



Classical Art and Archaeology: Teaching Latin and the Humanities with the Monuments of Rome with Karen Moore

Lecture 3: Ara Pacis, A Dynastic Monument

Outline:

“This is unique in the history of sculpture. It is the first time that we see mortals—living mortals nonetheless—including women and children, on a public monument...a divine monument, a temple, an altar. And so we see Augustus and his dynasty connected to the divine, both as Pontifex Maximus and as the heir to Aeneas and to Romulus.”

Introduction

In this lecture, Karen Moore explores the religious, political, and cultural significance of the Ara Pacis and the role it played in celebrating the Pax Romana and Augustus's legacy in ancient Rome.

- In our last lesson, we explored the journey of the Egyptian obelisks to Rome, as recorded by Pliny the Elder in his *Historia Naturalis*.
- One such obelisk celebrated the Pax Romana and the Augustan dynasty, with the Ara Pacis, the altar of peace, at its center.

Origins of the Ara Pacis

- Augustus records the origins of the altar in his work, *Res Gestae*.
 - *Cum ex Hispania Galliaque, rebus in iis provinciis prospere gestis, Romam redi, Ti. Nerone P. Quintilio consulibus, aram Pacis Augustae senatus pro reditu meo consacranda censuit ad campum Martium, in qua magistratus et sacerdotes virginesque Vestales anniversarium sacrificium facere iussit.* ([Augustus, Res Gestae 1.12](#))
 - When I returned to Rome from Spain and Gaul after matters had been carried out successfully in these provinces in the consulship



of Tiberius Niro and Pubes Quintiles, the Senate voted to consecrate the altar of peace of Augustus for my return in which the Senate ordered the Magistrates and priests and vestal virgins to make annual sacrifice.

- The *Res Gestae* is a list of Augustus's achievements, originally written on large bronze scrolls.
- Today, visitors can see these inscriptions at the [Ara Pacis Museum](#) in Rome.

Historical Context and Significance

- The Senate decreed the consecration of the Ara Pacis on July 4th, 13 BC, after Augustus established control over Spain, Gaul, and the Alpine passages.
- The altar was consecrated on January 30th, 9 BC, taking three years to build.
- Augustus was declared Pontifex Maximus, the high priest of Rome, in 12 BC.

Location and Structure of the Ara Pacis

- The altar was placed in the Campus Martius, facing west towards the Tiber River.
- The Campus Martius was an open field used as a burial ground and military training area.
- The altar's dimensions are 11.65 m by 10.62 m by 3.68 m high, with two doors and a flight of nine steps leading to the entrance.
- A great number of bulls were sacrificed on the altar to celebrate the peace of Rome, symbolizing the Pax Romana.

The Ara Pacis Complex

- In 28 BC, Augustus's Mausoleum was built north of the Ara Pacis along the Tiber River.
- Vergil references the mausoleum and its position in the sixth book of the *Aeneid*.
 - *Quantos ille virum magnam Mauortis ad urbem campus aget gemitus! vel quae, Tiberine, videbis funera, cum tumulum praeterlabere recentem!* ([Vergil, Aeneid 6.872-874](#))



- Translation: How many groans of men will that field of Mars lead toward the great city or what funerals will you see, Tiber, when you glide by the fresh mound!
- Agrippa built the Pantheon, a temple to all the gods, between 27 and 29 BC.
- Large statues of Augustus and Agrippa guarded the main entrance outside the temple, signifying that they were not divine but protected the deities inside.
- The main facade of the Ara Pacis faced west toward the Horologium (“sundial”), the obelisk that Augustus brought from Egypt and rededicated to Apollo, the sun god.
- Thus, the Mausoleum, the Ara Pacis, the Horologium, the Pantheon, and the Tiber formed the perimeter of a sacred ground honoring Rome's new dynasty.

Interior Design and Reliefs of the Ara Pacis

- The interior design of the Ara Pacis is a visual reference to the ancient practice of the augurs, sacred priests who set up temporary minor temples for sacrifices.
- The lower register of the inner walls resembles a wooden stake fence, and the upper register shows *bucrania* (skulls of cattle) tied together by garlands and *vittae*, sacred headbands.

Reliefs Depicting Aeneas and Roman Founders

- On the right-hand side (when facing the Tiber), a relief depicts Aeneas, the founder of the Roman people, dressed as a priest (*pontifex maximus*) preparing a sacrifice.
- The correct identification of the sacrificial animal is the white sow referenced in the *Aeneid* as the sign of where he is to found his new city (i.e. Rome).
 - *Ecce autem subitum atque oculis mirabile monstrum candida per silvam cum fetu concolor albo procubuit viridique in litore conspicitur sus quam pius Aeneas tibi enim, tibi, maxima Iuno mactat sacra ferens et cum grege sistit ad aram.* ([Vergil, Aeneid 8.81-85](#))
 - Translation: Behold indeed a sudden omen and wondrous to the eyes through the wood a sow clothed in gleaming white with her white offspring was lying down and is seen on the green



shore whom indeed pious Aeneas sacrifices to you, greatest Juno, carrying sacred implements with the herd, he stood at the altar.

- In the background of this relief, we see a small temple with the *penates*, the household gods. This calls to mind another scene from Vergil of Hector telling Aeneas in a dream to depart with the *penates* for a new home in Italy:
 - *Sacra suosque tibi commendat Troia penates; hos cape fatorum comites, his moenia quaere magna pererrato statuas quae denique ponto. 'sic ait et manibus vittas Vestamque potentem aeternumque adytis effert penetralibus ignem.* ([Vergil, Aeneid 2.293-297](#))
 - Translation: "Sacred Troy commends her own *penates* to you: take these as companions of the fates, seek great walls for them, which you will find for them at last after you have wandered through the seas." Thus Hector spoke and with his hands brings forth the priestly garlands and the power of Vesta and the eternal fire from within the innermost shrine.
- The Lupercal relief shows Romulus and Remus with the She-Wolf, flanking the left side of the entrance to the Ara Pacis.
- This image of Romulus complements that of Aeneas, his ancestor, as both are considered founders of the city and people of Rome.
- The myth of the She-Wolf raising the twins is recorded in Livy, Book 1.4 and also in Vergil's *Aeneid*, Book 8:
 - *Fecerat et viridi fetam Mavortis in antro/procubuisse lupam, geminos huic ubera circum/ ludere pendentis pueros et lambere matrem/ impavidos, illam tereti cervice reflexa/ mulcere alternos et corpora fingere lingua.* ([Vergil, Aeneid 8.630-634](#))
 - Translation: As he (Vulcan) had also crafted the she-wolf, having just given birth, lying on the ground in the green cave of Mars, the twin boys playing about and hanging on her teats and fearlessly nursing from their (foster) mother, that (mother wolf) bent back her neck and caressed them in turn smoothly, and licked their bodies with her tongue.



- Thus, the image of the Lupercal the Lupercal presents a quasi-historical, quasi-mythological history of the founding of the city of Rome.

Other Significant Reliefs and Sculptures

- On the east side of the altar, a relief depicts the personification of the city founded by Romulus in the form of a woman seated upon a trophy of arms.
- This relief can be compared to a coin minted by Nero in AD 65, which depicts Roma clothed as an Amazon with a helmet and spear, and a coin minted in AD 66 showing the Ara Pacis.
- With these coins, Nero is connecting himself to the divine images of Rome, the Roman peace, and his ancestor Augustus.
- The left side of the rear entrance features a debated central figure, possibly Tellus (Mother Earth), Fortuna, or Venus. She is surrounded by images of abundance.
- Whoever she is, this goddess is flanked by the *aurae velificantes*, or sailing winds. The Roman poet Horace describes the goddess Tellus accompanied by these winds:
 - Fertilis frugum pecorisque Tellus/ spicea donet Cererem corona/ nutriant fetus et aquae subres/ et Iovis aurae. ([Horace, Carmen Saeculare 29-32](#))
 - May Earth fertile in fruit and cattle give Ceres a crown of wheat; and may the healthful waters and breezes of Jove nourish the fruitful land.

Processional Friezes and Their Significance

- The processional friezes along the sides show a procession coming to the Ara Pacis to make a sacrifice.
- Unlike the Parthenon, the Ara Pacis shows present known persons, including women, heretofore unseen on Roman public buildings.
- The *flamines maiores*, *septemviri*, and *quindecimviri* lead the procession, with the latter connected to the worship of Apollo.

Vegetal Frieze and Its Symbolism

- The vegetal frieze below the procession is a favorite part of the monument, displaying beautiful natural imagery.



- The central plant in this frieze is an acanthus, with various other plants and small creatures intermingled.
- The acanthus plant, sacred to Apollo, symbolizes rebirth. Vergil immortalizes it in his 4th Eclogue:
 - *At tibi prima, puer, nullo munuscula cultu/ errantis hederas passim cum baccare tellus/ mixtaque ridenti colocasia fundet acantho.* ([Vergil, Eclogue 4.18-20](#))
 - Translation: But for you, boy, the earth will pour forth her first little gifts untilled, ivy wandering everywhere with baccharis and Egyptian lilies mixed with smiling acanthus.

Conclusion

- The Ara Pacis and its surrounding monuments form a sacred complex that celebrates the peace and achievements of Augustus and the Roman Empire.
- The detailed relief, friezes, and overall design reflect the rich cultural and religious heritage of Rome.
- Visitors to the Ara Pacis Museum can see depictions of the monument in its original painted glory, imagining its full splendor.