

# The ara pacis: monument of the age of augustus



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After 31 BC, as Augustus secured overall power in Rome, he set about a series of radical reforms which affected almost every area of public life, and some areas even of private life (the marriage laws, for example). His intentions were on a grand scale; he planned to regenerate Rome and its people after the disturbances of the late Republican period, and in more ways than one might have expected he succeeded. The price, of course, was the loss of republican liberties. Syme says “ It was the end of a century of anarchy, culminating in twenty years of civil war and military tyranny. If despotism was the price, it was not too high” (Syme, 2). Suetonius’s account of the reign of Augustus is partly a list of reforms, in the army, the fabric of the city, the administration of justice, the customs of dress, the securing of public health and many others. Paul Zanker says that “ The goal of his “ cultural program”, pursued with far-reaching and concentrated effort over the next twenty years, was nothing less than a complete moral revival” (Zanker, 3), in which the focus of national and cultural attention would be himself, a ruler chosen by the gods, who embodied practically as well as symbolically the soul of the state. The excesses of the previous period were to be replaced by nobler and more serious public values, by a greater sense of national loyalty which would reject personal rivalries in the world of power politics and bring about an era of peace and security which would allow Rome to thrive.

Such a radical revision of the public world naturally required a public imagery to support it and express its new codes. “ Invidious private ostentation [was replaced] by a program of *publica magnificentia* ” (Zanker, 3). Building in the city, and the visual arts generally, naturally became

vehicles for conveying the new values. Favro says that Augustus “continuously used the built fabric of the city to convey policy” (Favro, 141). The Ara Pacis was built between 13 and 9 BC, and is a key monument for the display of the Augustan principles. Augustus himself records its construction in the *Res Gestae*: “When I returned from Spain and Gaul after successfully settling the affairs of those provinces... the Senate decreed that the Altar of Augustan Peace should be consecrated for my return near the Campus Martius” (Brunt & Moore, 25). Augustus had been away on this military campaign for three years, and the Ara Pacis was a tribute to him, but also to the idea of peace, which he reminds us in the next paragraph of the *Res Gestae* came through war and victory: “Peace had been secured by victories throughout the Roman Empire by land and sea.” It is not surprising, then, that in the carved panels flanking the doors of the Ara Pacis, the figure of Tellus/ Ceres/ Venus, surrounded by the images of fertility and peaceful abundance is matched by another figure, of Roma, seated on a pile of arms, reminding all viewers of the serious truth “that the blessings of peace had been won and made secure by the newly fortified *virtus* of Roman arms” (Zanker, 175).

The altar enclosure carries sculpted friezes on all four sides. Tellus and Roma flank one door, Aeneas and Mars with Romulus and Remus the other. On the long sides a procession is depicted, showing Augustus himself and members of the Imperial family, accompanied by senators, lictors and priests preparing for a rite of sacrifice. Perhaps the processional image records the actual event of Augustus’s return to Rome. Some of the figures have been identified, rather tentatively, as individual people in the ruling group, but for

the most part the faces are idealized, though distinctly human. Clearly there is a classicizing influence at work here. These are dignified and serious people, displaying “ the Roman traditional concepts of dignity ( *dignitas* ) and sobriety ( *gravitas* )” (Henig, 85). Although Henig argues that the procession commemorates “ a specific event of contemporary history... with anecdotal detail in three dimensional relief” (Henig, 74), it is surely more the case that the classical dignity of the image is meant to convey “ the idea of the return of Augustus, the guarantor ( *auctor* ) of peace” (Gallinsky, 142), and the presentation shows “ not so much an individual action as a reflection of the underlying idea” (ibid). Augustus had refused the senate’s offer of a triumphant entry into the city, and accepted the Ara Pacis in its place, a structure of quite modest scale for a dictator, and understated in its imagery. The classicizing generality of the figures is part of the Augustan taste for moderation and restraint in all areas of life. The “ elegant simplicity and clarity of style” (Henig, 74) reflect the classical model behind the design, the 5<sup>th</sup> century BC Panathenaic procession depicted in the Parthenon. Augustus’s inspiration could hardly have been more noble. The miraculous thing is that the Ara Pacis frieze escapes completely from the frigidity of the Parthenon sculptures, and from the pomposity of much nineteenth-century neo-classical statuary.

It is interesting at this point to consider the images of Augustus himself produced during his lifetime. The Prima Porta statue of 27 BC is based on a Greek model, the Doryphoros of Polyclitus, which Quintilian calls “ *gravis et sanctis* ”, and thus a telling choice as a precedent. Augustus is shown addressing the troops, his right arm raised to command attention. Syme

describes it as “ showing the Princeps in his middle years, firm and martial but melancholy and dedicated to duty” (Syme, 470). The face has a calm, noble expression, its features “ marked by a harmony of proportions, inspired by the Classical canon” (Zanker, 99). Like the Doryphoros, the hair has been arranged with careful attention to the rules of symmetry. The result is a look of “ timeless and remote dignity” (ibid). It had little to do with Augustus’s actual appearance, but that is beside the point. This is how Augustus wished to be seen, it is the “ image” of Augustus, an image which derives much of its authority from the great Classical models, with all their associations of seriousness, nobility and the ideals of human grandeur. The armour Augustus wears carries emblems of his achievement and reminders of the nature of the peace. “ The rich panoply of symbols and personifications that decorate his cuirass refers to the establishment of peace ( *pax Augusta* ) in the Empire and Augustus’s role as *restitutor orbis* ” (Henig, 85). At the centre of the cuirass a Parthian king hands the legionary eagle to an armed figure – a Roman centurion, perhaps, or even Mars Utor himself, to whom Augustus built a temple in Rome. Around them are placed heaven and earth. Two mourning women are on either side, emblems of the defeated nations. Apollo and Diana ride traditional animals, a griffin and a hind. Above, Sol is in a chariot above Apollo, Luna above Diana, while Caelus spreads out the cloth of heaven. Luna is being replaced by Dawn, who pours dew from a jug. Augustus’s victory over the Parthians thus takes on qualities imagined in terms of eternity, timeless like the idealized Classical face of the Emperor. “ The Princeps who wears the new image of victory on his breastplate becomes the representative of divine providence and the will of God” (Zanker, 192).

The second statue, from the Via Labicana, is from later in Augustus's reign and shows us the Emperor dressed as a priest. The face is more individualized - the eyes are smaller, the cheekbones are visible, and the ears protrude. This is a more "real" Augustus, but the overwhelming effect of the statue is to show him as a serious and thoughtful figure. "The spirituality of the wise and benevolent father of the state and restorer of traditional morality emanates from the shaded deep-set eyes" (Henig, 85). The military commander is absent, but the same underlying conception is there; the god-like Emperor, who is both guardian of the security of the state, and also richly human in the most virtuous, intelligent, and pious ways.

The sculptures of the Ara Pacis can be understood in these terms. The procession is towards a sacred ceremony. Around two thirds of the scenes involve members of the four principal colleges of priests, which Augustus had revived in his reform programme. The flamines can be identified by their traditional dress, a woollen cloak and a cap with a metal point. Membership of the priesthood was a mark of high status. Augustus entrusted the management of the annual sacrifices to officials of all the major priesthoods (thus skillfully diluting their real individual power). Here, some of the priests have veiled heads, which shows that the ceremony has begun. A woman puts her fingers to her lips to call for silence. "The dense rows of figures all similarly veiled in their togas give the impression of unity and uniformity. The sculptural style and composition, inspired by Classical reliefs, elevates the scene beyond the historical occasion into a timeless sphere" (Zanker, 121). Amongst the Imperial family the women are draped in the style of

Classical statues. Drusus, the successful general, stands in their midst. Children try to get the attention of their parents. As with the two Augustus statues, dignity and authority merge subtly with humanity. There is, as Gallinsky says, an “ exquisite balance between stylization and informality” (Gallinsky, 152). The postures and gestures are varied, and in a way that is not merely the result of the artist’s desire to add variety to a potentially monotonous subject. “ These are real people. They chat, even to the point of having to be admonished to be quiet, and the children wriggle and squirm as we know them to do at any official ceremony or church service” (ibid). That this is true, even though the principal mood is that of Classical decorum and sobriety, is a remarkable artistic – and perhaps political – achievement. Gallinsky goes on to call the Ara Pacis “ one of the most humane monuments ever built by a powerful ruler... This is not the pompous and grim monument of a party leader whose subjects are bullied into conformist succession. The relaxed attitude of the participants... is in fact another manifestation of the blessings of *pax* ” (ibid, 151-2).

Mortimer Wheeler argues similarly for the remarkably relaxed grace of the work. He notes the delightful gestures of the lady hushing the chatterers, and the children “ particularly vital in their display of childlike interest or boredom” (Wheeler, 165). While Bandinelli rather insensitively describes the work as “ frigid in conception, sharing the programmatic conformity which stamps all official art” (Bandinelli, 189), Wheeler says that this is “ wide of the mark. If frigid, these figures owe their aloofness to the calm assured, unanxious society which they represent” (Wheeler, 165), surely a very astute understanding of the relationship between Augustan art – even “ official art”

- and the mood of the society it expresses. Another fine piece of observation is Wheeler's note that as we look along the frieze slabs from one vitally depicted head to another "there is no dramatic concentration upon the Emperor" (ibid). He stands, indeed, at the centre of the frieze, but he is only slightly taller than those around him, a quality he shares with Agrippa. The Emperor may be a god, but there is no personality cult at work. "He is merely *primus inter pares*" (ibid) and Wheeler sees this too as an example of the virtues of the Augustan era, "its quiet good manners and its undemonstrative confidence" (ibid). He contrasts this modest presentation of the Emperor with the image on the Arch of Titus about 100 years later, where the figure of the victorious Emperor is more prominent than the glory that seeks to crown him, and whose frontal positioning causes hopeless distortion of the perspective. This notion of Augustus's modesty is certainly supported by Suetonius. He notes how Augustus "felt horrified and insulted when called 'My Lord'" (Suetonius, 80), and would not let even his adopted children or grandchildren address him in this way. He always tried to avoid leaving or entering Rome in daylight "because that would have obliged the authorities to give him a formal welcome or send-off" (ibid). (This seems to be supported by his rejection of a triumphal entry after the Hispano-Gallic campaign, and the preference for the modesty and decorum of the Ara Pacis). Suetonius also describes the simplicity of Augustus's living conditions. The furnishings of the palace would "now hardly be considered fit for a private citizen" (Suetonius, 92), and his dress was unostentatious. Of course he held formal dinner parties, but "There was no great extravagance, and a most cheerful atmosphere, because of his talent for making shy guests... join in the general conversation" (ibid). And yet Syme reminds us that the

blessings of the Augustan reign had a cost: “ The new dispensation, or ‘ novus status’, was the work of fraud and bloodshed, based upon the seizure of power and redistribution of property by a revolutionary leader” (Syme, 2).

Both Bandinelli and Henig have complained of the lack of coherent plan in the Ara Pacis, “ not in the quality of the sculpture, nor in the style and technique, but in the subject matter” (Henig, 73). The question is whether the processional friezes have anything to do with the mythical and allegorical panels flanking the doors at either end. If we have understood the nature of the friezes correctly, and their relationship to the Augustan vision of the Roman world, it is clear that the subject matter of the panels and their treatment are central to the statement of the work. Most important in this sense, as well as best preserved, is the panel depicting Tellus (or Venus, or Ceres). The subject of the panel is the blessings of abundance. A matronly woman sits in Classical dress, with two babies at her sides, reaching for her breast. Her lap is filled with fruit, and her hair is bound with a wreath of grain. Wheat and poppies grow behind her, and below her are farm animals. The image celebrates growth and fertility. Either side of her are female figures, *aurae*, icons from Greek Classical tradition, who are emblems of the winds on land and sea. The land figure sits on a goose over a stream, the other has the sea monster under control (like Browning’s Duke, “ taming a seahorse”). The *aurae* are the bringers of warmth and rain, the bestowers of abundance and successful harvest. “ The overall structure is a paean to the fecundity, wealth, and harmony made possible by the Augustan peace” (Favro, 266). The female figure is Tellus, Mother Earth, but also Ceres, Venus, and perhaps Pax herself. The multiplicity of identities is enriching, not

confusing. But this idyll is not allowed to stand alone as a dream vision. On the other side of the door, in the corresponding position, we see the figure of Roma sitting on a pile of arms, reminding us that the price of peace is military preparedness and conquest, "Peace based on world domination" (Gallinsky, 146). At the other end the panels celebrate the heroic past, putting the Augustan present into the grandest possible context. In one panel Aeneas is shown preparing to sacrifice after he has seen the portent prophesying his future in Italy. With Venus, and his son Julius, founder of the Julian family, who stands behind him, he is the ancestor of the Roman people, as are Romulus and Remus, presented in the corresponding panel with Mars, god of war, their father and thus also a Roman ancestor. It is the members of that family and the leaders of that people who walk in procession in the long friezes.

Much of the wall surface is covered in delicate, symmetrical patterns of tendrils and vine clusters. This was a traditional decorative motif, but here the imagery of abundance takes on a particular relevance, which is reflected in the poetry of the period. The reference is to the myth of the Golden Age, and the implication of the use of such imagery, and so much of it, in the Ara Pacis is that the glorious present has recovered some of the qualities of that legendary past. As David Castriota says, "For poets like Horace and especially Virgil, who sought to idealize the stable and ordered Peace of the Augustan regime in the comparative terms of the mythic precedent, the analogy of a pristine era of blissful abundance and moral virtue must have seemed irresistible" (Castriota, 124). Such imagery was central to the Augustan picture of the world.

In one sense the Ara Pacis might be seen as not entirely the modest and restrained monument suggested here, in that it appears that it was planned as part of a giant structure which sounds rather more Mussolini-like than anything hinted at so far. The Ara Pacis was placed where it would be part of a giant sundial, the hand a huge obelisk 100ft high, with Augustus's mausoleum at the opposite end of the dial. Elaborate astronomical functions have been claimed for the design. The obelisk was of course a monument to the conquest of Egypt, so that the peace-through-victory notion is repeated. The Ara Pacis faced the Via Flaminia, which was the way Augustus had reentered the city after his campaign, and positioned in open ground "midway between Augustus's Mausoleum and the built-up area of the southern Field of Mars, possibly coinciding with the *pomerium* (the sacred boundary of the city where soldiers had to lay aside their weapons)" (Claridge, 189). The positioning probably carried symbolic significance, joining secular and sacred ground, emphasizing the universality of Augustan rule.

How much of this must one dismiss as the propaganda of a dictatorial regime? The *Res Gestae* is a curious document, hardly notable for its modesty. "Always it is the first person that is stressed" (Brunt and Moore, 4), say its editors, and it presents a highly selective view of the events of Augustus's reign. He claims that he was unwilling to accept untraditional honours and powers, but "This plea is an example of clever propaganda writing... He naturally did not mention that there was no precedent for any one man holding so many different positions and powers at the same time" (Brunt and Moore, 5). Syme says that Augustus's account of recent history is

nothing more than “ official truth” (Syme, 522-3), and Tacitus, writing over 100 years later, was cynical: “ He seduced the army with bonuses... Opposition did not exist. War or judicial murder had disposed of all men of spirit... Upper-class survivors found that slavish obedience was the way to succeed” (Tacitus, 29-30).

And yet for Horace, who we must remember fought against Octavius at Philippi, the Augustan peace was something very real. The Centennial Hymn, “ a triumphal ode which is unique in the way it breathes serenity” (Horace, 31), is a tribute to Augustus’s achievements seen in terms of the establishment of peace, prosperity and safety.

Now the Parthian fears the Alban axes,  
the forces mighty by sea and land;  
now Scythians and Indians, lately so proud,  
await our answer.

Now Faith, and Peace, and Honour,  
and pristine Modesty, and Manhood neglected,  
dare to return, and blessed Plenty appears

With her laden horn. (Horace, 168)

The Augustan peace was something genuine for Horace, and it is difficult to see work of the quality of that in the Ara Pacis as the product of official artists merely. It is little wonder that both the Renaissance and the English  
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eighteenth century saw the Augustan period, and its art architecture and poetry, as the great models to emulate.

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