

Abstract

The Ara Pacis Augustae was commissioned in 13 BC to commemorate Augustus' military victories in Spain and Gaul. The monument is laden with symbols pertaining to Augustan ideology, allegorical to the mythic "Golden Age" of Saturn. The Southeast exterior panel of the altar, titled in modernity as the "Tellus Relief", is the best-preserved sculptural relief panel. Scholars have long debated the identity of the figures on the panel and have suggested several interpretations of the identity of the central figure, asserting that it is either the goddess Tellus, Ceres, or Venus. This paper will analyze the artistic and symbolic elements and figures on the Tellus Relief within the historical context of the first century BC in Rome. I argue that the most recent scholars who have addressed this work lack definitive evidence to identify the figures in the panel, thus resulting in varying and inconclusive interpretations of the sculpture.

Polysemy in the Southeast Panel of the Ara Pacis Augustae

The Ara Pacis Augustae, or Altar of Augustan Peace, was commissioned in 13 BC by the Roman Senate to commemorate Augustus' military victories in Spain and Gaul and dedicated in 9 BC. The so-called Tellus Relief, located on the southeast side of the monument, is the best preserved sculptural relief panel on the monument. Scholars have long debated the identity of the figures on the panel and have suggested several interpretations of the identity of the central figure, asserting that it is either the goddess Tellus, Ceres, or Venus. The identity of the two infants on the panel has also been debated, with scholars such as J. Pollini suggesting that they either represent Romulus and Remus, or allude to Gaius and Lucius, the Augustan dynastic successors¹. In this paper, I will analyze the artistic and symbolic elements and figures on the Tellus Relief within the historical context of the first century BC in Rome. I argue that the most recent

¹ J. Pollini, *From Republic to Empire: Rhetoric, Religion and Power in the Visual Culture of Ancient Rome* (University of Oklahoma Press, 2012), 232.

scholars who have addressed this work lack definitive evidence to identify the figures in the panel, thus resulting in varying and inconclusive interpretations of the sculpture.

The southeastern panel relief depicts a centralized female figure who is draped in transparent, wet-style dress with a hood and a wreath adorning her head (fig. 1). She is seated upon a rocky boulder amidst reeds and crops and two infants sit on her lap surrounded by fruits that have been identified as apples or pomegranates, as well as grapes (fig 2.). By the central figure's feet, a cow and a sheep graze, and an additional female figure surrounds her on both the left and right. The female on the left holds a billowing cloth above her head while riding on a flying swan, while below her, a jug has tipped over, spilling water. The female on the right holds an analogous cloth, and rides a sea monster identified as a ketos.² While the detail and choice of subject of the relief is pointedly specific, it is not easy to identify any of these figures by name. In order to understand the identity of these figures, it is necessary to understand the context of the historical period and the intended function of the altar. Augustus sought to create a parallel between his new era of peace and that of the mythic Golden Age of Saturn (Greek: Cronus), characterized by abundant prosperity, fertility, and a return to the old Roman virtues of family and agriculture³. According to Peter Holliday, this relief panel and all of the symbols it contains, was carved to embody this ideology. The style in which the relief was carved is also reminiscent of the Parthenon frieze, alluding to the Golden Age of Pericles and the prosperity of that time, which Augustus, with his military victories to which the altar is dedicated, had brought once again to Rome.

² Erika Simon, *Ara Pacis Augustae* (New York Graphic Society Ltd., 1969), 26.

³ Peter J. Holliday, "Time, History, and Ritual on the Ara Pacis Augustae", *The Art Bulletin* 72 (1990): 555.

While the purpose of the Ara Pacis and the choice to depict iconography relating to a renewed sense of prosperity is clear, the identity of the main figure on the southeast panel is not. Historians call the southeast panel of the Ara Pacis the Tellus Relief, and thus I will first address the theory that the main figure represents the earth goddess Tellus (Greek: Gaia). Tellus, also called Tellus Italiae, is the mother earth goddess of Italy, often personified in art as the country in human form. She is associated with fertility of land, growth, and rebirth – all themes represented in the relief, as well as ideals that the Augustan Age embodied. It is mainly for this reason that Pollini and others have suggested that the matronly main figure in the panel is Tellus. In addition, all of the other relief panels on the Ara Pacis refer to Rome and Italy as a country directly, so logic follows that the Tellus panel would as well⁴. Further, Holliday states that Tellus is also closely connected with Pax, and both goddesses embody connotations of peace and prosperity, which Augustus brought to Rome by ending civil war. Finally, Virgil uses *Saturnia* as a common epithet for Tellus, which evokes the Saturnian Golden Age ideal that the *Pax Augusta* attempted to imitate; thus, it is reasonable to assume the panel depicts Tellus to emulate this ideological connection on Ara Pacis⁵.

However, there are iconographical problems with the identification of the main figure on the southeast relief as Tellus. In Roman art, Tellus is commonly represented bare headed, while the figure on the relief is veiled⁶. Furthermore, Tellus is normally depicted either emerging from the earth or reclining upon it, emphasizing her role as a

⁴ Other panels containing iconography specific to Italy include the goddess Roma, Romulus and Remus, and Aeneas; Pollini, 231.

⁵ Pollini, 231.

⁶ B. S. Speath, "The Goddess Ceres in the Ara Pacis Augustae and the Carthage Relief", *American Journal of Archaeology* 98 (1994): 72.

mother-earth deity and her connection to the land. In the southeast panel relief, the main figure is situated in neither of these positions, but sits erect⁷. In addition, even though in other examples of Roman art two children usually surround Tellus Italiae (as is depicted in the Ara Pacis relief), she is always distinguishable by a trademark cornucopia, which is not present with the main figure in the Tellus Relief⁸. Because of these disparities in the visual representation of Tellus on the Ara Pacis, it is difficult to definitively identify the main figure as Tellus.

It has also been suggested that the main figure on the southeast panel is the goddess Ceres. Ceres (Greek: Demeter) is closely linked to Tellus religiously, and some of the iconography on the panel relates to Ceres. Ceres, like Tellus, is associated with fertility and rebirth pertaining to both humans and agriculture. Thus, the golden age allusions and undercurrents of Augustan ideology, which are prevalent on the relief, are still represented through Ceres. Unlike Tellus, Ceres is usually depicted veiled as a symbol of her matronly status and as a symbol of mourning for her daughter Proserpina (Greek: Persephone) in the underworld. Barbetta Spaeth identifies the fruit on the main figure's lap as pomegranates, a fruit which alludes to Proserpina in the underworld, adding support to identifying the figure as Ceres. Further, the main figure's head is adorned with a wreath, and Spaeth asserts that both poppy and wheat are identifiable in the headpiece. If composed of these two plants, the wreath is similar to the *corona spicea* worn by Ceres in both Roman and Greek coins⁹. Using the wreath to identify Ceres is also supported

⁷ A. W. Van Buren, "The Ara Pacis Augustae", *The Journal of Roman Studies* 3 (1913): 136; Simon, 27.

⁸ Karl Galinsky, "Venus in a Relief of the Ara Pacis", *American Journal of Archaeology* 70 (1966): 228.

⁹ Spaeth, 68.

textually in Horace's secular poems: "Let Tellus, fertile in fruits and herds, present Ceres with a corona spicea; let the healthy waters and breezes of Jupiter nourish the offspring."¹⁰ From this passage, which also shows the religious and mythical connection between Tellus and Ceres, Spaeth concludes that the main figure on the southeast panel is Ceres, wearing the *corona spicea* (fig. 3). However, because of weathering and decomposition, it is difficult to definitively identify the specific components of the wreath; thus the wreath upon the head of the main figure in the Ara Pacis may not be the *corona spicea* but rather a generic wreath. Because of the uncertainty in positively identifying this crown, I believe that the wreath on the panel is not sufficient as a main line of evidence to identify Ceres on the southeast panel.

While there is evidence to support the identification of the main figure as Ceres, there is also iconography on the panel to suggest that the figure is Venus (Greek: Aphrodite). Venus is not only the goddess of love, but was an important figure in the Augustan era as the genetrix of the Julian line, as well as of Aeneas, who, according to myth, founded Rome. Because Augustus claimed descent from the goddess Venus, he could use divine favor and lineage to legitimize his rule, as he rose to power in Rome extremely quickly and in a way that was untraditional (i.e., he did not ascend the *cursus honorum*). By re-iterating that his family descended from a goddess, as well as that he brought peace and prosperity to Rome, Augustus attempted to solidify his claim to power with those in the senate. On the Ara Pacis, Karl Galinsky focused on the bird to the left of the main figure as an identifying symbol for the main figure, and an allusion to Augustus'

¹⁰ Spaeth, 77; Simon, 27.

divine ancestry from Venus. Galinsky suggests that the bird is either a swan or a goose¹¹. Venus is commonly depicted riding a goose in painting, and the swan is a personification of Venus as the morning star¹². The drapery on the main figure is also similar to other contemporary and earlier statues and relief carvings of Venus. The *velificatio* on the Ara Pacis accompanies Venus in other works, such as the Aphrodisian Aphrodite.¹³ However, because the *velificatio* is directly associated with the side figures on the panel and not the main figure, I caution against using this particular line of evidence to identify the central figure as Venus. However, Venus's role as a goddess of love is also commonly emphasized with clinging drapery falling off one shoulder, and this is how the Ara Pacis figure is dressed. The specific form of clothing on the Ara Pacis is also almost identical to the dress of Aphrodite on the Parthenon. Not only does this association allow Galinsky to interpret the figure on the Ara Pacis as the same goddess (Aphrodite/Venus) as on the Parthenon, but also the style calls to the viewer's mind the Golden Age of Pericles, and how Augustus was suggesting a recreation of that era in Rome¹⁴.

Iconography for Tellus, Ceres, and Venus are all present on the Tellus panel of the Ara Pacis, although no one deity can be clearly identified, despite the precision detail in the panel. As a result scholars interpret the main figure in multiple ways. All three of the goddesses discussed above share similar traits; they all relate to fertility and prosperity, and propagate the notion of an ideal, renewed "golden age" society, which Augustus tried

¹¹ Many other scholars agree with this identification, including all authors cited in this paper.

¹² Galinsky 1966, 230. The swan is also symbolic of Apollo's (the patron deity of Augustus) augury.

¹³ Karl Galinsky, "Venus, Polysemy, and the Ara Pacis Augustae", *American Journal of Archaeology* 96 (1992): 460.

¹⁴ Simon, 28.

to establish in Rome. The idea of *Pax Augusta* (to which the altar is dedicated) is not a singular concept, but the notion itself is layered with many meanings, including *pax*, *libertas*, *fides*, *pietas*, prosperity, and more¹⁵. Therefore, we struggle in identifying a single figure or mythological figure that represents such a dynamic concept as the *Pax Augusta*. Perhaps the reason that Ceres, Venus, and Tellus are all easily synthesized into a combined representation by modern scholarship is because in addition to all three sharing ideology about regeneration and prosperity, the three goddesses also are linked religiously. Venus and Ceres shared a cult, and there were many connections between Ceres and Tellus religiously, linking all three together¹⁶.

The Tellus panel is not the only occurrence where scholars debate the identity of figures in a Roman monument; there are other instances where experts suggest polysemous interpretations from the visual sculptural culture in Rome. Galinsky points out that a monument in honor of Sulla was erected in 91 BC, which contained multiple layers of iconography and allegory pertaining to the complex Sullan ideology, almost a century before the Ara Pacis¹⁷. While scholars may not be able to understand the nuances of identifying figures through symbols, with the foundation of visual rhetoric already introduced to the Roman people, a majority of the Roman citizens would have been able to comprehend the complex allegory in sculptural relief and recognize specific narrative and figures that appear on the Ara Pacis. Further precedent for polysemy in Roman art is evident on Roman coinage. Often images of different goddesses were portrayed with the same female head, which could represent Pax, Venus, or any other goddess; it was only

¹⁵ Galinsky 1992, 469.

¹⁶ Galinsky 1992 472; Galinsky 1966 243.

¹⁷ Galinsky 1992, 469.

through identifying symbols¹⁸ or the name of the specific goddess printed on the coin that one could distinguish who was represented. This interchangeability of interpretation of the same image perplexes scholars today, but would have been familiar to Romans. This same dilemma occurs concerning the Tellus Relief on the Ara Pacis.

Scholars have extensively debated the identity of the main figure on the southeast panel of the Ara Pacis. Although the iconography on the panel is specific and intentional, it is not possible to positively identify the main figure today. The figure displays traits and iconography of Tellus, Ceres, and Venus, and it is plausible that we will never understand how first century BC Romans understood the identity of the figures on the panel. Experts today provide multiple interpretations for the rich allegory, addressing all aspects of the *Pax Augusta* and Augustan ideology.

¹⁸ Even on coins, the same symbol (in addition to the same head) was sometimes used to represent different goddesses. The cornucopia, typically associated with Tellus Italiae, is also found on coins that depict Venus. An ear of corn or a bundle of poppies, typically attributed to Pax, is also attributed to Ceres and Venus; Galinsky 1966, 243.

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Figures:

Figure 1: Southeast Panel Relief



Figure 2: Fruit (apples, pomegranates, grapes)



Figure 3: wreath, possibly the corona spicea

