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on Ancient Bronzes

edited by Dávid Bartus, Zsolt Mráv and Melinda Szabó

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Budapest, 20–24 September 2022

Edited by
Dávid BARTUS – Zsolt MRÁV – Melinda SZABÓ

Budapest, 2024

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The reconstruction of the Serpent Column in Delphi

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Abstract: There are two basic versions for reconstructing the famous victory monument at Delphi: either with a large or with a small tripod cauldron. Comparisons with other contemporary monuments (tripod of Gelon and that of the Crotonians) and other practical considerations point to the conclusion that a large cauldron can be definitely ruled out. Consequently, the small version is accepted but with a small addition/modification: there must have been an intermediate element (upper part of a column shaft with a capital) joining the serpent heads and serving as a base for the cauldron legs, which was made most probably of marble or stone. This solution can definitely account for the position of the serpent bodies and heads and may also solve the technical and historical problems related to the small reconstruction.

Keywords: Greece, Classical Period, Persian wars, victory monument

The Serpent Column is a rare historical document of the 5th century BC and it has received particular scholarly attention. Its history is well-known, but despite intensive discussions, the correct reconstruction of the monument is still debated. Two solutions have been proposed, with no decisive argument for either: the first would place the serpent column underpinning the cauldron at its centre and the legs of the tripod framing the column; the other proposed solution places the feet of the tripod on the serpent heads. The first proposal results in a huge tripod measuring 7–12 metres in height; the other proposal results in a much smaller one of 1–2 metres high at the most.¹ From a purely technical/structural point of view, both are feasible and since the tripod itself is completely lost and iconographic parallels can be adduced for both reconstructions, the arguments have to be taken from literary testimonia and from the partly preserved base of the monument (which was not correctly identified until recently²). The latter would definitely argue for a small tripod but, because of its fragmentary nature, one can assume that its lost parts supported the legs of a large vessel. This suggestion was made most recently by M. Steinhart, who argues that there is no compelling reason in the literary record for a small tripod, and that both Herodotos (8. 82) and Thukydides (3. 57) imply that the serpent column must be an integral part (i.e. the central support) of a large tripod cauldron, and not just the supporting base of a small one. I think, however, this conclusion is not borne out

1 A third version (proposed by [RIDGWAY 1977](#)) envisages the cauldron between the freestanding necks of the three serpents with the heads projecting above the rim. This would result in a medium-sized cauldron, which would, however, have an unparalleled shape and highly atypical proportions; thus, it is rightly not considered in later discussions.

2 [LAROUCHE 1989](#).

by the evidence and it is not only the fragmentary base, but all the literary, historical and practical considerations point to the small reconstruction.³

First, a general consideration already advocated points to the small tripod: in Delphi, it was customary to place dedications on a high pedestal. In this way, the dedication was more highlighted and was much more visible on the sloping terrain. Two other practical factors are the costs and the stability issues: even if the booty from the Persian Wars had possibly been sufficient for financing a large tripod as well, making it from pure gold would have been extremely expensive and would have resulted in an extremely fragile construction.

As for the historical circumstances, we have to consider two basic problems: when was the tripod erected and why? The answer to the first question is fortunately quite straightforward: after 479 BC and almost certainly already in 478 BC.⁴ As for the second question it is quite clear that the tripod was erected from the booty taken at Plataiai. It is, however, equally clear (both from the preserved inscription and from Herodotos 8. 82) that it did not commemorate this victory alone, but explicitly included those poleis as well, which had played no part in this battle, but had supported the Greek case in the previous year at Salamis. Two circumstances make this combination seem odd: the naval victory of 480 BC had already been commemorated quite appropriately by a monumental bronze statue of Apollo at Delphi (Herodotos 8.121);⁵ on the other hand, contrary to Salamis, the Delphic oracle had not played any part in the Battle of Plataiai,⁶ and was clearly not supporting the Greek resistance during the entire campaign.⁷ There must have been therefore some different and quite profound reason why Delphic Apollo was honoured in this spectacular way. This can be sought, I think, in the competition between Greeks erecting victory monuments in the sanctuary. At the beginning of the 5th century BC, there was already a longstanding tradition of intensive competition between dedicators in international sanctuaries which has been best described as peer polity

3 The literary evidence has already been treated elsewhere (PATAY-HORVÁTH 2022a, 250).

4 GAUER 1968, 93 opts for a slightly later date, 477 (also accepted by YATES 2019, 29–30), mainly because in this year Pausanias was recalled to Sparta and had to stand a trial. But he was acquitted (Thukydides 1. 95 and 128) and it is quite unlikely that in such a situation, when he was accused of numerous crimes and “appeared to exercise his command more after the fashion of a tyrant than of a general” he would have dared to place his infamous inscription on the monument in Delphi. The whole story of this epigram seems to have been a later fabrication (see PATAY-HORVÁTH 2022b) and has no relevance for dating the monument. JUNG 2006, 248 n. 78 gives full bibliographic details and concludes that “Eine Datierung in die Jahre unmittelbar nach der Schlacht muß als gesichert angenommen werden, sie ist 478/477 v. Chr. wahrscheinlicher anzusetzen als 479 v. Chr.”

5 ZAHRT 1993, 361, note 28 (followed by ZAHRT 1993, 65) assumes that the sanctuary was not secure for the allied Greeks until the battle of Plataia and therefore this monument was erected roughly at the same time as the Plataian tripod. But this is by no means indicated by Herodotus who lists this monument along with other war memorials obviously dedicated immediately after the battle of Salamis. During the winter 480/479, the Persian forces left southern Greece and even the Athenians returned to their home. They (and all the other allies) had every reason (and were certainly able) to complete and to send the dedication to Delphi as soon as possible and there is absolutely no reason to assume that this was somehow not permitted by the local authorities, cf. also KIENAST 1995, 130–131.

6 At least according to Herodotus, whose narrative is otherwise heavily influenced by Delphic sources or informants. It is only Plutarch (Aristides 11.3) who gives such details, but these are rightly considered as later additions (MARINCOLA 2016, 113–115).

7 See most recently ROP 2019, 425–431 offering a very good overview of previous scholarship but not mentioning KIENAST 1995. Delphi clearly supported the Medizers until the winter 480/479 when the uncertain situation and the victory monuments offered by the Greeks may have induced a slight change in its politics (if there is some truth in the various stories reported by Herodotus, but D. Kienast (KIENAST 1995, 130–132) is certainly exaggerating this change).

interaction.⁸ In this case it was Gelon, the tyrant of Syracusee who dedicated a golden tripod and a Nike from the spoils of Himera (Diodorus Siculus 11.26.7),⁹ and one can reasonably assume that this dedication (whose inscribed base has been preserved [ML 28]) had already been set up during the following year, i.e. 479 BC.¹⁰ It was an extravagant dedication indeed, especially because of the large amount of gold¹¹ (which had previously been employed only by Gyges and Kroisos¹²); it must have overshadowed every other monument made of bronze, including the twelve cubit high Apollo dedicated by the Greeks after Salamis. Given the large size of the booty from Plataiai, it was surely possible to compete with the Syracusan tyrant and presumably it was therefore decided to dedicate another golden tripod. Furthermore, since the intention was to compete with a victory achieved in 480, and because the main forces in both years came from the same poleis, it was quite natural to include the smaller participant states of 480 as well.

Now, it has been shown, that the tripod of Gelon also stood on a cylindrical base made of metal, so most probably on a column.¹³ And if the allied Greeks wanted to compete with this monument, they were likely to chose the same form: a golden tripod on a bronze pedestal. This was the most economical option and even supposing a small tripod, it surely resulted in a quite expensive dedication. The Greeks decided to improve on the pedestal which might have been higher than that of the Syracusan tripod and was certainly much more elaborate and innovative. But basically, it was likely to be recognizably similar to the one erected by Gelon. This observation may be of use for the precise reconstruction suggested below as well and we will return to it later. For the moment it is sufficient to note that the monument erected by Gelon for his victory at Himera served as a model for the Greeks and therefore suggests that the serpent column supported a small tripod made of gold.

8 SNODGRASS 1986.

9 ADORNATO 2005 suggested that the dedication actually had nothing to do with the Battle of Himera, because the preserved inscription does not mention it. However, as A. Jacquemin already observed, this is an *argumentum e silentio* and it seems better to accept the ancient tradition, than to expect too much information from the dedicatory inscriptions (JACQUEMIN et al. 2012, 44).

10 A. Jacquemin is mistaken, I think, in placing this dedication, without any reason, after the Plataian tripod (JACQUEMIN 1999, 176). The reason was given by M. Zahrnt (ZAHRNT 1993, 363, note 35), but seems to be weak, cf. note 9 above.) The sequence proposed here is not only based on the natural assumption that the battles were commemorated, as soon as possible, by victory monuments but is implicitly corroborated by the observation made by two ancient researchers (see next note). Detailed discussions of the date: KRUMEICH 1991, 48–49 and PRIVITERA 2003, 408–412 who are of different opinion concerning some details but agree on the date. Herodotus 7.163 clearly shows (even if the story seems to be fictive, at least in part) that Gelon had close connections to Delphi already by 480 and he was certainly able to dedicate the monument only before his death in 478. Strangely enough, I think, F. Krumeich (KRUMEICH 1991, 52) definitely rules out the possibility that the tripod of Gelon could have been imitated by the Greeks, because Gelon had refused to participate in the war against Xerxes. Quite to the contrary, I think this circumstance could even have been an incentive for the Hellenes to compete with the Sicilian ruler.

11 There is some evidence on this, even if it is not entirely reliable. Diodoros (11.26.7) gives a figure (16 talents) for the gold. It can be understood as the weight of the gold, but it is more likely to denote the value of the dedication in silver (PRIVITERA 2003, 413) and is in this way entirely credible or realistic. Another piece of evidence is an epigram preserved in the Anthologia Palatina (VI. 214) and attributed to Simonides. In this case a different figure is given (50 talents and 100 litra) but even if the epigram is authentic (and not just a later literary exercise, as occasionally assumed), it may refer to another dedication made by the Deinomenids. For a detailed discussion see PRIVITERA 2003, 419–425.

12 As stated by Phanias and Theopompos (according to Athen. 6.20) and duly emphasized by P. Amandry (AMANDRY 1987, 85).

13 AMANDRY 1987, 81–90. This suggestion is unanimously accepted since then. Amandry has not provided a reconstruction drawing but two slightly different versions were published recently by A. Jacquemin and D. Laroche (JACQUEMIN – LAROCHE 2020, 140, Fig. 15 (drawing with a special type of column capital), 148, Fig. 19 (color snapshot of a 3D model featuring a Doric column)).

On the other hand, there was another tripod dedication made at the same spot and just a few years later, certainly not more than a decade. This was the huge tripod of the Crotonians which stood on the base previously attributed to the serpent column and which was made entirely of bronze.¹⁴ This tripod had no central support, stood directly on the stone base and was clearly intended to eclipse the previous tripod dedications made in its immediate vicinity. Had the Plataian tripod been of similar dimensions, this Crotonian monument would have been pointless, because it was not made of gold but just of bronze. It is quite logical that it was the sheer size of the tripod dedication which mattered for the Crotonians: they enlarged the dimensions and produced the largest tripod instead of producing yet another one made of gold. Besides being impressive, this was an economical choice. Of course, the entire monument would have been pointless if the Plataian tripod had had similar dimensions. So the earlier tripod dedication, i.e. the one erected after Plataia must have been a small one, like the one dedicated by Gelon.

So the small reconstruction is definitely to be preferred or can be regarded as almost certainly correct even if the material remains would allow the large reconstruction as well. There is only a small technical detail which remains to be clarified. How were the legs of the tripod fastened to the pedestal? In 1987, Amandry objected correctly that the preserved snake head does not seem to provide a sufficient base for fastening a tripod leg strongly enough and even if this was mastered and the head fastened the leg securely for more than a century, how were the Phocians able to remove the tripod without damaging the serpent heads? That they succeeded in doing this is clearly illustrated by all the Byzantine and Medieval drawings clearly showing all the three heads in a perfectly intact condition.

Some sophisticated solution was supposed therefore in the form of a bronze ring connecting the three heads and stabilizing the three legs at the same time.¹⁵ From a technical point of view this is surely feasible but has no parallels, I think from Antiquity and leaves a detail unexplained. This detail is the empty space between the snake necks and heads. Considering the special form of this empty space, again well documented by the extant drawings, and the fact that tripods were usually erected on stone bases, one can make a simple suggestion which offers a solution for the problems raised by Amandry. He correctly observed¹⁶ that there is no base for the tripod in the small reconstruction but he was wrong in claiming that there was no room for such a base: the space between the snake heads was perfectly suitable for this purpose and was, I suspect, indeed filled by a stone basis which in turn supported the legs of the small golden tripod (Fig. 1).

This solution may have provided a simple, robust and at the same time easily removable fastening

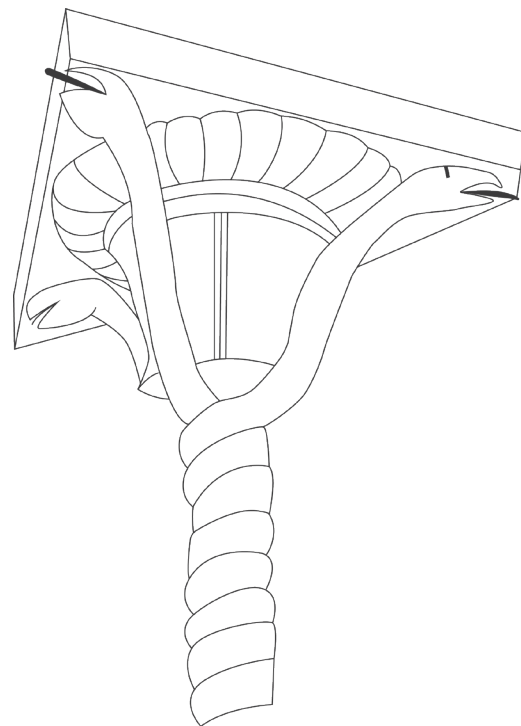


Fig. 1. Reconstruction of the upper part of the monument (drawing by D. Román).

14 JACQUEMIN – LAROCHE 1990.

15 This detail of the reconstruction is perhaps generally accepted (suggested or assumed e.g. by GAUER 1968, 81 Abb. 4) and is most clearly visible at <https://didierlaroche.wixsite.com/delphes/sd-440-trepied-de-platees> (accessed 03. 07. 2023), but I have found no discussion of it.

16 AMANDRY 1987, 112.

for the golden tripod without requiring robust joints at the snake-heads. The base would follow a type which is documented at Delphi (on the head of the so-called ex-Knidian caryatid) and would enable fastening the tripod to a stone base in the usual way. Its lower part can be imagined as a cylinder fitting into the hollow space created by the winding serpent bodies providing the additional advantage of preventing the flow of rainwater into the serpent column. This lower part did not have to be especially long or heavy; if fitted exactly into the round hollow space, it provided an extremely strong and stable base and the echinus on top of it had to be joined to the snakeheads just for the sake of additional security. The serpent heads fitted below the rapidly widening echinus and on top of this part there possibly was an abacus serving as the base of the tripod cauldron. We cannot know if this abacus was rectangular (as the bases of the tripods in the Ptoon¹⁷) or had some other form (e.g. triangular or round) or was missing as in the case of the acanthus column in Delphi¹⁸. Any of these solutions would have been feasible, the triangular abacus being the most simple and most probable one in my opinion.

In this way, the three serpents were not shown winding up and balancing the tripod without any internal support (an idea which would be strange indeed) but they were imagined and depicted as twisting up around a column, the capital or upper part of which was visible for everyone.¹⁹ The overall dimensions of the serpent column perfectly fit the height/lower width ratio of a typical ionic column and the supporting base of the tripod cauldron was therefore probably conceived as a column indeed.

The golden tripod was thus placed on a column, similarly to the monument of Gelon already referred to above. The column of the Sicilian tyrant is not preserved, but most obviously it consisted of a relatively simple fluted shaft and some kind of a capital, which was made either of bronze or of stone. The victorious Greeks after Plataia adopted basically the same structure but striving to outdo the other monument, they chose to improve on the base by adopting a more interesting design. Intertwined serpents winding slightly diagonally around the shaft of a column while concealing it may have provided an attractive alternative to the simple vertical fluting.

The serpent column and this hypothetical stone base were practically held together by gravity and it was an easy game for the Phocians in the 4th century to remove the entire upper part without damaging the bronze parts. They melted down the gold and threw the stone away. It was most probably not inscribed and obviously not valuable nor very important, so it got lost quite soon. As Pausanias (10.13.9) told quite correctly, it was only the bronze part which remained.

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17 GUILLON 1943, Pl. 13.

18 For this monument see <https://didierlaroche.wixsite.com/delphes/sd-509-colonne-dacanthé> (accessed 03. 07. 2023) and JACQUEMIN – LAROCHE 2020, 131–144, Figs 15–16, 19.

19 Large serpents winding around columns (or without any support) occur quite often in Archaic Laconian vasepainting (e.g. Louvre E 669, Vatican 16592, cf. PERFETTI 2013) but they never have any object on their heads. The intertwined serpents of Asklepios or on the kerykeion of Hermes also have an internal support and do not balance anything on their heads. The single exception (if it is really genuine) is a mirror stand made up of two serpents (JANTZEN 1937), but even in this case, the mirror is not directly placed on the heads but there is an intermediary palmette.

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