"THE SERPENT COLUMN OF THE DELPHIC ORACLE."[1]

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Amongst the many spots in Constantinople which are fraught with interest, I know of none more attractive than the "At Meidan," or "Place of Horses," which occupies one of the most conspicuous positions in that city, to whose life history it has quickened and responded with pulse-like throb; for here we stand on the open space which was selected by the Emperor Severus as the site of the great Hippodrome, when he rebuilt Byzantium, the capital of Thrace, only to leave its completion to Constantine the Great, when the latter founded Constantinople as the New Rome. About 1,300 ft. in length and half as wide, the Hippodrome was constructed on the lines of the Circus Maximus at Rome, being oblong in shape with one semi-circular end.

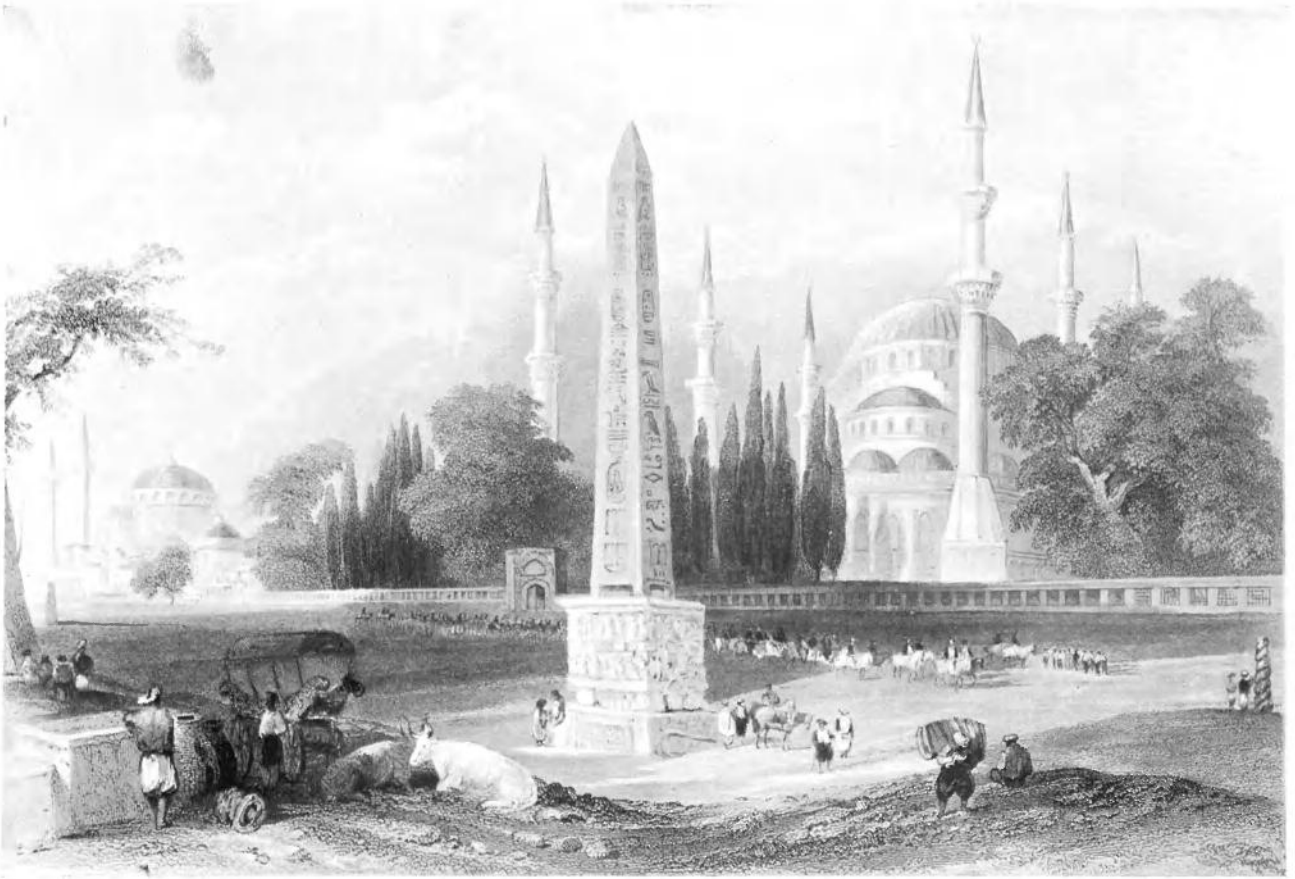
From the north-east to the south-west ran the Spina, a low wall that separated the course itself into two parts, and also formed a species of platform on which various works of art were displayed.

But, in addition to its original purpose as a racecourse, the "At Meidan" of to-day, as the Hippodrome of bygone ages, was used for all the public meetings and assemblies which Constantinople called together, whether in times of peace or the stirring moments of revolution and carnage.

Here, in 532, occurred the sanguinary strife between the Emperor Justinian and the fierce factions of the Circus, when the arena was deluged with the blood of some 30,000 citizens. Here again, two years later, came Belisarius in all the pomp and glory of a conqueror, fresh from his African wars, and yet, in disdain of a triumphal car, marching in modest pride at the head of his faithful veterans.

Here, too, were monarchs proclaimed as rulers, criminals executed, and heretics burnt; here wild beasts

[1] Read at the Meeting of the Institute on 2nd March, 1904.



THE AT MEIDAN OR HIPPODROME IN 1838 SHOWING THE SERPENT COLUMN ON THE RIGHT.

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were shown and athletic contests held, so that it might be truly said, "The Spina of the Hippodrome was the axis around which revolved the Byzantine world." At one entrance formerly stood the bronze horses of Lysippus, now at St. Mark's, Venice, while in another spot might be seen the silver statue of Venus by Praxiteles, an Apollo by Phidias. a gilded statue of Jupiter, and one of Theodora, besides numerous other wondrous products of the sculptor's art, collected chiefly by force of arms from all parts of the then civilized world.

And amongst these, vieing with all in interest, though possibly not in appearance, stood, as it stands to-day, in the Hippodrome of Constantinople, that wonderful relic of a by-gone age, which it is now my purpose to describe in detail—I mean that curious column of brass, or rather bronze, with its three entwined serpents, whose heads formerly upheld the vessel of gold which stood before the temple altar of the Delphic Oracle. Reference to this monument has been made by many writers in many ages and of many nations, but to Herodotus and Thucydides, Pausanias, Diodorus Siculus, and Plutarch we must turn for the early history of the column and its associations.

In the innermost sanctuary of the temple at Delphi, most renowned of all Apollo's oracles, stood a statue of the god himself, in front of which, upon an altar, the sacred fire, fed with firwood, was perpetually maintained. In the middle of the temple there was a small fissure in the ground whence at times there were exhaled sulphurous smoke and intoxicating vapours, emanating, it was believed, from the well Cassotis, which disappeared into the ground near to the temple. Over this aperture was a lofty tripod of gold supported, it would seem, by the column under consideration.

To this the priestess of Apollo, called the Pythia (probably from the Greek word $\pi\upsilon\theta\epsilon\sigma\theta\alpha\iota$—to enquire) was led by the attendant high priest or $\pi\rho o\phi\eta\tau\eta\varsigma$ and placed, in a state of nudity, upon the tripod, so as to inhale the vapours now surrounding her. The result was to affect her brain; her hair stood erect, her eyes flashed with frenzy, her body was convulsed with sobs. all this culminating in her falling into a convulsive

delirium or intoxication, during which the influence of Apollo was held to manifest itself in the cries and articulations which she uttered. On one occasion so great was the ecstasy into which the Pythia was raised, that, we are told by Plutarch, the priests who led her to the sacred tripod and ministered during her trance, became so terrified by the excess of her delirious ravings that they rushed from the temple, whilst the unfortunate priestess, after remaining in agony for some days, at last died of the exhaustion and shock induced by her frenzy.

I have thus briefly touched upon the rites, or rather, ravings, of the Oracle at Delphi in view of the fact that the column I propose to describe appears to have been the support to the tripod on which these grim scenes were produced. But as to how it got there, we must turn to the sober pages of Herodotus and Pausanias the topographer. The former tells us that all the treasures and spoils of the battle of Platæa, when the Greeks defeated the Persians (22nd September, B.C. 479), having been collected, a tithe was taken from them for the god at Delphi, from which was dedicated the golden tripod standing on the three-headed serpent column.

This description is confirmed by Pausanias. writing in the time of Marcus Aurelius (161 to 180 A.D.), and here I may point out that both he and Herodotus refer to the column as consisting of a *single* serpent, being probably deceived by the subtlety of the work, which certainly gives an impression, at the first glance, that there is one and not three snakes, a mistake made also in later times by one or two other authors.

According to Diodorus Siculus, when the Greeks had wrought the golden tripod, they sent it to Delphi with this inscription: "The saviours of spacious Greece offer this tripod, having rescued its cities from hateful slavery."

In addition, however, to what was engraved on the tripod, Cornelius Nepos tells us Pausanias had caused an inscription, composed by the poet Simonides, to be placed on the column, running thus:

"Pausanias, as General of the Greeks, after he had destroyed the army of the Medes, dedicated this monument to Phœbus."

It should be stated that though other historians differ

slightly as to the wording of this inscription, all are unanimous as to the meaning intended to be conveyed, namely, that all the honour of the victory was due to Pausanias alone, thus causing great offence in particular to the Platæans, whose blood and treasure, with that of other and greater States, had contributed considerably to the defeat of the Persians. At the same time their indignation was not, it seems, entirely on account of this particular act of arrogance, for Thucydides states that "by his licentious behaviour and affectation of barbarian customs, Pausanias gave much cause of suspicion that he did not intend to be content with the state of affairs as they were; among other things this, that upon the tripod of Delphi, which the Greeks had dedicated as the best of the spoil of the Medes, he had himself by his own private orders, caused to be inscribed this elegiac verse, &c."

The historian then refers to the erasure, and to the Lacedæmonians engraving the names of all the States upon the column [Bk. I. 132, *et seq.*].

Suidas' note (in the eleventh century) on Pausanias' statement runs thus:

"Pausanias, the son of Cleombrotus and Anchithea, King of the Lacedæmonians, who after the fight at Platæa, dedicated a tripod to Apollo with this inscription, &c."

setting out practically the wording mentioned by Cornelius Nepos. Aristides Aelius, too, comments on the modest conduct of Miltiades, who had conquered six-and-forty nations in all, in contrast to the charge so frequently brought against Pausanias, who took to himself the credit of the whole affair.

So great was the indignation aroused, that an appeal was made to the Amphictyonic Council, with the result that the Lacedæmonians were ordered to erase the boasting and arrogant inscription in honour of Pausanias. This being effaced, instead of it there was engraved upon the Serpent Column itself a list of the Greek States which had helped to vanquish the Persians. Demosthenes thus addresses his countrymen on the subject:

"The Platæans alone, of all the Greeks came, O Athenians! to help you at Marathon, when Datis, the General of the Persian King, leaving Eubœa, which he had conquered, invaded our land with countless forces

and laid it waste. But Pausanias, the King of the Lacedæmonians, began to treat you with insolence, not contented with the command entrusted to him by the Spartans alone: and our city, whilst really the leading city of Greece, though it had secured the freedom of Greece, did not oppose the honours paid to the Lacedæmonians for fear of incurring the jealousy of the allies. Pausanias then, inflated with pride, inscribed on the Delphic Tripod, which the Greeks who fought at Platæa and had taken part in the naval battle of Salamis, dedicated to Apollo as a record of their victories over the barbarian; 'King Pausanias, after destroying the Median foe, dedicates this spoil to Phœbus,' as if he alone had done it, and as if the tripod had not been the common offering of Greeks. The Greeks being deeply offended, the Platæans brought an accusation against the Lacedæmonians before the Amphictyonic Council." (*In Neœram.*)

The boasting inscription of Pausanias was probably carved on the stone base of the column after what, I believe, was the almost invariable custom of the people where such was of a dedicatory nature. But when this was removed, the Greeks sought a more enduring record on the bronze itself, which was not in any way an act of devotion to the god. And it is the remains of this record still upon the column, in some instances almost as clear as the day when cut, which make it one of the most remarkable relics of the past, throughout the whole world.

The circumstances under which the inscription was completed particularly merit attention. Originally, it was clearly intended to keep in remembrance the great victory over the Persians at Platæa by engraving upon the column the names of those States which had done such signal service towards it. But later on the other names distinguished at Salamis and also at Thermopylæ were added, so that at last it served as a deathless record of all those Cities and States which had risen in their country's darkest hour of need to repulse the hordes of the invading Persian from the shores of Greece. It is true that on inspection we find the majority of the names cut on the column are those of the States whose efforts secured the victory of Platæa, but, on the other hand, the name of the Tenians, according to Herodotus (VIII, 82), was engraved because, though they sided with the Persians, the Greeks learnt important tidings from a Tenian ship on the eve of the great battle of Salamis, fought against the Persians on the 22nd September,

B.C. 480, when the Greeks were victorious, as a year after outside the walls of Platæa. Moreover, it must be borne in mind that the names on the column are those of the States which, according to Plutarch, contended against the Persians throughout the whole of the Persian War. The name of the Siphnians, who do not appear to have fought at Platæa, is inscribed with that of the Tenians, both being engraved more roughly and, in all probability, added at a later date than the others.

Here I may mention that I have verified the wording and ordering of the inscription which I observed on the column, by reference to authorities such as Rawlinson, Fabricius, Frazer, Grosvenor, and others, so that the accuracy thereof may be depended upon. But in tracing this, regard must be had to the names of the States which fought in the war, for with these in one's thoughts the eye is helped in no small degree by the mind. Here, then, follow the titles of those 36 States which together had, according to Herodotus, resisted the Persian so successfully, not only at Salamis and Platæa, the crowning point of their conquering arms, but for some 14 years previously, and of these, 31 more or less, can be traced at the present time on the coils of the serpents. The name of the Lacedæmonians, a space for which is on the first coil, before that of the Athenians, is missing, through, perhaps, literally an act of self-effacement, as a propitiation to their offended compatriots, whilst the inscription which should give the name of the Mantineans is doubtful, and the names of the Paleans, Crotoniats, Seriphians and Lemnians, are not inscribed at all. The omission of these last four is probably due, as to the Paleans that they only sent 200 fighting men to the battle of Platæa, and as to the three other States, that each contributed but one ship to the fleet at Salamis:

1. Lacedæmonians.
2. Athenians.
3. Corinthians.
4. Tegeans.
5. Sicyonians.
6. Æginetans.
7. Megareans.
8. Epidaurians.
9. Orchomenians.
10. Phliasians.
11. Troezenians.
12. Hermionians.
13. Mantineans.
14. Tirynthians.
15. Plateans.
16. Thespians.

17. Mycenaeans.
18. Ceans.
19. Melians.
20. Tenians.
21. Naxians.
22. Eretrians.
23. Chalcideans.
24. Styreans.
25. Eleans.
26. Potidoeans.
27. Leucadians.
28. Anactorians.
29. Cynthians.
30. Siphnians.
31. Ambraciots.
32. Lepreats.
33. Paleans.
34. Crotoniats
35. Seriphians
36. Lemnians.

Of these, it should be pointed out that the Ceans, Melians, Naxians and Cynthians, all supplied ships at the great battle of Salamis, but did not co-operate with troops at Platæa. The Thespians, who fought valiantly at Thermopylæ, were present, but unarmed, at Platæa. I am unable to find any record of conspicuous behaviour on the part of the Siphnians, though their name appears on the tripod.

Unfortunately the titles of all these States are not equally clear upon the serpents as we find them to-day. Here I may mention that this column is nearly 19 feet in height, to be exact $18\frac{3}{4}$, and there are 28 coils still to be found, on the lower of which still exists the inscription, assuredly not later in date than 475 B.C., cut in primitive characters about an inch in length, impressing the column with that authenticity which communicates to it so surpassing an interest alike to the historian and archaeologist. According to Professor Ernst Fabricius, both dialect and alphabet are Laconian, but Professor Rawlinson considers them early Doric. I may point out that the inscription does not encircle the column, but is restricted to the N.E. side of it, commencing with the third coil from the bottom and terminating on the 13th. From the 3rd to the 10th coil the inscriptions are remarkably clear, but from the 11th to the 13th they are less easily traceable, though sufficiently so to justify the reasonable deduction that these three coils contain the names of those States, which, with the other more legible ones, complete the list of the conquerors. The remaining 15 coils bear no traces of an inscription at the present time, nor do I find any record of one ever having been made, beyond that which I have already dealt with in detail. The excellent condition of the

inscription from the 3rd to the 10th coil is certainly remarkable considering its age, but this is attributable to the fact that, being on the lower part of the column, it was protected by the earth, which, silting in process of time around it, acted as a protection against atmospheric action for very many years until 1855, when, after the Crimean war, the earth was cleared away by British soldiers, under the direction of Sir Charles F. Newton, and the inscription was brought to view.

But, as we consider the position of the monument, the question naturally arises, "How did it get there?" The answer gives an additional interest to its fascinating history. Dedicated to the god Apollo in the year 479 B.C., both the golden tripod and its bronze serpent supporters were probably erected in the Temple at Delphi shortly afterwards. Here they remained until the sacred war (358 B.C.) which the Phocians unsuccessfully waged against the armies of the Amphictyonic Council. During this war, Pausanias tells us that the Phocians carried off all the golden portion of the monument, but the bronze part could still be seen in his time, which would be in the second half of the second century of the Christian era.

From this one might conclude that only part of the tripod was of gold, the remainder of it being of bronze, which was gilded; but the actual basin itself was undoubtedly of gold, whilst its immediate supports were, perhaps, of gilt bronze. There is considerable ground for this view, having regard to the fact that Byzantine writers, long after Pausanias, continually refer to the tripod as then being in existence. The serpent column itself, however, still remained in the Temple at Delphi until, in the fourth century, it was taken by Constantine the Great, amongst hundreds of trophies of war, statues of gods and heroes, and other works of art for which Egypt, Greece and Asia Minor had been ransacked, to enrich the city of Constantinople at its completion.

The evidence as to this is very abundant. Socrates, the Ecclesiastical Historian, writes in the fifth century (Book I, 16):

"Not only did he (Constantine) improve the affairs of the Christians, but he also destroyed the superstition of the heathen, for he brought

forth their images into public view to ornament the city of Constantinople and set up the Delphic Tripods publicly in the Hippodrome."

So, too, Eusebius tells us:

"The Delphic tripods were deposited in the circus, and the muses of Helicon in the Palace itself."—*Vit. Constant.* 111, 54.

This again confirmed by Nicephorus Callistus, from whom we learn that—

"The Apollo was removed from the shrine of the Pythian oracle, the Muses from Helicon and the sacred tripod from its place in Delphi together with the famous Pan which Pausanias dedicated at the conclusion of the Medic war (atque celebris ille Pan quem Pausanias post Medicum bellum dicaverat)" *Eccles. Hist. VIII*, 33.

There, however, would appear to be some misunderstanding here, probably from the Greek word παν (Latin, omnino) being mistaken for Pan, the rustic deity.

It is interesting to note that Nicephorus Callistus adds that, in consequence, the temples were utterly neglected and reduced to ruins, from which circumstance we may not unreasonably date the downfall of the Delphic Oracle. Sozomenus repeats this, adding to the tripod from Delphos "the much-extolled Pan, which Pausanias, the Lacedæmonian, and the Grecians erected after the war against the Persians" (Book C, II). What this reference to Pan means, however, I am unable to explain, as I can find no reference whatever to it in Herodotus or any other of the early writers. It is, however, very possible that Sozomenus obtained his information from Callistus' works and repeated the latter's mistake, to which I have alluded above. From these unanimous references to the tripod or tripods by the later writers there is no doubt, therefore, that, when Constantine brought the monument to his new city, the serpents (then possessing their heads) upheld an inferior tripod, which had been substituted for the golden one carried away by the chiefs of Phocis.

The serpents now lack both heads and tails. The absence of two of the heads is ascribed to the Patriarch John VII., in the ninth century, who, at midnight, secretly broke them off under the belief that the column was possessed by an evil spirit.

Thereupon, it is said, Constantinople was visited by a

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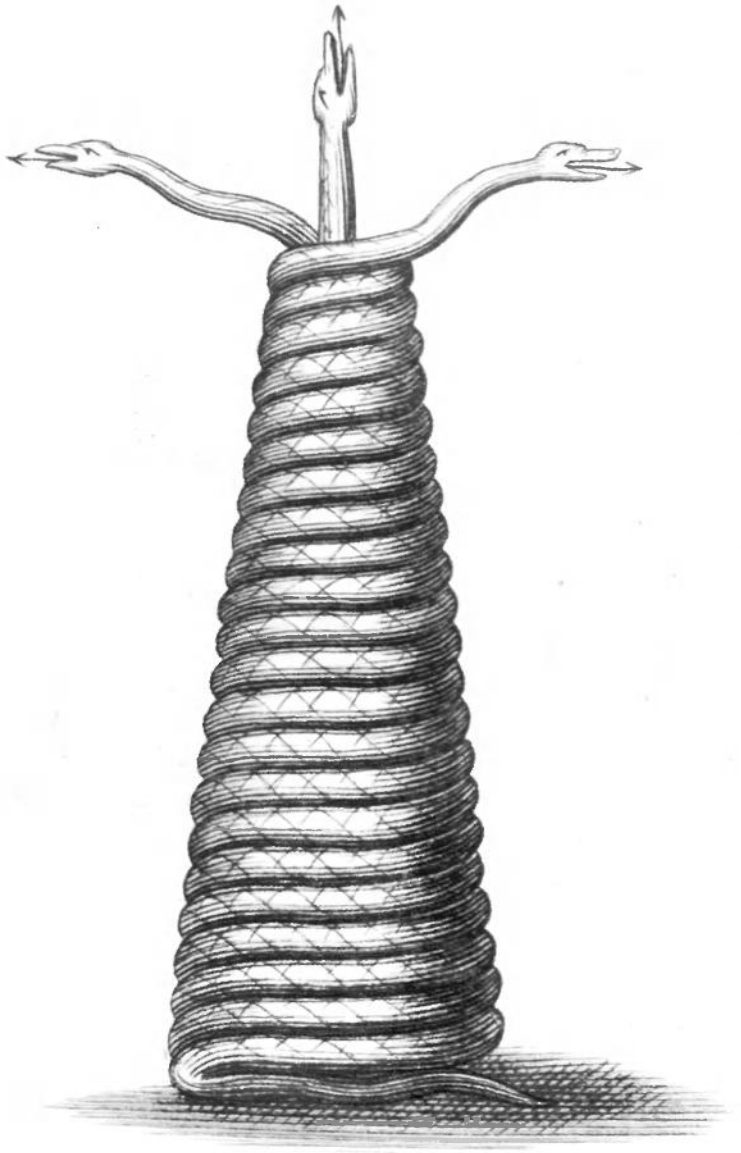

THE SERPENT COLUMN AS SHOWN IN "DE CONSTANTINOPLEOS TOPOGRAPHICA," WRITTEN BY PETER GYLLIUS ABOUT 1540.

plague of serpents, due to the desecration of the Delphic relic, and the Patriarch was, in consequence, compelled to restore the heads in order to appease the wrath of the populace and the offended oracle. The third head, by a commonly accepted tradition, is said to have been struck off, in 1453, by the Sultan Mohammed II. with his mace, to express his detestation of anything even savouring of idolatry, and, at the same time, to give evidence of his strength. This is referred to by Spon and Wheler, who, writing of it in 1675–1676, say that it was believed by some to be a talisman against snakes, but that from the date of the Sultan's breaking off a part of the head of one of the serpents this talisman had lost its virtue. A mutilated fragment of one of the heads was found by the Italian architect Fossati, in 1848, during the progress of excavations conducted near the Mosque of St. Sophia, showing that the serpents' mouths were wide open, and this fragment, which is alleged to be the portion struck off by the Sultan Mohammed II., is still to be seen in the Imperial Museum within the Seraglio Gardens; the crest is flattened as if to give a steadier support for the golden tripod.

But the heads, or heads of a sort, were on the serpents at a much earlier date, being referred to in 1422, and also in the early part of the sixteenth century by the Byzantine Historian Peter Gyllius, who in his book, "De Constantinopoleos Topographica," describes it, as thus set out in an English translation by one John Ball, in 1729. "In the same range of Obelisks there stands another Pillar, 'tis made of brass but not fluted, but wreath'd round with the foldings of three serpents like those we see in great ropes. The heads of these serpents are placed in a triangular form and rise very high upon the shaft of the Pillar. There are many fabulous and trifling reports among the inhabitants concerning the erection of this Pillar, which is occasioned by their ignorance of the history of their ancestors." The worthy Gyllius then proceeds to give this history in a lucid and accurate manner, though his sketch of the column itself certainly seems somewhat fanciful, being probably copied from an earlier illustration of the year 1422.

The following is an account of the column given

by John Thevenot in his book of travels published in the year 1744. Describing the Hippodrome, he says:

"It is a large square 550 paces long and 150 broad. In the midst of it is an obelisk pretty entire marked with Hierogliphick letters and at a little distance from it a pretty high pillar made of large stones laid one upon another without cement and towards the end of it is a pillar made of brazen serpents twisted together and the heads make the capital. It was said to be a talisman or spell raised by Leo Isaurieus the Emperor against serpents so that none would come near till Mahomed II, who took Constantinople beat off the underjaw of one of them with his Zagaye and now they are said to do no more hurt because it is standing."

"The occasion of erecting it," adds Thevenot pithily, "is as fabulous as the virtue, and so the relation of it may be spared."

The worthy Samuel Purchas seems to have shared the opinion of the Patriarch John and the Sultan Mohammed the Conqueror, for from that delightful book which he compiled, "Purchas, his Pilgrims, or Relations in Sea Voyages and Land Travels" (1625) I take the following description:

"This Piazza hath also another pillar very high of squared stone in manner all lineated with the time, and likewise one of brasse made with marvellous art in forme of three serpents wreathed together with their mouths upwards which was made to inchant the serpents that on a time infested the Citie."

In the seventeenth century there certainly appear to have been three heads on the serpents, for in that quaint old book "Lord Sandys, hys travels 1670," the author, who visited Constantinople in 1610, says:

"A little removed there standeth a column of wreathed brass with three unfolded serpents at the top extended in a triangle looking several ways and beyond there another high obelisk termed by some a colossus, built of sundry stones now greatly ruined, covered heretofore with plates of guilded brass," &c.

Tounefort, who was at Constantinople in 1701, says:

"The bronze column of three serpents is not better known, it is about 15 feet high formed by three serpents coiled like a roll of tobacco. Their contour lessens imperceptibly from the base up to the necks of the serpents, their heads diverging to the three sides like a tripod, formed a sort of capital. They say that the Sultan Murad broke the head of one of the serpents. The column was thrown down and the heads of the two others were broken in 1700, after the peace of Carlowitz. What has become of them is not known but the rest has been set up."

The Rev. E. Chishull, B.D., Chaplain to the Factory of the Worshipful Turkey Company at Smyrna, writing in April, 1701, speaks of the column in detail, thus:

"The second pillar is of wreathed brass not above 12 feet high lately terminated at the top with figures of three serpents rising from the pillar and with their necks and heads forming a beautiful triangle. But this monument was rudely broken from the top of the pillar by some attendants of the late Polish Ambassador whose lodgings were appointed in the cirque opposite to the said Pillar."

Lady Mary Wortley Montague, however, saw the serpents with their heads in 1718, for we find the following in a letter written by her from Constantinople on the 10th April of that year:

"This was the Hippodrome in the reign of the Greek Emperors. In the midst of it is a brazen column of three serpents twisted together with their mouths gaping, 'tis impossible to learn why so odd a pillar was erected. The people can tell nothing but fabulous legends when they are asked the meaning of it and there is no sign of it ever having had any inscription."

With regard to this it has been suggested that probably temporary heads of plaster may have been supplied for some special fête or ceremonial held in the At Meidan.

A curious tradition obtains to this day amongst the Turks that whenever by any mischance the column is destroyed or removed, a Christian King will once more rule in Constantinople. When, towards the close of the year 1855, Sir Charles Newton, as I have already mentioned, caused the earth round its base to be removed, he discovered the soil had accumulated to the extent of nearly seven feet. This had, of course, materially contributed to preserving the inscription from the ravages of time and air. It was then seen that the column rested on a rough stone plinth of the Byzantine period. A short distance away, and eight feet below the surface, there came to light a series of earthen pipes, whilst near the aqueduct were the remains of a small cistern. Sir Charles Newton came to the conclusion that the column formerly stood in the tank for the purpose of a fountain, and this theory was subsequently justified by the discovery, inside the column, of a lead pipe on which was a Byzantine inscription. Moreover,

the stone on which the column stood was found to be hollowed out, as if for the access of water.

That it was used for a fountain in Constantinople certainly appears probable, but in the days of its glory as the supporter of the golden tripod, the column being hollow was probably utilized as a conduit pipe for the noxious exhalations which inspired the frenzy of the Pythian Oracle.

In connection with this it would seem that the three feet of the tripod centred on the three serpents' heads, but having regard to the height of the column being nearly 19 feet, it would be of interest to know how the Pythia, who was at least 50 years of age, mounted to the tripod it supported, and on which she sat. Be this as it may, there can be no doubt the column at Constantinople was the one in the Temple at Delphi; Dr. Otto Frick being, so far as I know, the only writer of authority who has ever queried its authenticity. The grounds for his doubts were the indifferent lettering, the apparently shallow way in which the inscriptions were cut, and, last but not least, the style in which the column had been cast, which, I must admit, appeared to me singularly unlike what we generally find in Greek art.

But the bronze was subjected to treatment with chemicals which proved the engraving to be far deeper than originally appeared, the spelling was shown to be correct, and the style orthodox, until at last it is satisfactory to find that the learned doctor not only withdrew his criticisms, but declared himself as satisfied "beyond all question" (*ausser allein zweifel*) that the column was clearly identified with the votive offering of the Greeks to Apollo.

On examination, it appeared to me to have been cast in one piece, no join in the serpents being visible, and, curiously enough, no trace whatever can be found on any part of an attempt to represent scales, the bodies of all three serpents being perfectly smooth. Its altered and neglected condition is a cause of regret, as we see the holes and also the sabre-cuts inflicted on the bronze by the ignorant and superstitious of the past, and note the heap of refuse thrown into the pit in

THE SERPENT COLUMN OF THE DELPHIC ORACLE, A.D. 1900.

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which it now stands, by the careless and irreverent of the present.

But, superior to all its surroundings and battered frame, there rise to the mind the recollection of its glorious origin—the circumstance of its dedication by those who had fought for freedom when right was might, its association with Pausanias, Themistocles, Xerxes, Aristides, Mardonius, Constantine, and others, whose names will for ever live in history as the leaders of men, whilst Herodotus, Pausanias, Plutarch, Diodorus Siculus, Eusebius, and other historians have found it as interesting in the past as the humbler folk who see it to-day in the Hippodrome. Surely Horace himself would need no monument more lasting than the brass of this unique emblem of ancient Greece, "The Serpent Column of the Delphic Oracle."