterranean, is visible from April to October; since ancient warfare took place almost exclusively in summer, these constellations were visible not only before Plataea and Chrysopolis, but before almost every battle of the ancient world, including the vast majority for which no serpentine votive was produced. Moreover, the author’s insistence on the “spiraling tails” of the Milky Way (40, 46, 60, 98) deceptively implies an association between the galaxy and a serpentine image that is not attested by any Greek or Latin source, either scientific or mythological; the only reference the author can provide (62) comes from the Babylonian epic *Enuma Elish*.

This practice of suggesting evocative associations without providing the reader with the means of assessing their likelihood is frequent throughout the book. The presence of many factual errors does not help. I mention here some examples: page 23, the title ἀνὸν ὑπόρων (ex-consul) is translated as *proconsul* (whose Greek equivalent is ἀνθύνατος); page 41, Draco and Ophis are mistakenly treated as the same constellation; page 42, the famous fourth-century BC astronomer Eudoxus is called Eudochos; page 51, the mythographic collection *Βιβλιοθήκη* is dated to the second century BC, as if its author was really Apollodorus of Athens (an attribution rejected by Carl Robert in 1873); and page 100, Byzantium is said to be “equidistant from the Rhine and Euphrates” (the first distance is about twice the second). There are serious language problems, too. On page 1, what purports to be the author’s own translation from Pierre Gilles’s *De topographia Constantinopoleos* (1562) is in fact mostly a paraphrase from the English edition of the same work published by John Ball in 1729. The author only steps apart from Ball’s version at the end, writing “which was from Delphi” for Gilles’s “ut erat apud Delphos.” On page 10, one would expect that the inscription on the Serpent Column itself be copied from any of the existing publications without misspellings. On page 11, the author mentions an article “in the Athenian *Éphéméride Archéologique*”; the repetition of an indication borrowed from a nineteenth-century French scholar shows that the author not only has never come across the *Αρχαιολογική Εφημερίς*, but also did not bother to check the reference. On page 23, in a Greek inscription bearing official titles in the genitive, three restorations of proper nouns are proposed, all in the nominative case. Pages 212–13, the story of a tree growing within the Serpent Column, reported in Giovan Maria Angiolello’s *Historia Turchesca* (mistakenly called *Turchesa*), is misunderstood by clumsily combining two different English translations.

To conclude: the overall idea of the book and its theoretical premise can only be praised, but the way they are carried out is rather confusing. While many sources and associations are certainly worth mentioning, the book ends up being more a collection of curiosities than a cultural biography. Subsequent studies will assess the validity of each association presented here. In the meantime, a reader with previous knowledge of the topic will find many interesting suggestions, but it will be very hard for an uninformed reader to get a coherent picture of this monument and its meanings.

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