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The Parthenon and the Ara Pacis... and why they are both really weird

The Parthenon and the Ara Pacis Augustae are often the first monuments we think of in regard to the great architectural and artistic products of the ancient world. In many ways, they do indeed sum up 5th century BC Athens and Augustan Rome, not only in terms of their wealth, grandeur and artistic achievement, but also in terms of what we understand of their political content. In the latter regard, they need to be considered very much in their historical and social context and it is also important to remember that the potency of these monuments was not confined solely to the design and decoration of the structures themselves, but was also inextricably linked with their physical setting and relationships with both other structures and their ancient viewers. In constructing the ‘message’ of these buildings, their designers also introduced new elements into the visual repertoire and broke a number of ‘rules’ regarding the nature of public monuments. Hence the subtitle of this paper: however much the Parthenon and the Ara Pacis might typify the ancient world in our minds, that fact remains is that they were (and are) both really weird; and despite the 400-odd years which separates them, they are also connected both in terms of what they were trying to say and how they were doing that.

The Parthenon

The Parthenon was designed by the architects Iktinos and Kallikrates. Building began in 447 BC and was sufficiently complete to allow the dedication of the temple in 438 BC, although work continued on the decorative elements for another six years. It is essentially a Doric temple, and in that regard typical for the Greek mainland; but it was a very unusual Doric temple. As an octastyle structure, with eight columns across the front and back instead of the usual six (hexastyle), it had much in common with the colossal Ionic temples of East Greece (such as the 6th century Temples of Artemis at Ephesus and Hera on Samos). It was, in fact, the biggest temple on the Greek mainland by some distance, with its stylobate (the top step of the platform) measuring 31 x 69.5m. Only the aborted late 6th century Peisistratid temple – no doubt an attempt to create a colossal temple in Athens in competition with the huge temples of Sicily as well as East Greece – was bigger, but in the 5th century this was an unfinished structure below the Acropolis and had to wait for Hadrian in the 2nd century AD before it was completed as the Olympeion.1

The Parthenon was also not entirely a Doric temple. The Greeks did not usually mix the orders on their buildings, but there are some exceptions, of which the Parthenon is one, and indeed the Ionic features throughout it may be an allusion to the Ionian ethnic identity claimed by the Athenians. However, the two most obvious Ionic elements which appear were not typical even for fully Ionic structures. The first is the four Ionic columns in the mysterious back room of uncertain purpose; although temples in Western Greece (South Italy and Sicily) did often have such a back room (adyton), it lacked columns and was not normally combined with an opisthodomos (back porch). The second is the elaborate Ionic frieze around the exterior walls of the cella, which would not be found in that position on a normal fully Ionic temple.

These elements alone – size, mixing of orders and things in strange places – are enough to indicate that this building must have struck an ancient Greek viewer as not only very odd but also very expensive. And expensive it was indeed: it was built entirely of marble from Mount Pentelicon about 16 km away (the transport costs alone were colossal) and ancient viewers looking as far as the roof would have seen that even the tiles were made of marble instead of the usual terracotta. Through what survives of the inscribed building accounts of Parthenon and some careful hypothesising, it

1 Travlos (1971), 402-403. A useful fold-out table of temple dimensions is provided at the back of Dinsmoor 1950.
has been estimated that the total bill came to some 469 talents. There is a debate over how exactly the Parthenon was paid for, but it seems likely that a substantial amount came from the former Delian League, by now effectively the Athenian Empire. Apart from the size, materials, cost of marble transportation, and decoration (on which more below), a major contributor to the cost and complexity of the Parthenon project was the employment of various architectural refinements, namely adjustments made to counter certain perceived optical effects (described by Vitruvius) and optimise the overall appearance of the building. There are four main refinements in Greek architecture and most temples have one or two, if not all. The Parthenon has all four, plus some extras.

The first, and most common of all refinements (it occurs on most temples), is the curvature of the stylobate, whereby the top step of the temple platform curves downwards towards the corners (Fig. 1). This innovation appears to have been made in Greek architecture around the middle of the 6th century BC: the Temple of Apollo at Corinth may be first instance. It had some practical advantages – rainfall would flow more readily off the platform – but its primary aim seems to have been to counteract the idea that optically a very long horizontal line will appear to sag in the middle. The curvature was very subtle on the Parthenon: the stylobate rises about 11cm along the flank length of 69.5m and 6.75cm over the 31m of the short sides. Nevertheless, it is perfectly visible when viewed at step height from one end of the building. The curvature had to be carried up through the whole building to the other long horizontal elements of the entablature, thus creating a series of very complicated calculations in cutting the blocks to exactly the right size and angle.

2 It is difficult to convert this into modern day currency, but one attempt puts this cost at $US281 million (Connolly (2014), 87).

3 Kallet (1998); Connolly (2014), 85.

4 Vitruvius 3.3.1; 3.4.5; 3.5.13; Coulton (1977), 108.

5 Hurwitt (1999), 167; Haselberger (2005), 118-20;

A second, and also common, refinement is the entasis of the columns, whereby the columns would bulge slightly outwards around their middles as they tapered upwards. Again, this was to counteract the optical illusion of a sagging, although in fact straight, line, which in this case would give a slight hourglass profile to the columns. An early (and extreme) example of entasis appears on the mid-6th century BC Temple of Hera I ("The Basilica") at the Greek site of Poseidonia (Paestum) in South Italy – so extreme indeed that it must surely have been a deliberate aesthetic decision to retain such obvious curvature, perhaps as an almost organic response to the weight of the entablature above (Fig. 2). Elsewhere, the entasis was far more subtle and indeed often undetectable by the naked eye: on the Parthenon the entasis is a mere 1.75cm on the 9.5m high shafts of the external columns, and slightly greater (2.5cm) on the pronaos columns.

6 Coulton (1977), 110.

7 Haselberger (2005), 121-22.
The third refinement is the thickening of the corner columns (Fig. 3). Since these columns were more likely to be seen against the sky rather than the cella walls, this appears to have been to counteract the shrinking effect which bright backlighting will have on a solid object – hence the columns were thickened so that they did not look scrawny. It is possible that the Parthenon was the first building on which only the corner columns were thicker; if not the Parthenon, then the Hephaisteion, depending on which is in fact the earlier temple. On earlier temples, such as the early 5th century Temple of Aphaia on Aegina, all the columns on the short sides were thickened. An advantage of this refinement was that it made a small contribution to solving the problem encountered on all Doric temples of the relationship of the corner columns with the Doric frieze above, a problem usually solved on the Greek mainland through angle contraction (nudging the corner columns in so their axes were in line with those of the corner triglyphs). 

Figure 2. The Temple of Hera I, Poseidonia (Italy), showing exaggerated column entasis.

Figure 3. The north-east corner of the Parthenon, showing the thickened corner column and very visible angle contraction.

8 Haselberger (2005), 124-25.
The fourth refinement is the inclination of the columns, which was a fairly standard feature of Doric temples by the early 5th century BC. Here the columns tilted inwards as they soared upwards, to counteract the impression of an outward lean and a temple about to collapse that might otherwise have arisen from the combination of the height of the columns and the visual weight of the entablature. The Parthenon columns incline by 7-8cms for columns and – if extended – would meet at a height of about 2km.9 This inclination added yet another intricacy to the cutting of the drums, as it meant they had to be elliptical rather than circular.10

These are the main refinements employed in Greek architecture, but the Parthenon not only has all four of them but some extras as well. For example, the long walls of the cella also incline inwards, much like the columns. In fact, every component of the Parthenon has some sort of refinement, with the net result that it is (despite all appearances) a completely angled and curved building – there is not a straight line on it. The refinements added enormously to the complexity and expense of the structure and they were also very subtle. Were they really worth it? On a building the size of the Parthenon, possibly yes – the optical distortions might have been visible on such horizontal and vertical lengths, although this is uncertain and modern scholarship often explains the refinements as most effective in enlivening an otherwise academically correct but rigidly dull and lifeless structure.11 It is also the case that these refinements in general are to be found mainly on 5th century BC Doric temples, and especially Attic ones. These temples were smaller, so it could be asked whether refinements were often less to do with correcting optical distortions which would not in any case have appeared on smaller buildings, and more to do with showing off not only technical virtuosity but also the expense and extravagance which would have been evident in any publicly displayed building accounts.12 The Parthenon, loaded up with every refinement in the book, took this level of wealth display even further.

The oddities of the Parthenon are not confined to its architecture: they also extend to how it was used, and accordingly what it was for. As is well known, a temple was not in fact required for the practice of Greek religion: all that was actually necessary was a demarcated sacred space (temenos) and an altar for sacrificing. A temple was an added extra to which every self-respecting polis aspired, a sign of community wealth and a source of civic pride. We have little idea of what went on inside a temple, or indeed who had access. A temple was certainly used to house a cult statue (another strictly unnecessary item) and valuable offerings, but was it always open? Or only open on festival days? Or only accessible to sanctuary officials and their invitees? It was in fact the outside space, and specifically the area around the altar which was normally at the east end of the temple, which was the focus of the rituals and sacrifices.13

The Parthenon fails to meet even the low utilitarian benchmark for a standard Greek temple – indeed it is possible that it is not a temple at all. There is no evidence for an altar associated with the Parthenon. Absence of evidence is not of course evidence of absence, but it is noteworthy that there is no archaeological trace (such as cuttings in the bedrock of the Acropolis) nor any extant textual reference to an altar. There is also no record of any priestess of the Parthenon, nor do we hear of any rituals specifically associated with it. It did house valuable offerings, and a tremendously valuable statue, the huge chryselephantine Athena made by Pheidias, but this was not the cult statue. The actual and very sacred cult statue appears to have been a rather manky old piece of olive wood of vaguely anthropomorphic shape which

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9 Hurwitt (1999), 167.
11 Hurwitt (1999), 168.
12 Coulton (1977), 111.
was stored next door in the Erechtheion; this object was the focus of real veneration and the Panathenaic festival. If it is authentic, then there is the problem of the circumstances in which it could be overridden: the answer to this might be the ‘Peace of Kallias’ by which the Persian threat was deemed to eradicated, but this is another document of questionable authenticity.

Whatever the precise circumstances, the Athenians did begin to rebuild on the Acropolis with a vengeance in the middle of the 5th century, in a highly ambitious project promoted by the charismatic statesman Perikles. Some costs were reduced for the new Parthenon by reuse of material from the pre-Parthenon, especially the temple platform. The footprint of the new building was shorter than its predecessor, but also wider. This ensured that the Parthenon occupied the very highest, though not central, part of the Acropolis. And not only was it huge and built to an extraordinarily elaborate design spec, its decoration incorporated imagery that managed to be both familiar and unprecedented at the same time.

The pedimental sculptures do not present any major surprises, in that they depict two fundamental scenes from Athenian myth-history, the birth of Athena (east pediment) and the competition between Athena and Poseidon to determine who should possess Attica (west pediment). Such scenes of local relevance are to be expected, but the technical details testify again to the degree of detail (and hence expenditure) incorporated into the building: the pedimental figures were sculpted in the round, and are worked in as much detail at the back – an area that could not possibly ever have been seen – as on the visible front parts. It is worth walking behind the sculptures as they are displayed today in the British Museum to observe this.

In the metopes, we again find both decorative and technical extravagance, but also hints of the more complex set of messages designed to be conveyed by the Parthenon.

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14 Hurwitt (1999), 163-64.

15 Lykourgos, Leocratem 81; Diodoros 11.29.3

16 Hurwitt (1999), 141; 157.
The metopes are worked in extremely high relief: some of the figures almost depart the picture plane and are anchored at relatively few points. They also ran along the entire rectangle of the external Doric frieze: it was highly unusual for a temple to sport a full set of sculpted metopes. Instead the decorated panels were usually confined to the front and back (perhaps with a few down the flanks, as on the Hephaisteion) or the friezes above the pronaos and opisthodomos behind the main colonnade (Temple of Zeus at Olympia); they are also amongst the earliest sculpted metopes known from Athens.\textsuperscript{17} The north side depicted scenes from the Sack of Troy (Ilioupersis), the east the Gigantomachy, the south (and now best preserved) the Centauromachy, and the west the Amazonomachy. These battles are individually very familiar scenes in Greek art, but here we have all four together and the combination is instructive. All depict the triumph of order over chaos, of Greek civilisation over barbarian degeneracy. This fairly generic interpretation is probably the best for many other instances of these scenes, such as the version of Centauromachy on the west pediment of the Temple of Zeus at Olympia. But in Athens – on a building paid for in large part by the proceeds of an appropriated anti-Persian fund and which after three decades eventually rose from the ruins of a predecessor torched by the Persians – we might be able to go a step further.

The opponents of the Greeks in these metopes were of course all ‘other’ types against which the Greeks could be contrasted to good effect. But these opponents could also be seen to resemble the Persians – or at least Greek perceptions of the Persians – and given the other ‘Persian’ connections of the Parthenon, the idea that we are looking at a more specific analogy here is very appealing.\textsuperscript{18} The Persians were foreigners from the East, like the Trojans; they were hubristic, like the Giants; like the Centaurs, they overstepped the bounds of appropriate behaviour (and what more inappropriate than sacking a sanctuary?); and they were arrow-wielding effeminate types who invaded Attica, just like the gender-bending Amazons who were also another set of foreigners from the east. The Greeks in the scenes might even be read more specifically as Athenians, who repulsed the Persians both at Marathon and within sight of their own city at Salamis.

It is important to stress that these interpretations are entirely modern assessments: no ancient author provides an explanation of a mythological scene in terms of the contemporary historical and political situation. On the other hand, our ancient accounts of monuments tend to be late: Pausanias, for example, was certainly not looking at the Parthenon with 5th BC century Greek eyes when he visited in the 2nd century AD. We also have plenty of other evidence for the manipulation of mythology for political purposes. In Athens, some years before building work began on the Parthenon, Kimon had managed to ‘find’ the bones of Theseus on Skyros and bring them back home for reburial in the Agora.\textsuperscript{19} The Greeks also had, in general, a curious reluctance to depict real people and real events: mythological events abounded, and generic activities (Greeks doing Greek things) were common especially on Athenian painted pottery, but there is very little that we can identify as depicting historical figures enacting an historical event (in stark contrast to the Romans in this regard). Were the ancient Greeks in fact adept at inserting, and reading, messages about their contemporary society in their public artworks in a visual environment where ‘real’ events were discouraged but mythology was prolific? The parallels between mythological plays and contemporary society are well known; unlike the plays, the sculpture was constantly visible to a largely illiterate society that must have been well versed in understanding visual cues. Given all this, and given the civic significance of Greek temples in general, and the Parthenon in particular, it seems entirely possible that we are looking at a very specific message about the Athenians.

\textsuperscript{17} Ridgway (1981), 17.

\textsuperscript{18} Spivey (1996), 141-43.

\textsuperscript{19} Pausanias 1.17.6; Plutarch Kimon 8.5-6.
and Athenian superiority that was hammered home on all four sides of the Parthenon.

There are of course some well-known exceptions to the general Greek avoidance of ‘real’ events. In Athens, an important one was the painting of the Battle of Marathon in the Stoa Poikile in the Agora. It stood alongside paintings of the Ilioupersis and the Amazonmachy (both also depicted in the Parthenon metopes) in a building that was put up c. 475-50, during the period the Acropolis was left in ruins, by one Peisianaktios, possibly the brother-in-law of the Athenian democratic statesman Kimon, whose father Miltiades had been one of the generals at Marathon. The Marathon painting might have passed muster partly because it was in a secular building and partly because, according to Pausanias’ description (1.15), it was both mythologised and heroised with the insertion of quite a number of supernatural characters: Athena, Herakles, Theseus, and the local heroes Marathon and Echetlaos all made an appearance to aid the Athenian cause. On the Acropolis, on another structure which was part of the 5th century building programme, there might also be a representation of the Battle of Marathon: the south frieze of the Temple of Athena Nike on the Acropolis shows a battle between men characterised through their attire (or lack thereof) as Greeks and Persians. Although it could be one of many encounters, given the potency of Marathon in the Athenian imagination, one possible interpretation is that this is another image of that battle.

There is another well-known, if highly enigmatic, scene of a ‘real’ event on the Acropolis, which brings us back to the Parthenon and its decoration: it is of course the unprecedented Ionic frieze extending along the top of the exterior cella walls and running across the pronaos and opisthodomos. It depicts a procession, which starts at the west end of the building and proceeds down the north and south flanks to converge at the east end, where the gods are gathered to watch it. A number of interpretations of this procession have been put forward, of which the most widely accepted is that it is a generic representation of the Panathenaic festival procession (probably the more magnificent quadrennial version) or possibly an idealised version of the first time the festival was staged. However, this has never been a wholly satisfactory interpretation, on a number of grounds: firstly, the depiction of a non-mythological event does not sit well within the conventions of temple decoration, even when that depiction is of unusual form and in an unusual place; secondly, there are some rather odd discrepancies between what is depicted in the frieze and what we know of the procession from literary sources. The absence of the ship with the new peplos hoisted as a sail might be excused, since that would be difficult to depict in the available space and the Greeks always liked to concentrate on human action rather than scenery and props; but it is less easy to explain discrepancies like the inclusion of horsemen rather than foot soldiers, or males instead of females bearing the water jars. What of the enigmatic (and, it must be said, somewhat anticlimactic) ‘peplos’ scene between the gods and right above the east door?

These problems have given rise to other interpretations, none of which is entirely satisfactory either because they still encounter elements in the frieze that must be explained away. One is that the frieze refers to the myth of King Erechtheus’ sacrifice of his daughter in order to save Athens from a Thracian invasion; another sees the frieze as a heroisation of the Athenians at Marathon (and counts 192 heroised figures, the same number reported to have died at Marathon) and hence yet another image relating explicitly to this

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26 Connolly (1996).
historical event. Another possibility is that we are trying to find too specific an interpretation of the frieze, one which would be more comprehensible to our modern eyes. Instead, the scenes might have been recognisable to ancient eyes as presenting a ‘microcosm’ of Athenian society, encapsulating all that it valued and claimed to be.

If the frieze does represent something ‘real’ and more or less contemporary (whether the Panathenaic procession or the heroes of Marathon), then that might explain its inclusion on a building in an area that was not normally decorated: the designers stuck to more conventional subjects for the normal decoration, but no such ‘rules’ applied to the external wall of the cella. Furthermore, the frieze was not nearly so visible as the metopes and pediments. It was positioned at a height of about 12m, and behind a colonnade, which meant it could only be viewed either from a very sharp angle from the colonnade below, or from outside the building with the constant interruption of the columns. Some features would have helped mitigate the problems of visibility: the relief is slightly deeper towards the top, a subtle refinement but one which would have helped to prevent the upper portion disappearing from the viewer’s sight; like all the other sculptural elements, the frieze was painted in bright colours which would have made it much easier to pick out the figures and their actions; and although the colonnade was covered with marble coffering, the dim light might have been improved through light thrown up from the marble paving below. Even so, it can never have been easy to see: in this way its creators might have got away with something which breached the normal conventions of temple decoration and which also – as an ornate, expensive and technically unnecessary addition – once again demonstrated the disposable wealth of the Athenian state.

If the Parthenon had a function, then, it was less about any notions of practicality which might be associated with a temple, and more about a statement of Athenian achievements, identity and self-perceptions aimed at the wider Greek world. As a building, it was both recognisable as a Greek temple while at the same time being quite unlike any other temple an ancient Greek had ever seen. In this context of its impact on the viewer, it is worth thinking not just of the Parthenon in isolation, but in relation to the other structures on the Acropolis which were part of the same building programme.

The first view of the Parthenon once one had climbed the Acropolis was, as today, the north and west sides as one emerges from the Propylaea, the monumental packaging of Athena’s sanctuary. This stunning view was carefully engineered by the architect Mnesikles: the 5th century Propylaea was not exactly aligned with the footprint of its 6th century predecessor, but instead rotated eastwards so that it was aligned with the Parthenon and the best possible view of the latter was obtained from the grand entrance to the sanctuary. This view was, of course, also of the back of temple. To get to the front, one had to walk the full length of the building, effectively walking along with the frieze procession; this journey allowed plenty of opportunity to admire not only the Parthenon on the right, but also the Erechtheion to the left. The latter was another very weird 5th century building on the Acropolis: an Ionic structure of sprawling, split-level design over the varying rock levels, it accommodated Athena’s cult statue, various other cults, and preserved the locations of supernatural events (such as the trident marks and sea water well created by Poseidon). It also counterbalanced the visual weight of the Parthenon on the south side of the Acropolis very effectively, complementing the Parthenon rather than competing with it, and what it lacked in comparative size it made up for in bling. As an Ionic building, it could be decorated everywhere (why have columns when you can have caryatids?) and in fact the building accounts suggest that the decorative elements on the Erechtheion cost more than the building itself.

27 Boardman (1977); Herodotus 6.117.1.
The Parthenon and the Ara Pacis… and why they are both really weird

Not everybody approved of the new-look Acropolis. According to Plutarch (Perikles 12), Perikles was accused in the Assembly not only of appropriating funds from other Greeks, but also of ‘gilding our city and embellishing it, like some whore decked out in precious stones’. Perikles reportedly responded that not only did such projects bring economic benefits to Athens, but also that – once military requirements had been met – a city should direct its wealth towards projects which would ensure its ‘everlasting glory’. In this he certainly succeeded; and his success was uncannily predicted by his contemporary and admirer, Thucydides. Thucydides (1.1) imagined a time in the future when both Athens and Sparta were deserted, and were essentially archaeological sites, with only the temples and building foundations remaining. Sparta, he argued, would not look nearly so powerful as in fact it had been, while Athens would appear twice as powerful, and he concluded that appearances could be deceptive and power must be judged differently (Fig. 4). Both he and Perikles understood the power of the image: for a useless building, the Parthenon in fact worked very hard. Some 400 years later, Augustus took some lessons from Athens and the Acropolis.

The Ara Pacis Augustae

Like the Parthenon, the Ara Pacis is an unusual structure with a complicated and at times enigmatic sculptural scheme; like the Parthenon, its location and relationship with other structures and the manner in which it was viewed were critical to its success. It is today encased in a modern (and controversial) housing designed for it in 2006 by the architect Richard Meier. It is not in its original position: the present site is the one chosen when it was reconstructed from hundreds of fragments in 1938 under Mussolini. It is however fairly close to the original site, about 450m away on the Campus Martius, where the first fragments of it were discovered in the 16th century when the Palazzo Pretti was under construction.30 This location was at the north end of the Campus Martius, and of the Ara Pacis’ two entrances the west one faced onto the Campus. Some sections of it are still missing, notably the cornice, which has been restored as a plain cornice in the modern reconstruction simply because there is no evidence for its actual decoration, although it undoubtedly must have been decorated.

Figure 4. The remains of the 6th century BC Temple of Athena Chalkioikos on the acropolis of Sparta – a stark contrast with the Athenian Acropolis, as predicted by Thucydides

30 Claridge (2010), 207; 213.
a variety of functions including as a place of asylum and the point from which distances were measured. The Ara Pacis was entirely made of Luna (Carrara) marble from what is now modern Tuscany. The Luna quarries were first extensively developed and exploited under Julius Caesar and Augustus in the context of their extensive building programmes in Rome, which led to Augustus’ famous reported quip that ‘I found Rome built of bricks, I leave her clothed in marble’ (Suet. Augustus 28).

The Altar was decreed by the Senate on July 4th 13 BC, in order to commemorate Augustus’ return to Rome after a three year absence in Gaul and Spain. During his time away, he had managed to settle the affairs of the western empire, so the Altar was designed to celebrate this very significant achievement of the pacification of the Roman world. The site chosen on the Campus Martius was significant: not only was this the open space used for military training, public meetings and voting, but the east side of the Altar faced the Via Flaminia, the road leading north of Rome by which Augustus returned and re-entered Rome. It matched and counterbalanced an earlier altar erected six years earlier by Augustus on the Via Appia, south-east of Rome: this altar was dedicated to Fortuna Redux (‘Fortune who brings you home’) and commemorated Augustus’ return from the eastern empire, where he had conducted a similar mission. The completed Ara Pacis was dedicated on January 30th 9 BC, which was the birthday of Augustus’ wife Livia. This happy – and presumably not accidental – coincidence was just one of several references made to the Julio-Claudian family throughout the monument.

The interior of the enclosure has the appearance of a palisade: the expensive, high quality marble has been cut to give the impression of a simple wooden slatted fence, perhaps in imitation of the traditions of more humble sacred enclosures (Fig. 5). Above this ‘fence’ is appropriate sculpted sacrificial imagery, including paterae (shallow bowls) for pouring libations, bucrania (bulls’ skulls) and garlands (the sacrificial bulls could be garlanded). There are traces of red undercoat on the paterae which would have originally provided a base for gilding – as for the Parthenon, we need to remember that this was originally a glittering and colourfully (even garishly) painted structure. The actual altar itself was U-shaped with sphinxes decorating its wings, with generic scenes of the annual sacrifices to Pax. This was an unusual, and indeed old-fashioned shape for the period, and must be deliberately so: it was a Hellenistic style of altar popular in Italy in the 4th-3rd centuries BC. As such, it seems to be referring to older traditions within Italy but especially to the Greek past and the Hellenistic east – also sources of inspiration both for the Ara Pacis specifically and Rome as a monumental ‘built’ city (Fig. 6).

33 Claridge (2010), 210.
The Parthenon and the Ara Pacis… and why they are both really weird

Other proposals for the identification of this female have included a personification of Italy (Italia). What she does not very obviously appear to be is in fact precisely the figure we might reasonably expect to see on this monument, namely Pax herself. In fact, Pax is not explicitly identifiable anywhere on the Ara Pacis, and is just one of various characters whose identification is far from clear. In part this might be because Pax was something of an innovation: at the time, the Goddess of Peace was in fact a relatively new concept, having been almost unknown before 13 BC. She became, of course, very prominent following the inauguration of the Ara Pacis. So it may be that what we are seeing here is the formulation of the personification, even if it is not yet articulated via a specific character. Instead, she is represented more obliquely as a composite character through various images which illustrate the fertility and abundance of the earth which come from peace and the role of Augustus in achieving this.

The preservation of the west face is likewise very mixed, but again we see references both to the legendary past of Rome and the divine ancestry of the Julio-Claudians. The few fragments of the panel left of the west door appear to show Mars and the shepherd Faustulus with a fig tree between them, presumably the tree that grew in front of the Lupercal, the cave where the wolf suckled Romulus and Remus. The panel on the other side of the west doorway is much better preserved: it depicts Aeneas, descendent of Venus and ancestor of Augustus, sacrificing to the ancestral gods. He is assisted by a young man on his right, possibly his son Ascanius/Iulus as an adult; alternatively his son might be one of the boy attendants who have brought the white sow encountered at Lavinium and other sacrificial equipment. These elements of pious family activity and lines of descent are reiterated in the processional scene on the south side of the altar.

35 Claridge (2010), 208.
36 Kleiner (1992), 98.
37 Kleiner (1992), 93.
The Aeneas scene is interesting also in terms of both the similarities and differences with classical Greek art. Much like the Parthenon pediments and the Mars/Faustulus scene, it is aetiological in character as it tells the story of the foundation of Rome. Aeneas is depicted as a bearded, older man. A beard was a conventional device in Greek art to indicate male maturity, but Romans generally preferred to appear clean-shaven until the Hadrianic period, so this may be harking back to the idealised male imagery and ‘portraits’ of Greek art (such as various versions of the ‘Perikles’ bust). Other elements of the picture are much more ‘Roman’ in character, notably the use of landscape and the illusion of space. In the top left section of the panel a little temple sits on a hill: this is the temple at Lavinium, and a close look reveals little Penates (household gods, in this case brought from Troy by Aeneas) peeking out the front. The scale of this temple and its position on a rocky outcrop are clearly meant to indicate that it is situated at some considerable distance from the sacrificing group, and this deep landscape is further elaborated with plants and rocks.

The depiction of deep space and landscape appear in Greek art in the Hellenistic period (although classical wall painting – now lost – may well have been where earlier experiments were made). In sculpture, it appears in Hellenistic reliefs such as the Telephos scenes on the 2nd century BC Pergamon Altar. In classical sculpture and vase painting, however, the Greeks preferred to concentrate on human action, and as a result the human figure generally more or less fills the picture space. Where landscape motifs in Greek art appear, they tend to be filling elements, useful compositionally or as scene dividers, perhaps with some reference to the location (such as the palm tree in Exekias’ vase painting of the suicide of Ajax), but the location is usually understood from the specific myth or activity which is being played out. In the creation of space, Greek art tends to rely on the volume required for the action rather than excessive space, and the composition will often come forward from the picture plane rather than recede into it – as in the case of the high relief Parthenon metopes which enter the viewer’s space rather than pulling away from it. The Greeks had relatively little interest in creating illusionistic space and effectively punching holes in solid objects, but the Romans did explore techniques of illusionistic space and indeed depicted landscape as a subject in its own right in painting.

The figural scenes on north and south sides of the Altar are quite different from those of the east and west. Instead of myth, they depict a contemporary Roman procession, with officials, priests, citizens and families. The south side incorporates members of the imperial household, including Augustus, and the procession moves down both sides of Altar enclosure, effectively converging at the west front. It is generally thought to illustrate the actual procession which took place on the day of the consecration of the altar site on July 4th 13 BC, which would mean it describes a specific historical event, complete with portraits of prominent figures involved, although the identification of all these individuals is problematic.

The north procession faced towards Augustus’ Mausoleum and groups together less important characters, essentially officials and citizens. It conveys a sense of a rather chatty, somewhat relaxed progression as it moves west, rather than a highly formal and regimented performance, and the same is true of the south procession. There is some evidence of the Roman interest in creating pictorial depth in the massing of heads in order to create a

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38 One example is in the British Museum: [http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=461638&partId=1](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=461638&partId=1)


40 [www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/XDB/ASP/recordDetails.asp?recordCount=33&start=1A62F73778C6][www.beazley.ox.ac.uk/XDB/ASP/recordDetails.asp?recordCount=33&start=1A62F73778C6] &returnPage=&start=0

sense of a crowd, but essentially this is a fairly narrow space and human figures occupy the full height of the picture plane—much as they do on the Parthenon frieze. In fact, given other similarities, it is quite possible here that a deliberate reference was being made to the Parthenon frieze, even though that (whatever its precise interpretation) is a more generic or even mythologised scene than this historical one. These similarities include the relatively shallow relief and the classicising style symptomatic of the general influence of 5th century BC Greek sculptural styles on Roman works of the Augustan period: idealised, graceful figures, whose very specific and less attractive individual features are played down, process elegantly, coated in flowing drapery. We also, of course, have other very good evidence that Augustus looked to classical Athenian monuments for imagery and styles to portray his own regime: the caryatids which adorned the second storey of the porticoes of the Forum of Augustus were smaller, but otherwise exact, copies of those on the Erechtheion.

Some of the figures on the north side might be more readily identifiable were it not for the reworking of the sculptures during the Renaissance which may well have further ‘ironed out’ some of the individual features; on the south side of the Altar, where we have the more important figures of the day, we can make specific identifications of at least some of the characters, although there is considerable controversy over others. Here this is primarily attributable to the classicising overlay which suppressed the personal in favour of the idealised. This idealisation is particularly distinctive when considered in the context of the tradition of Roman veristic portraiture, where even when the depiction might not be a full-on ‘warts and all’ approach, we can usually identify particular important figures. On the Ara Pacis Augustus can be identified in the unfortunately fragmentary figure towards the west end of the south frieze: he is wearing a wreath, with his toga pulled up as veil, and appears to be in the act of sacrificing at a brazier. Apart from his action and the veil—which indicates his role as a presiding magistrate—Augustus’ features do not make him particularly identifiable, although he is just very slightly taller than the figures around him, thus underlining his position as primus inter pares (first among equals).

Augustus is surrounded by priests and lictors who are followed by members of the imperial family. It is here that the problems of identification start. Agrippa (dead by the time the Altar was completed) is fairly readily identifiable, both from his features but also the fact that he is also veiled and also just a little taller, appropriately so as Augustus’ right-hand man. The veiled woman behind him is probably Livia, but there is much debate over other characters and particularly the children who appear on both sides the Altar (Fig. 7).

However, regardless of the actual identification of these individuals, an important point to make is the departure from traditional conventions that some of these individuals represent: this was the first time that men had been depicted on a state monument with their wives and children. It

Figure 7. Detail of the procession on the south side of the Ara Pacis, showing Agrippa (veiled) and Livia (?), with a child.

42 Kleiner (1992), 92.
43 Kleiner (1992), 100.
44 See further Kleiner (1992), 93; Rose 1990.
45 Kleiner (1992), 92.
was a very carefully orchestrated departure, since it reiterated so effectively the themes of the mythological panels in the context of the contemporary regime. The inclusion of women and children again alluded to the prosperity and fertility which resulted from peace, and the lineage of the imperial family was also presented in a manner bordering on the dynastic. This was despite the inconvenient fact that Augustus and Livia did not produce any children as a couple, but at least those from previous relationships could be roped in. The wives and children also helped to uphold some of Augustus’ social policies and legislation surrounding marriage, procreation and family life. These were formulated in the context of concerns about increasing proportions of slaves and freedmen in Roman society, and included incentives under the *Leges Iuliae* for free Roman citizens to go forth and multiply, including special privileges for those who had three or more sons and penalties for the unmarried and childless.\(^\text{46}\)

In sum, the Altar was laden with messages about peace, prosperity, and fertility under Augustus and his family, with their illustrious descent from a deity and the very founders of Rome. This might, as noted above, explain the otherwise rather conspicuous omission of *Pax*: in fact *Pax* was represented and personified by the whole structure. And, just in case the message of Augustan abundance was still not quite clear, the lower sections of the enclosure walls were ornamented with superbly detailed and exuberant vegetal ornamentation. Not only do the plants burst forth with vigour, but they are also teeming with life: small animals, birds and insects all frolic amongst the foliage (Fig. 8).

Just as in the case of the Parthenon, we also need to think about the wider physical context of the Altar and its relationship with other structures in assessing the messages it was designed to convey and the effectiveness of the methods used. Augustus put up two other monuments at the north end of the Campus Martius in addition to the Ara Pacis: one was his own mausoleum, and the other was the so-called *Horologium Augusti* (Sundial of Augustus).

The Mausoleum was a fairly early project in Augustus’ building career: it was finished during his sixth consulship in 28 BC, by which time Augustus had no rivals. However, building commenced in 32 BC, before the hostilities with Mark Anthony had been resolved. Given this situation, to initiate such a monstrous piece of self-commemoration was both potentially premature and extremely ambitious.\(^\text{47}\) It was an enormous structure – its original diameter would have been c. 89m and it was never exceeded by any subsequent imperial burial monument, although Hadrian would carefully match it in what is now known as the Castel Sant’Angelo in Rome (Fig. 9). What made this monument particularly vainglorious, however, was its location. Roman burial practice dictated that the dead must be buried outside the city. Although the Campus Martius technically fulfilled this requirement (it lay outside the sacred perimeter (*pomerium*) of Rome), nevertheless it was a public space, not a cemetery: ordinary citizens could not be buried there, and in this regard Augustus was aspiring to the sort of heroic-style of intramural burial associated with (legendary)

\(^{46}\text{Zanker (1988), 156-7; Kleiner (1992), 92-3.}\)

\(^{47}\text{Zanker (1988), 72-3.}\)
The Parthenon and the Ara Pacis… and why they are both really weird

Augustan level of the Campus Martius; the explanation for this is probably that it represents a restoration done under Domitian. This would correspond both with the style of the lettering on the pavement, and Pliny’s comment (NH 36. 72-73) that in his time the Horologium was not working, probably because the gnomon (or the pavement) had subsided or shifted and so was no longer accurate.

The area of the pavement found showed a section of a meridian, a device for keeping track of the solar year by measuring the length of the shadow cast by the gnomon every day at noon along a ruler-like scale (the shadow will be longest on the shortest day of the year). It is not a device for telling the time, but was essential for making sure the calendar was accurately maintained, and religious and political events were correctly scheduled. A meridian can be incorporated into a sundial, or can stand alone. Although the original restoration of the structure envisaged a sundial and hence

civic benefactors, and an honour normally conferred posthumously. Yet Augustus’ pitch for glorious immortality paid off: not only he but various members of his family ended up in the Mausoleum, and his own account of his achievements—the Res Gestae—was prominently displayed on bronze plaques on either side of the entrance to the tomb.48

The other monument, the Horologium, is now not entirely in its original position, although we do know more about it following discoveries made in the last 30 years or so. Its gnomon was the Egyptian obelisk now displayed in Piazza Montecitorio, close to but not exactly in its original position (Fig. 10). The obelisk, which dates to the reign of Psammetichus II (594-589 BC), was taken after Egypt’s annexation to Rome in 30 BC. It thus formed another very vocal expression of Roman power, also expressed in the inscription added to it (Augustus brought Egypt ‘under the will of the Roman people’). Because the original position of the gnomon was known (it was discovered in pieces under a barber’s shop in the early 16th century), it was possible to calculate the position of the corresponding pavement on which the gnomon cast its shadow; in 1979-80, excavation in the basement of a building in via Campo Marzio revealed a section of the pavement (Fig. 11). It was found at a higher level than that which would correspond to the

Augustus’ meridian, now displayed in Piazza Montecitorio in Rome

was reinforcing the calendar of 365¼ days established by his great uncle and adoptive father, Julius Caesar. The Julian calendar had gone out of kilter due to the Roman practice of counting dates inclusively, hence the priests in charge were inserting the leap year every three years instead of every four. In constructing a huge device on the Campus Martius, complete with Greek (the language of science) rather than Latin inscriptions, Augustus assured Rome that through him all was in order and under control once again.

The original study also asserted that the shadow of the gnomon would have fallen on the Ara Pacis on the autumn equinox, which was also Augustus’ birthday. Unfortunately this rather splendid scenario also has to be revised. Apart from a degree of uncertainty as to the exact day of Augustus’ birth, mathematical calculations have shown that the shadow could not have covered the distance between the two structures, and would have dissipated before it reached the Altar. In any case, given the obelisk was fixed, the shadow would have pointed in the direction of the Ara Pacis every day of the year. However, it does seem that there was still some very careful placement of these monuments in relation to each other. The obelisk was positioned at an angle to the meridian, but faced the Ara Pacis square on. This meant that if one was standing in the Via Flaminia in front of the east entrance to the Altar, the obelisk would have risen centrally behind the Ara Pacis – a very striking image. When the Mausoleum nearby is added to this concoction, we have something of an Augustan theme park here on the Campus Martius – it is all about his achievements, lineage, dynasty and memory.

In conclusion, while the Parthenon and the Ara Pacis are very different monuments from different times and different societies, nevertheless they are both extraordinary and also had some fundamental features in common which contributed both to their weirdness and their success. Both were very

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49 Heslin (2007), 1-12.

50 Heslin (2007), 12-16.
unusual within the normal conventions for such structures; they were in this regard also extremely innovative and even idiosyncratic, following some traditions but flouting others, and introducing new elements into the architectural and iconographic repertoire. They shared similar sculptural styles, and were both highly elaborate and extravagant monuments. They both exuded messages of wealth and supremacy, and today demonstrate to us what a very powerful political and social tool the visual material culture of the ancient world was.

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