THE ANCIENT WORLD

DEEP FRIEZE

What does the Parthenon mean?

BY DANIEL MENDELSOHN

A new book says that Greece's most iconic temple commemorates human sacrifice.

What will archeologists twenty-five centuries from now make of the ruins of One World Trade Center, currently nearing completion in downtown Manhattan? Some scholars in the year 4514, familiar with ancient accounts describing the diminutive structure as a "skyscraper," will no doubt speculate about the significance of its height—although they will be forced to admit that 1,368, the number of "feet" from base to roof, was a figure with no known significance in the culture of the ancient builders. Others, drawing on fragmentary scriptural texts ("wikis") that refer to a now missing aerial spire, will propose an ingenious theory that the original height of the building was 1,776 of those ancient units of measure: a symbolic reference to a date known to have had considerable ideological importance for the builders. (Still others will dismiss this notion as vulgarly literal-minded.)

Meanwhile, experts in epigraphy and prosopography will pore over inscriptions bearing the names of the ordinary people who lived, loved, and worked here ("Condé Nast," "Michael Kors"). The presence of mysterious symbols—in particular, an apple with a bite taken out of it—will raise the vexed question of whether the site was sacred or secular. A few researchers will argue that the two immense rectangular pits near the site of the ruin, once fitted with pipes and, as most historians in the forty-sixth century agree, used as public baths, were the footprints of earlier, "archaic" structures known to have existed on the site, although they will not be able to explain why the outlines of those ruins were preserved. Try as all these scholars may, the unifying theory that connects the number 1776, the names, the symbols, and the traces of earlier structures will remain elusive.

When we look at the Parthenon today, we are looking at a building that began life much as One World Trade Center did—as a monument to a national cataclysm. By now, of course, it is one of the most iconic structures in the world: its majesty celebrated from Plutarch in the first century A.D. ("no less stately in size than exquisite in form") to the Ottoman diarist Evliya Celebi in the seventeenth ("We have seen all the mosques of the world, but we have never seen the likes of this"); its aesthetic perfection adulated by professionals as well as tourists (Le Corbusier called it "the basis for all measurement in art"); reproduced in every medium and on every scale imaginable, from stone to paper, in tombs, stock exchanges, and courthouses, from a full-size replica in Nashville to the blue-and-white image on millions of takeout coffee cups.

But what the Athenians who built the Parthenon saw, on the day in 438 B.C., when it was dedicated, was a memorial to a devastating attack. It, too, rose as a replacement for a predecessor incinerated by enemies; it, too, towered over a plaza where the footprint of an earlier structure had been left deliberately visible. And it, too, was forever associated in the minds of the citizens who beheld it with one terrible day in September.

On the 23rd of that month in 480 B.C., near the climax of a decades-long conflict between the Persian Empire and a loose confederation of Greek city-states, a Persian force sacked Athens and the Acropolis. A great flat-topped rock that hunches up in the center of the city, the Acropolis ("the high place of the city") was home to the Athenians' holiest structures. There stood its shrine to Erechtheus, one of Athens' mythical founders and first kings, which featured the olive tree said to have been a gift from Athena, the city's patron deity; not far away was a temple to Athena herself, which housed a wooden image of the virgin goddess so old that it was believed to have fallen from Heaven.

Along promenades and temple steps innumerable votive offerings sprouted: panoplies from defeated enemies, bronze of heroes and gods, the life-size stone youths and maidens known as kouros and korai, smiling their secret smiles.

All this the Persians burned. Blood was shed, too. The invaders killed citizens and priests who had taken refuge in the holy places—a slaughter that, for the Greeks, represented an
inconceivable violation of sacred law. Later, after the Persians were defeated and the rest of the Athenians returned to their sacked city, the smiting statues were carefully gathered and buried, as if they were people. You can still see the char- 
ning on some of them.

The attack and destruction scarred the Athenian consciousness in a way that is difficult for us, traumatized though we still are by September 11th, to imagine. A generation passed before the Athenians could bring themselves to rebuild. (Jon D. Mikalson, a professor of classics at the University of Virginia, recently observed that to get a full sense of the Athenian ordeal, you’d have to “imagine that on 9/11 the whole of D.C. and New York City was levelled and the whole country evacuated and it took thirty years to rebuild.”) What the Athenian and the American national traumas had in common was that the attack almost immediately became symbolic—a dramatization of the political and moral differences between the victim and the perpetrators. One Greek term for the people who had destroyed their city was barbaroi, which is the root of our word “barbarians.”

Since the mid-eighteenth century, when Greece and its ruins were being popularized by European intellectuals, writers, and artists, the Parthenon—the jewel in the crown of the rebuilt Acropolis, a gleaming marble temple to the goddess of wisdom—appeared designed to represent everything we have wanted both ancient Athens and our own liberal democracies to be: the pure expression of a rational, humanistic world view. Now a book by an archeologist at New York University claims that the passage of twenty-five centuries has hopelessly obscured the building’s original meaning, and that the temple’s most famous sculpture in fact represents something “unbearable to imagine on a building regarded as the ‘icon of Western art.’” In “The Parthenon Enigma,” Joan Breton Connolly argues that “the biggest, most technically astonishing, ornately decorated, and aesthetically compelling temple ever known” was designed to commemorate a human sacrifice—a barbarous act of which the Greeks were not the victims but the perpetrators. Her controversial thesis is only the latest in a series of arguments about the Parthenon that have been going on since before it was even finished.

The first great controversy was political, and, as with so many construction projects, it had to do with money. In the three decades between the sack of the Acropolis and its lavish reconstruction under the statesman Pericles, Athens had gone from being a regional power to the head of a strategic alliance known to historians as the Delian League (after the island of Delos, the site of its treasury). In everything but name, the League was Athens’ empire, and its members were subject states. Shortly before rebuilding on the Acropolis began, Pericles seized the treasury and moved it to Athens, ostensibly for safekeeping. At the time, it was valued at eight thousand talents—roughly $4.8 billion in today’s money, by one estimate. Another six hundred talents, or about three hundred and sixty million dollars, rolled in annually as tribute from Athens’ “allies.”

To the Athenians, who prided themselves on their piety as well as on their cultural superiority, one obvious place to sink this cash was into the rebuilding of the blackened ruins on the Acropolis. In its marriage of artistic ambition and economic practicality, this immense project was a bit like the Depression-era W.P.A. (Athens enjoyed full employment for nearly half a century after the war began; Plutarch, in his life of Pericles, wrote that the projects “divided and distributed surplus money to pretty every age-group and type of person.”) When Pericles’ enemies tried to use the astronomical costs of the Acropolis project as a political weapon against him, he said that he was perfectly happy to finance the construction himself, provided that he be allowed to dedicate the buildings in his own name. Eager for the glory that they, knew, would cling to the project, they stopped grumbling.

The new temples were like none that had ever been built. Although many people think of the Parthenon, in particular, as the epitome of Greek architecture, it was typical of nothing at all, an anomaly in terms of material, size, and design. It was the first temple in mainland Greece to be built entirely of marble—twenty-two thousand tons of it, quarried about ten miles away and hauled up the Acropolis by sledges, carts, and pulleys. It was also the largest. Most temples in the rather plain architectural style known as Doric have six columns across the front and thirteen down the sides; the Parthenon has eight columns in front and seventeen down the sides. The expanded scale made possible an unprecedented amount of sculptural decoration. Marching along the entablature (the horizontal element that rests above the outer columns) were huge rectangular panels, called metopes, showing scenes from mythic battles. Gods strike down giants on the east front, Greeks triumph over Amazons on the west and Trojans on the north, and men vanquish the half-human, half-horse centaurs on the south. In both pediments (the triangular gables at either end), brightly painted statues were used to depict crucial moments in Athena’s legend. On the east, above the front door, the goddess sprang full grown from the head of her father, Zeus, as another gods looked on, gesticulating with understandable astonishment; on the west, she battled her uncle Poseidon for possession of Athens. Merely to walk around the temple was to get a lesson in Greek and Athenian civic history.

Another radical departure from architectural tradition was the inclusion of an element typical of a more ornate order, the Ionic: a continuous sculptured bas-relief frieze running around the entirety of a temple’s rectangular inner sanctum, or cela, the chamber in which the statue of the god was typically housed. The Parthenon’s cella was unusual, too, consisting of two rooms rather than one: the larger did contain a statue, but the purpose of the smaller rear chamber remains unclear. Some scholars think it was where young virgins who served as temple acolytes were housed, or worked. Others, noting ancient references to expensive dedications stored in that room, believe it served as a treasury of some kind—perhaps for part of the immense fortune that belonged to the Delian League.

The degree to which high art, religion, and international finance converged in the Parthenon is apparent in what was, in antiquity, the temple’s most famous feature: a forty-foot-high gold-and-ivory statue of Athena Parthenos (“the Virgin”), which stood inside the main room of the cela. Depicting the goddess in armor, the severed head of Medusa on her chest, a shield
at her side, a giant snake—the symbol of Athens' mythic kings—at her feet, and a six-foot-high winged victory in her right hand, this prodigy was the work of Phidias, a close friend of Pericles and the greatest artist of the day, who, according to some sources, oversaw the entire Acropolis project. The gold plates used for the goddess's gown, worth around forty-four talents, or twenty-six million dollars, were designed to be detachable, in the event that an overwhelming need for cash arose. Sure enough, within a century of the building's completion, the precious garments had been liquidated by an Athenian leader to pay for mercenaries.

Even more remarkable than the richness of the Parthenon's décor was a series of technical refinements that continued to excite the admiration of architects. The façade may have the memorable simplicity of a logo—those eight verticals surmounted by the shallow isosceles triangle—but there are almost no straight lines in the building. Both the entablature and the platform upon which the structure sits curve upward at the center; the metopes lean outward, while the panels that alternated with them lean inward, as do the north and south walls of the cela. The foundation of the entire structure tilts slightly upward toward the west end—the side you first see as you enter the Acropolis—giving it the slightly aggressive, elbow-in-your-face quality that can strike you on first viewing. The columns of the outer colonnade, which appear to be perfectly straight, actually swell slightly at the center. This adjustment served, in part, to correct an optical illusion (pillars with perfectly straight sides appear to cave inward toward the middle), but the slight swelling also conveys the subliminal impression of muscular effort. The Greek archeologist and architect who has overseen the Parthenon restoration for more than twenty years—since 1975, most of the structure has been, essentially, taken apart and put back together again—describes the effect as "the deep breath taken by the athlete." The outer columns themselves all lean inward slightly; if extended, they would meet a mile and a half above the surface of the earth.

Arching, leaning, swaying, swelling, breathing: the over-all effect of the Parthenon's architectural subtleties is to give the building a special and slightly unsettling quality of being somehow alive.

During the recent restoration, it was found that the vertical grooves, or flutes, carved into the building's columns represent the arc not of a circle, as had previously been thought, but of an ellipse. This ostensibly minor technical feature accounts for a major effect: the uncurved play of light and shadow along the columned façade as the sun rises and sets, which, as one member of the restoration team has put it, can make it seem that every day "the Parthenon is moving into the light."

Just about everyone who has ever struggled up the slippery marble steps of the Acropolis and gazed at this astonishing building seems to have wanted to lay claim to it. With its ideologically freighted sculptures, it began, as Connelly puts it in her new book, as the city-state's "great billboard"; the various politicians, emperors, theologians, infidels, invaders, thieves, and liberators who have passed through Athens since then have all tried to scrawl their messages on it.

First, there were the Greeks themselves. Barely a century after construction ended, the orator Demosthenes,nostic for the heyday of the Periclean democracy, referred to the building as a symbol of the Athenians' past greatness. Around the same time, Alexander the Great decorated the entablature with shields captured from his Asiatic enemies, along with a sardonic inscription lambasting the Spartans for not joining his campaign. Three hundred years later, the Roman emperor Nero splashed a Greek text, fashioned from bronze letters, on the east façade, honoring himself.

After a major fire in the third or fourth century A.D. devastated the interior and destroyed the roof, the billboard became available for other messages. Toward the end of the sixth century, by which time virgin other than Athena had come to be worshipped in Athens, the Parthenon became a church. Many of the pagan images were defaced, icons were erected, the west end replaced the east as the main entrance, and a curved apse bulged out the back. A hundred years later, it was the Orthodox Cathedral of the Virgin Acheiropoietissa, the "God-bearing Mother of Athens." After 1204, when the French and Venetian leaders of the Fourth Crusade passed through, the building began a new life as the Roman Catholic cathedral of Notre Dame d'Athènes, complete with a bell tower. In another three centuries, after the Ottoman Turks occupied the Greek mainland, Athena's temple and Mary's church was reborn as a mosque. The bell tower morphed easily into a minaret.

Despite these disasters, deprivations, and reconstrucations, by the early modern era the Parthenon was still largely intact. At this point it began a strange new career as a pawn in a conflict between Europe and the Ottomans. Late in the seventeenth century, during a clash whose name—the Sixth Ottoman-Venetian War—tells you a good deal about the whole wearying period, the Turks used the Parthenon as an ammunition depot, confident that the Venetians would never fire on so sacrosanct a monument. They were wrong. One of the seven hundred cannons that the Venetians fired at the Acropolis during the autumn of 1687—another had September for Athens—found its mark. The immense explosion blew out the cela walls, toppled two dozen columns, and sent metopes, blocks of fire, and pedimental sculptures flying. "How it dismayed His Excellency to destroy the beautiful temple that has existed three thousand years," a member of the household of the general who led the Venetian forces wrote, with great feeling, if lopsided chronology. Three hundred Turkish women and children who'd taken refuge on the Acropolis were killed, although this fact tends to go underreported—just another of the ways in which the vagaries of the Parthenon's history can reflect the prejudices and predilections of its historians.

The Parthenon's relatively brief life as a total ruin has, if anything, made it even more available as a blank screen on which to project our fantasies about the past. For instance, despite the fact that the building was a church and a mosque for far longer than it was ever a temple of Athena, relatively few scholars or archeologists since 1832, when Greece won its
independence from the Turks, have questioned that the correct way to "restore" the Acropolis was to strip away all evidence of those subsequent incarnations—to return it to the Golden Age of Pericles. "All the remains of barbarity will be removed," one German architect declared, soon after a Bavarian princeeling was installed as king of the newly independent Greece.

But by then much of the Parthenon itself had been removed. Beginning in 1801, Thomas Bruce, the seventh Earl of Elgin—a Scottish aristocrat who was the British ambassador to the Ottoman court—acting on the basis of a permit whose language has since been studied with Talmudic fervor, pried loose from the ruin much of the frieze, most of the remaining pediment statues, and fifteen of the metopes, and shipped them back to England. In 1816, short of money, he sold the lot to the British government, and since 1817 the sculptures have been displayed as part of the permanent collection of the British Museum.

The controversy over the Elgin Marbles—you call them the Parthenon Marbles if you think the British should give them back—is, without question, the most famous that the Parthenon has excited. For some, Elgin is an aesthetic criminal. (He severed the sculptures from their proper architectural setting.) For others, he is a political criminal. (He was an arrogant imperialist appropriating native art works.) For others—a minority viewpoint today, when art-world sensitivities about provenance and patrimony have never been more acute—he was a savior. It’s worth remembering that in his day locals were gleefully walking off with bits of the Acropolis buildings for reuse in their homes or to burn in lime kilns.

Even while Elgin’s cargo was sailing, to denounce him was a badge of cultural and political bona fides in certain circles. Lord Byron devoted part of “Childe Harold” to vilipending him—“Cold as the crags upon his native coast.” Since then, the list of those who have been moved to pronounce on the rightful place of the marbles includes everyone from Canova to Cavafy (“Honesty is the best policy, and honesty in the case of the Elgin Marbles means restitution”), from Jacqueline Kennedy to Melina Mercouri (“They are the symbol and blood and the soul of the Greek people”), from the Clintons to Christopher Hitchens, who found time to write an indignant book on the subject. Even Vladimir Putin and Iran’s Supreme Leader Ali Hosseini Khamenei have weighed in. Both are in favor of restitution.

If the question raised by the Elgin Marbles debate is “Who does the Parthenon belong to?,” the question that “The Parthenon Enigma” raises is “Who were the people who built it?” Joan Briony Connelly thinks the answer lies in the long frieze that ran around the inner sanctum. A little more than three feet high, five hundred and twenty-four feet long, the frieze represents an immense procession featuring more than six hundred participants—human, animal, and divine. Parade marshals impatiently beckon, cavalrymen get their frisky mounts under control, elderly dignitaries fuss with their robes, maidens carry ritual implements, musicians play pipes and lyres, comely youths stand around being comely, and sacrificial cows and sheep process mildly to their demise. For most admirers of the building over the centuries, this tour de force exemplifies the high-classical union of art and science, of aesthetic subtlety and technical finesse, that characterized the Parthenon as a whole. But for Connelly, a MacArthur-winning scholar whose previous works include an engaging study of the life of a Greek priestess, it reveals a far “darker” side of classical-Greek culture—a more “primitive outlook than later cultures and classicists have been prepared to face.”

No one disputes that the bas relief represents a grand ceremonial parade. But what kind of parade? The first modern visitors to the Parthenon were perplexed: a fifteenth-century antiquarian called Cyriac of Ancona thought it showed “the victories of Athens in the time of Pericles.” Three centuries later, two English architects travelling in Greece and studying its ruins had a different idea. James (Athenian) Stuart and Nicholas Revett, whose multivolume “Antiquities of Athens” did much to popularize Greek neoclassicism in the eighteenth century, argued that the frieze depicted a civic procession known as the Panathenaea (that is, the “all-Athens” parade), which was held every four years during Pericles’ time in honor of the birth of Athena.

The proof of this seemed to be the scene depicted on the frieze’s climactic panel, which rested above the temple’s front door. It shows five mortals—a man,
a woman, and three younger people—
 enact some kind of ritual as the twelve
 Olympian gods, lounging in chairs and
 chucking amially, look on. The rite cen-
ters on the man, who is handing a large
 folded cloth to the youngest child (or
 perhaps taking the cloth from the child).
 Here, Staart and Revert surmised, was a
 depiction of the culmination of the Pan-
 atheanatae: the presentation of a new wool-
en cloak, or peplos, as a dedication to the
 goddess. To our eye, the folded garment
 being handled by the man and the child
 lends a charmingly quaint note amid
 the lofty goings on and august guests.
 If you didn’t know better, you’d say that
 they were folding laundry.

 From the start there were doubts about
 the Panathenaic theory. For one thing,
 important features of the real-life festival
 were missing, though the frieze hardly
 lacked for space. In particular, there was
 no sign of the huge cohort of foot sol-
diers—the backbone of the Athenian
 army—who were known to have marched
 in the parade. (In the frieze, cavalry dom-
ninates.) A far more fundamental objection
 was stylistic. There is no precedent in any
 other extant Greek temple for a sculptural
 decoration representing a contemporary
 historical occasion; the subjects are always
 mythological. As A. W. Lawrence, an ar-
 cheologist who was the brother of Law-
 rence of Arabia, put it, “the flagrant breach
 with tradition requires explanation.”

 Explanations, needless to say, abounded:
 like the sinking of the Titanic, the death
 of Marilyn Monroe, and the J.F.K.
as-sassination, the Parthenon frieze has in-
spired enthusiasts to detect significance
 where it may not be present. Some ar-
 cheologists ingenuously explained the
 preponderance of horses and horsemen
 by noting that Pericles was expand-
ing the Athenian cavalry just as construc-
tion began. Certain art historians, mean-
while, commonsensically pointed out
 that horses and horsemen are simply more
 interesting to look at than hun-
dreds of infantrymen’s feet. Others have
 got round the complaint that there is no
 precedent for representing a historical
 event by arguing that the procession de-
picted in the Parthenon frieze wasn’t an
 actual Panathenaic parade of Pericles’
time but a mythical one—the very first
 such procession, instituted by Athen’s
 mythic king, Erechtheus. The theories,
 like the figures in the frieze, marched on.
 One reason the debates have raged as
 loudly and long as they have is that there
 is no extant ancient description of the
 frieze. When Greek and Roman writers
 visiting Athens were moved to mention
 architecture, they tended to rhapsodize
 about the Propylaea, the Acropolis’s
 multilevel entrance building; if they
 mentioned the Parthenon, it was usually
 to focus their attention on the immense
 golden statue of Athena. “I have little
 doubt,” wrote John Boardman, Britain’s
 most distinguished historian of classical
 art, “that the problems of the Parthenon
 frieze—iconographic, religious, artist-
ic—will continue to be regarded as an
 open sport for scholars until a fifth-
century text is discovered which tells us
 the truth.” Twenty years ago, Joan Breton
 Connelly came across what she believed
 was precisely such a text.

 In her book, Connelly recounts how,
 while she was visiting Oxford in the
 early nineteen-nineties, her attention
 was drawn to the fragments of a lost
 play by Euripides called “Erechtheus.”
 These texts had come to light after
 some papyrus sheets on which the play
 had been copied out, and which were
 reused in antiquity as mummy wrapp-
ings, were extricated from the mummy,
 and their contents analyzed and pub-
lished. Euripides’ play, first produced
 about a decade after the Parthenon was
 completed, dramatized a myth of su-
preme importance to the Athenians: the
 tale of the three daughters of Erech-
theus, who volunteered to die after an
 oracle declared that only the sacrifice of
 a royal virgin would guarantee victory
 for Athens in its war against a neigh-
 boring city.

 Until the papyri were deciphered, the
 play was known primarily from a long
 excerpt quoted in a legal oration written
 a hundred years after Euripides’ time; in
 the excerpt, the girls’ mother, Queen
 Praxitheia, extolls the virtue of making
 sacrifices on behalf of the city (a virtue
 sadly lacking, according to the lawyer
 who gave the oration, in the accused).
 The fragments discovered in the mummy
 wrappings provided a big new chunk
 from the end of the play. Here Athena
 orders the Athenians to erect two tombs,
 one for Erechtheus (who, though Ath-
en was victorious, perished in the battle)
 and the other for his altruistic daughters,
 who are all to be buried in “the same
 earth tomb.”

 For Connelly, the implication was
 electrifying. Scholars had long assumed
 that the Greek word parthenon—“the
 maiden chamber”—referred either to
 Athena the Virgin, the dedicatee of the
 building, or to the female servants of
 the goddess who may have been housed in
 the temple’s rear chamber. But after
 reading the Erechtheus fragments, a
 “stunned” Connelly became convinced
 that the five figures at the center of the
 Parthenon frieze were Erechtheus,
 Praxitheia, and their three daughters,
 depicted just before the awful sacrifice—
 and that the Parthenon was itself the
 “earth tomb” mentioned in the play.
 Her idea has been rather sensationally
 garbled in some of the mainstream re-
 views of her book. “Was the Parthenon
 used as a site for virgin sacrifice?” the
 Daily Beast goggled.

 Connelly’s sensational theory is, in
 fact, nearly two decades old. She first
 aired it in a 1990 scholarly article that has,
 over time, failed to persuade art historians
 and archeologists. In the book, she takes
 her case directly to the people. Like other
popularizing tomes by specialists who, in promoting controversial theses, have done what amounts to an end-run around the academic establishment, this one has the defects of its virtues. The infectious enthusiasm, even emotionality, that the author displays toward her subject—"stunned" is not a word you often come across in discussions of Hellenistic literary pappy—cannot, in the end, compensate for questionable methods and wobbly evidence.

Connelly doesn’t get into her hypothesis until halfway through the book; the first chapters are devoted to generously packed descriptions of Athenian topography, history, and mythology, intended to let the reader “see the monument through ancient eyes.” (Some of this is sneakily tendentious: if you get an awful lot about the streams and rivers of Athens in Chapter 1, it’s not because Connelly is a tree-hugger: she believes that one of the pediment sculptures represents a certain river god who was Erechtheus’ father-in-law.) When she gets down to the frieze itself, she shows herself to be adept at the interpretative gymnastics that frieze theorists have excelled at from the start. To scholars who have argued that the smallest of the five key figures, a scantly clad child, is a boy—and therefore clearly not a daughter of Erechtheus—she responds, “Archaic and classical Greek artists were so unused to depicting the female nude that when confronted with this challenge, they relied on what they knew best: the male nude.” To those who wonder why, in a scene supposedly depicting a human sacrifice, there happen to be two hundred and forty-three head of livestock dumbing along on their way to slaughter, Connelly asserts that this scene represents a different moment in the myth from the one represented over the east door. And so on.

The effect of all this ingenuity is oddly unpersuasive. Connelly’s tendency to see Erechtheus behind every ported palm takes on the manic quality you associate with conspiracy theorists. (“Sometimes,” she writes apropos of some ritual objects in the central scene, “a stool is not just a stool.”) A good example of the wishful methodology is her attempt to show that the Parthenon’s rear chamber was the tomb of Erechtheus’ daughters. First, she seizes on a single scholar’s theory that the columns in that room, long since destroyed, were in a style known as “proto-Corinthian.” From there she segues into a tale told by a Roman architect—writing five hundred years after the Parthenon was built—to the effect that the very first Corinthian column was inspired by an offering left at a tomb. For Connelly, this can mean only one thing: “The Parthenon signals loud and clear that it is . . . a final resting place for the maidens who gave their lives to win Athenian triumph.” Too much of the argument here has a similarly Rorschach-y feel.

But the real problem with “The Parthenon Enigma” is that the big “controversial” news it delivers—the claim about the dark side of the Greeks that is the basis of its headline-grabbing appeal, complete with human sacrifice, missing texts, and mummy wrappings—isn’t news at all. For one thing, the “Erechtheus” fragments had been published and were well known for a quarter of a century by the time Connelly became aware of them. As for the myth of Erechtheus and his daughters, which in her eyes demonstrates that the Athenians had a “more primitive outlook than later cultures and classicists have been prepared to face,” commentators have been facing and writing about it for millennia, with no apparent emotional trauma. Small wonder: for the Athenians themselves, tales of virgin self-sacrifice were old hat. Frequently dramatized in tragedies and referred to in patriotic speeches and legal arguments, they were clearly to be taken metaphorically. Many scholars now agree that, as treated in plays like “Erechtheus,” self-sacrificing gestures by young women were part of a rhetorical trope that was all too familiar as the Peloponnesian War ground into its second decade: the need for families and individuals to make sacrifices on behalf of the state.

And so even if Connelly were right about the figures at the center of the frieze, there would still be no reason for the hype—except, of course, that it sells books. To insinuate that depictions of Erechtheus’ daughters are evidence of a darkly barbaric culture of virgin sacrifice is a risible misrepresentation; it’s like claiming that those old posters of a white-bearded Uncle Sam, pointing a bony finger and saying “WE WANT YOU!” are evidence of a nationwide cult of elderly pedophiles. Sometimes, a stool is just a stool. The fact that this scholar has spent years laboring over a book-length attempt to bolster what is, in the end, a pet theory ultimately tells you more about the Parthenon’s strange allure than about the building itself.

If Connelly’s idea is far-fetched, her fixation is, at least to me, wholly forgivable. In the long line of Greeks, Romans, Byzantines, Ottomans, Crusaders, Venetians, Swedes, Frenchmen, Germans, Englishmen, and Americans who have found it hard to stop thinking about the monument, I occupy a tiny place. When I was in the sixth grade, I made a cardboard model of the building as part of a history project; the numerically correct colonnades were rendered in toilet-paper rolls.

By the time I was in junior high school, I was spending many nights and most weekends at a workbench in our basement laboring over a scale model of the building, three feet wide by six feet long, complete with a thirteen-inch-high plaster replica of Phidias’ statue, for the decoration of which I learned how to apply real gold leaf.

I never completed the project, but I did a good bit of the frieze—the part from the east front, with the gods lounging around—in gray-green modelling clay on a cardboard backing. What became of it, and of the golden Athena, I have no idea. Plus ça change: time passes, eras—in the lives of people, as of civilizations—succeed one another, what once was treasured ends up in the lime kiln or the wastebasket. I suppose it was out of sentimentality for my own past, as much as for the Greeks, that a few years ago, when I saw, at a flea market in upstate New York, a plaster cast of the section of the frieze known as “W X”—the tenth block on the west side, which shows a pair of horsemen and their frisky mounts high-stepping toward the left—I bought it without hesitating. It hangs in my living room, above a small table. Sometimes, in the evening, I’ll light a fat candle beneath it: the dancing shadows can make it look as if the horses and riders were moving. Where they are going, we may never be able to say for sure, but I know that they are beautiful.