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HART 1330W

12-9-18

Compact Imagery, Self-Effacing Minimalism, and the *Ara Pacis Augustae*

Most ancient Roman architecture doesn't shy away from open expressions of power: from Nero's golden mansion of excess, to the deifying Forum of Trajan, Roman rulers often expressed their power in massive undertakings reflecting their authority. This symbolic transfer of manpower into the power of the builder is known as "energetics." More specifically, as the individual who pioneered the term in archeological study writes, "energetic analysis of architecture explains the cultural context that led to the particular pattern of energy expenditure...and reflects a significant range of organizational behaviors requisite for such construction" (Abrams). However, by this definition, one would incorrectly infer that one of Augustus' crowning constructive achievements, the relatively small *Ara Pacis Augustae,* is indicative of his relative weakness and low influence in Roman history. This deceptive conclusion demonstrates that a purely energetic perspective is not sufficient in the analysis of some ancient sites. In this paper, I will argue that the Ara Pacis cemented Augustus' power and externalized his ideological vision of peace in Rome more effectively than any grandiose, self-aggrandizing monument could have accomplished. This paper will develop this argument by analyzing Augustus' consciousness of political context, complex use of historical and religious imagery, and humble self-depiction in the Ara Pacis.

Augustus' extensive understanding of the Roman political landscape at the time of the Ara Pacis' construction is an essential component to a full understanding of the site. Prior to

Augustus' reign was that of the infamous Julius Caesar. While Caesar's assassination in 44 BC is a complex topic, one of its root causes can be attributed to excess in self-presentation. Specifically, Caesar's extensive military victories were celebrated at *Lupercalia,* "an ancient festival whose main associations were with fertility" (Goldsworthy). While at this adorative festival, "Marc Antony ran up to Caesar and presented him with a royal diadem...at the sight the crowd went silent" (Goldsworthy). This excessive presentation of power not only saw a loss of influence over the Roman people, but also was responsible for Caesar's eventual assassination by the members of the Roman Senate. Augustus, politically conscious of his predecessor's shortcomings, deliberately avoided making Caesar's mistake again. When Augustus similarly returned from extensive military victories in Spain and Gaul, rather than emphasizing his brilliance and military might, he focused on another ideological agenda: Roman peace. By depicting values of tranquility and abundance through a minimal presentation, Augustus hoped to gain power and political influence quietly by emphasizing "imagery of lasting happiness that eventually came to shape the common perception of reality" (Zanker), while also easing public fears of another all-powerful autocracy. This complex goal was not best forwarded in a religious temple of excess, or in an ultimate show of imperial power, but in the small, dense, and intricate Ara Pacis Augustae.

The initial construction of the Ara Pacis was reflective of Augustan modesty and non-dictatorial power. "The Senate vowed the Ara Pacis in 13 BC in honor of Augustus' return to Rome from his successful campaigns in Spain and Gaul" (Spaeth). This senatorial commission was reemphasized by Augustus himself, where his inscription concerning the monument reads, "Aram…pro reditu meo senatus consacravit (The Senate consecrated this altar on account of my return)" (Rehak). In emphasizing that it was the Senate, not himself, who was responsible for its

construction, Augustus demonstrates early on that this site will not be an excessive, outlandish place of self-deification. This normalization is also seen in the size and style of its architectural form. “The Ara Pacis [1] is a comparatively small rectangular solid, approximately 10 x 11 m, not dissimilar in size and form to the typical tombs and altars (of Rome)” (Favro). This general focus on understatement, both in the responsibility of its construction and in its ordinary structure, establish a basic level of Augustan subtlety. This fundamental humbleness that the monument asserts was incredibly endearing to the Roman people, who viewed the site’s limited scope as emblematic of Augustus’ non-autocratic power. This appeal led to an increased popular reception of the Ara Pacis’ extensive religious ideology.

An understanding of its central altar as symbolic of Augustus is essential before one can analyze the complex imagery on the enclosure of the Ara Pacis. On the altar’s dedication, Augustus writes “in qua...anniversarium sacrificum facere iussit redi. (On this altar... (the Senate) ordered that an annual sacrifice be made on the anniversary of my return)” (Rehak). Despite its significance, this Augustan altar itself was relatively simple and constrained, serving more of a functional purpose than an artistic one. Surrounding this altar of Augustan sacrifice are depictions of various things of religious importance, including “wonderful garlands of various kinds of fruit...the skulls of sacrificed oxen, and sacrificial ribbons” (Zanker). This interior of the Ara Pacis places an understated Augustan symbol at the center of the monument’s extensive religious imagery. The small and practical altar is once again emblematic of Augustan humbleness, while the surrounding sacrificial imagery intertwines him with traditional Roman religion. This centered symbol of modest Augustus quietly places him in the background of the vividly decorated external relief panels of the altar’s enclosure, allowing their symbolic tranquility and abundance to be meshed with Augustus himself.

In the initial approach to the Ara Pacis, two reliefs on the front left and right sides of the monument depict complex imagery of Rome's turbulent past, and establish the base point of ideological progression in movement around the site. The front-left relief panel, known as the Lupercal Panel [2] , depicts "the origins of Rome with the entrance to the Lupercal (the wolf cave) and the she-wolf nursing Romulus and Remus" (Long). Standing adjacent to this image is a representation of Mars, the god of war. This relief demonstrates that war and conflict have been endemic to Roman existence since the very beginning, even since the cities' founder, Romulus, was just an infant. This depiction further connotes the strife of Roman existence with its historical implications: Romulus later murdered Remus in cold blood to found Rome. The front-right relief panel, commonly known as the Enii Panel [3], depicts "Aeneas offering up a drink to the gods...as he is preparing to sacrifice a sow" (Long). This demonstrates the importance of religious devotion to basic Roman identity, showing Rome's foundational hero of the distant past performing religious ritual. Additionally, the story of this central figure, *The Aeneid,* is "a tragedy of an individual caught up in the processes of history" (Levick). Despite these portraits of basic Roman identity and historical struggle, both panels (and the entire lower exterior of the site) are surrounded by lively images of beautiful plants, vines, and growth [4]. These two depictions of past Roman hardship encompass broad difficulty in Roman history in compact depictions, while the creeping plants and vines around these panels foreshadow the fertility, rebirth, and abundance of the present.

A short walk around to the other side monument, symbolic of a progression through Roman history from the past to the present, leads to more dense imagery of peace and abundance. The contrasting relief opposite that of the warlike Lupercal Panel is known as the Roma Panel [5]. On this panel, an image of a female warrior, "*Roma,* the personification of Rome,

is depicted enthroned on a mound of armor" (Zanker). This image of victory is unlike any other celebratory, post-war depiction in Roman Art. For example, from "Trajan's column… telling the story of Roman victory in the Dacian Wars" (Zanker), to the extensive triumphal processions of Julius Caesar celebrating his destruction of the enemy, Roman Art never emphasized the results of war, but rather its undertaking. In this way, Augustan ideology is portrayed in subtlety. Augustus avoids boastful depictions of victory in favor of celebrating relief from conflict. Additionally, the altar at the center of the Ara Pacis, symbolic of Augustus, marks his background responsibility for peace without any arrogance of obvious self-inclusion. This humble minimalism and emphasis on peace over conflict further increased Roman appreciation for Augustus' non-autocratic regime.

While the relationship between the Lupercal and Roma panels illustrates a transition from a war to peace, the Epii-Tellus panels depict the progression from basic Roman spirituality to the mass abundance that came as a result. The Tellus Panel [6], opposite the Epii Panel depicting Rome's historic piety, is the most complex, and communicates the appealing values of Rome's copiousness and fertility. An analysis of the central figure in the panel demonstrates the extent of the profusion that the peaceful Roman state permits. In the center of the panel sits a female deity, surrounded by images of plenty. "In her lap are two children and several different types of fruit...and at her feet are a grazing sheep and a reclining cow" (Spaeth). Further analysis of the primary figures within the panel becomes more difficult. The two figures on the either side of the central deity can be viewed as "spirits of the breezes of the land and sea...or nymphs, one of fresh water and one of salt water" (Spaeth). These complex figures work in tandem with the central female deity, who, despite the panel's common name, "we could call the mother goddess Venus...or fertility goddess Ceres...or mother earth, Tellus" (Zanker). However, this difficulty in

exact identification is most likely intentional. The three primary figures, when combined, are intended to represent the most ultimate, all encompassing form of peace and prosperity. While the central figure represents the values of plenty and liveliness, the two side figures embody their extension throughout the whole earth, the land and the sea. This emphasis on the fruits of extensive, universal tranquility is not within a massive depiction of Roman excess, but rather is kept within a small, contained relief. These attractive and widespread values, depicted as stemming from Aeneas' historic piety and Rome's recent peace, further establishes public appreciation of Augustus' reign, and quietly augments his influence in the process.

In addition to the vividly depicted end panels, the wrapping friezes of the Ara Pacis contain extensive human figures, and intertwine the various people of Rome with the religious ideology of the monument. Representative of those who may visit the altar, the varied depictions are "all equally paused in their processional advance" (Wheeler), walking to join in a celebration of newfound peace at the altar within. More specifically, the south frieze [7] contains many notable Roman figures engaging in this large religious procession. In addition to depictions of religious nobles and sacrificial leaders moving to the altar are two figures of Roman significance, Augustus and Agrippa. While Augustus returned from western military campaigns in 13 BC, Agrippa was a prominent Roman general who returned from eastern military campaigns in the same year. "They both stand in the south frieze, therefore, as poles of the Roman empire, Augustus near the western end of the procession, and Agrippa towards the eastern" (Rehak). These depictions further emphasize the geographic bounds of new Roman peace, stretching from the farthest limits of the empire. The south frieze, in this ideological depiction, is another example of Augustus' self-effacement. Rather than standing out as the primary figure in a crowd of common officials, he stands amongst them, only "distinguished by the 'claw-lock' of hair over

his forehead" (Rehak). This inclusion of Augustus among a crowded procession of similar religious elites emphasizes that "he is merely *primus inter pares,* first among equals" (Wheeler), rather than a victorious, ultimate political force. In this minimalist depiction, the southern frieze reasserts the topographical extent of Roman peace and Augustus' understated role in achieving it.

The northern frieze [8] depicts a diverse group of Roman citizens as equally important in the procession of religious sacrifice. Specifically, "the north frieze (depicts) unnamed magistrates, senators, and members of religious fraternities, some with wives and children" (Wheeler). This dense and diverse depiction, by running at an equal height as the frieze of Roman religious elites on the monument's opposite side, demonstrates the equal religious importance of more typical Romans to those wielding religious power. Additionally, while the depictions of Augustus and Agrippa on the southern frieze emphasize the geographic breadth of Roman peace, certain depictions on the northern frieze demonstrate its demographic extent. For example, one section of the northern frieze depicts "women and children...and at the front, a non-Roman child with long hair, who may represent a barbarian (non-Roman)" (Rehak). The inclusion of often ignored demographics such as women, children, and foreigners in a frieze of equal symbolic importance to nobles demonstrates just how far Roman peace extends: it is not at exclusive to elite, property-owning Roman men, but is rather inclusive of all demographics. This diverse inclusivity and equality expands the widespread appeal of Augustan religious ideology, while its deemphasis of Roman nobility further eases Roman fears of fascist rule.

Ultimately, the Ara Pacis' incredible religious and political significance goes against an energetic architectural analysis of pure size and manpower. In its initial construction, Augustus ensured that he was lacking in every possible attribution: the site was contracted by the Senate in

his honor rather than by himself, and its form is relatively common to any Roman altar. Following this base level of humbleness, the site's extensive imagery of Rome's historical progression, newfound peace, and equality among Romans symbolized values of a popular ideology that saw extensive reception in its Roman observers. Such receptiveness, combined with an appreciation for the construction's smaller scale, Augustus' extensive humbleness, and his non-autocratic tendencies only saw his power and influence over the people increase. The Ara Pacis is a celebration of ultimate peace for all, not of Augustus' extensive brilliance, victory, or power. These incredibly potent and extensive ideologies are contained within a monument of minimal size and scale. Yet despite its small size and relatively low manpower, the Ara Pacis is the work of the most powerful and influential man in all of Roman history. It is not purely size or raw labor, but a complex understanding of political history, popular ideology, and a restrained approach of scale and self-inclusion that results in this potent architectural construction. It can be argued that any architecture with an ideological message, "should, like any written propaganda directed toward the populace, be short and to the point. This is most definitely true for the Ara Pacis" (Rehak).

Reference Images

1. The reassembled Ara Pacis Augustae, in its current place of the museum of the Ara Pacis.

2. The “Lupercal Panel,” with Mars on the left, and the infants Romulus and Remus at his feet.

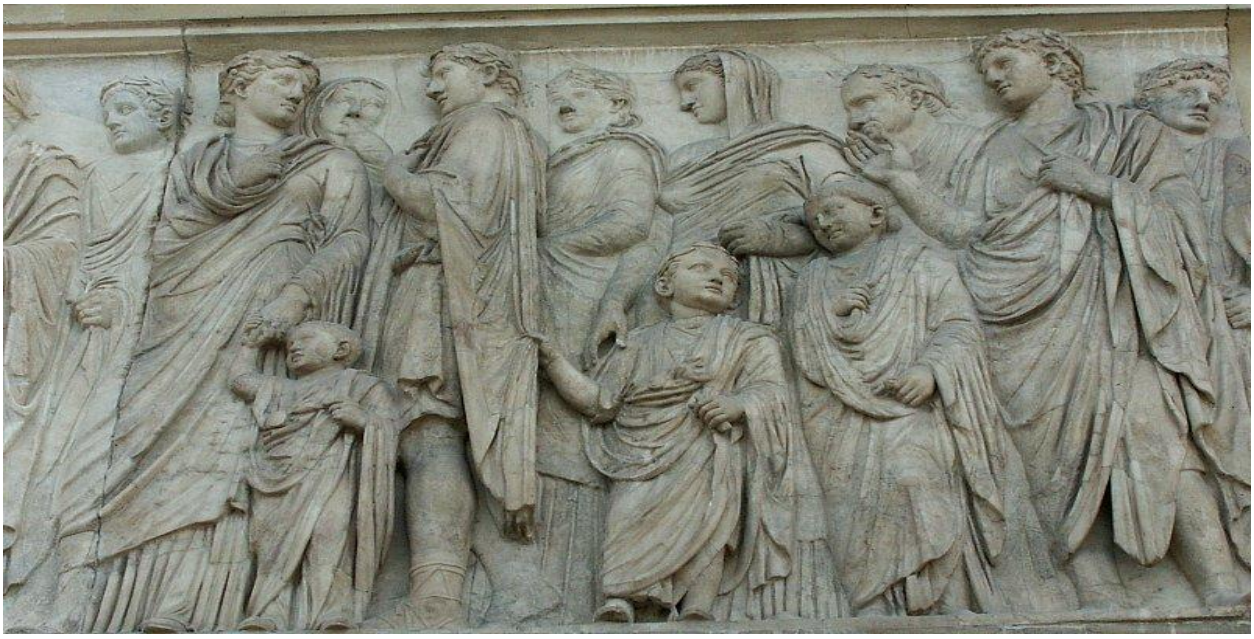
3. The “Enii Panel,” with Aeneas offering a boar as sacrifice to the gods with his son, Ascanius.

4. A section of the lower wrapping frieze, depicting vivid plant imagery of life and growth

5. The “Roma Panel,” depicting the goddess of Rome sitting on a confiscated pile of weapons.

6. The “Tellus Panel,” depicting a various figures of fertility and abundance.

7. A portion of the north frieze, depicting various Roman nobility. Agrippa is on the right, and Augustus' now-damaged depiction is on the far left.



8. A portion of the southern frieze, depicting various Roman citizens. This portion sees the interesting depiction of women, children, and foreigners, with the longer hair of the rightmost child distinguishing him as non-Roman.

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