Ara Pacis

In 14 CE, towards the end of the month recently named Augustus in his honor, the body of Imperator Caesar Augustus, Princeps and Father of his country, was carried into the Forum. The closed coffin, borne by senators, was crowned by a life-size wax effigy of the deceased, which glistened wetly in the heat. Behind came members of the Julian family, wearing the death masks of their eminent ancestors. Conspicuous by his absence was Julius Caesar; it would be impious to wear the mask of a god. Behind the family walked men masked and costumed as the great heroes of Roman history, from Romulus to Pompey. After these came ranks of men dressed as personifications of the nations Augustus had conquered, and finally the massed ranks of the Senatorial and Equestrian orders.

The emperor’s bier was set on the rostra, and a long somber man – Tiberius, Augustus’ adopted son and heir – delivered a long somber eulogy in the Forum square. Then the procession reassembled and snaked through the streets to the stubby brown lawn of the Campus Martius. Followed by the Roman people in their hundreds of thousands, the marchers drew into formation in the center of the Campus, where a tall pyre had been erected. After the pallbearers slid the emperor’s coffin into its appointed place, the high priests circled the pyre, spiked caps gleaming. They were followed by the five thousand soldiers of the Praetorian Guard, who threw their military decorations onto Augustus’ coffin. Finally, a chosen group of centurions lit the pyre from beneath. The flames rose heavenward; and some swore that they saw the emperor’s spirit ascending in the column of smoke.

Five days after the funeral, when the pyre had finally cooled, the empress Livia and a small band of retainers walked barefoot through the cinders to recover the emperor’s bones. The remains were sealed in a golden urn. Then, gliding silently over clouds of dust, the mourners turned toward the great mausoleum Augustus had been built for himself forty years before. Advancing in a ragged line, they passed a monumental altar, its painted walls grayed by falling ash. On the side facing them was carved a procession; and there, in high relief, was Augustus himself, young and healthy, a half-smile on his lips, striding confidently into the future.

The man was dead; but the image lived on.

The Ara Pacis Augustae, or Altar of the Augustan Peace, epitomizes the reign of a man who ruled through images. Augustus never forgot that his great-uncle and adopted father Julius Caesar had been assassinated for failing to adapt his ambitions to the sensibilities of the Senate. To avoid that fate, Augustus took pains to gain the substance while avoiding the semblance of absolute power. Although he kept an iron grip on the treasury, armies, and critical frontier provinces, he claimed to have restored the Republic, and insisted on no title grander than “princeps” – that is, first citizen. He came to power through a savage civil war, but presented himself as a bringer of peace. He brought revolution, and called it tradition – and because he was convincing enough, and lived long enough, his fictions became reality. Nowhere is this dance of image and substance more apparent, or more fascinating, than in the reliefs of the Ara Pacis.

The Ara Pacis was constructed between 13 and 9 BC to celebrate Augustus’ return to Rome after a long absence in the western provinces. It was located in the Campus Martius or Field of Mars,
a level floodplain just north of the city, where it was integrated into a complex of monuments celebrating the Princeps. A short distance to the north was the immense Mausoleum of Augustus. Just west, and joined to the Ara Pacis by a broad plaza, was the Horologium – a colossal sundial that used a seventy-foot Egyptian obelisk as its gnomon. The Horologium was configured so that on September 23, Augustus’ birthday, the shadow of the obelisk would point directly to the Ara Pacis, suggesting that the sun god Apollo – Augustus’ patron – had smiled on the day of his birth, and that the future princeps had been born to bring peace to the world.

The Ara Pacis itself was a monumental altar surrounded by an enclosure. The altar proper, a massive U-shaped structure, has always been overshadowed by the marble enclosure walls, which were decorated inside and out with painted reliefs celebrating the goddess to whom the altar was dedicated: Pax, or Peace.

The goddess is represented in the so-called Tellus relief on the eastern enclosure wall. Flanked by personifications of the Sky and Sea, Pax sits on an outcropping, surrounded by sprouting plants and docile animals. In her lap she hold two infants and a cornucopia of fruit. Her arms are spread protectively over the babies. Her face is appropriately serene. This representation of Pax, which associates the blessings of Peace with the regenerating power of nature, captures the heart of the Augustan message: the civil wars are over, and the good old days of prosperity and virtue, when man lived in harmony with nature, have returned.

By the time the Ara Pacis was completed, the Roman world had been at peace for more than twenty years. Wars were still fought – but now they were waged against barbarians on distant frontiers. The city of Rome itself was tranquil, and Augustus’ power – unobtrusive but inescapable – was unchallenged. Older Romans, however, remembered the bloodshed that came before, and a time when Augustus was still Octavian – a pale and sickly teenager known, if at all, as the great-nephew of Julius Caesar.

Gaius Octavius Thurinus, the future Augustus, was born in 63 BC. His father came from a family that, though distinguished, was not of Senatorial rank. His mother Atia, however, was Julius Caesar’s niece. Though the young Octavius was raised primarily by his grandmother Julia, Caesar’s sister, he had little contact with Caesar himself until 46 BC, when he was invited to join his great-uncle’s campaign against the sons of Pompey in Spain. Too sick to sail with Caesar in the fall, but desperate not to be left behind, he hired a small boat to bring him across the Mediterranean in the stormy winter months. Shipwrecked on the Spanish coast, he and a small band of companions made their way through enemy territory to Caesar’s camp. When they arrived, Caesar – impressed by his nephew’s resourcefulness – began to favor the boy; and once he had defeated the Pompeians and returned to Rome, he wrote a new will, in which he adopted Octavius and made him his heir.

On March 15, 44 BC, while Octavius was studying in Greece, Caesar was assassinated. In the confusion that followed, the conspirators, led by the senators Marcus Junius Brutus and Gaius Cassius Longinus, established an uneasy truce with Caesar’s friends and allies, who were led by Marcus Antonius.
Into this situation stepped Octavius, now calling himself Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus, to reflect his adoption by Caesar. To Antonius’ intense irritation, this eighteen-year old punk began to present himself as the leader of the Caesarian party, commemorating Caesar at every opportunity and playing for the favor of his veterans. For a few months, Octavian sided with the Senate against Antonius – but by the summer of 43, recognizing each other as natural allies, Octavian and Antonius had reconciled, and joined with the Caesarian general Lepidus to create the political alliance known as the Second Triumvirate.

Brutus, Cassius, and the other conspirators were hunted down and slain; Lepidus was shunted aside, and Octavian, still only in his early twenties, emerged as one of the two most powerful men in the Roman Empire. By informal agreement, Octavian and Antonius divided the provinces between them. While Octavian remained in Rome, orchestrating the defeat of Pompey’s last remaining son, Antonius spent the bulk of his time in the east, where –like Caesar before him – he became enamored with Cleopatra. Neglecting his wife in Rome – who happened to be Octavian’s sister – he made Cleopatra his consort, and had three children with her.

For this and other reasons, the relationship between Octavian and Antonius, always a matter of convenience, gradually cooled. Octavian began to wage a propaganda war against his rival, presenting himself as the protector of traditional Roman values, and criticizing Antonius as the debauched slave of Cleopatra. Finally, in 31 BCE, Octavian convinced the Senate to declare war on Antonius.

The decisive moment in the ensuing conflict was the naval battle of Actium, where Octavian’s forces confronted those of Antonius and Cleopatra. Octavian’s navy consisted primarily of small, swift liburnian galleys, each capable of holding a few dozen heavy marines and one or two ballistae. A ballista, incidentally, is an unconscionably large crossbow. Antony and Cleopatra’s fleet, though less numerous, consisted of much larger ships – some with as many as ten banks of oars, and capable of carrying several hundred soldiers and six or more ballistae.

For hours, neither side could gain a decisive advantage. Octavian’s ships attacked Antony’s larger galleys in groups of two or three, sweeping their decks with flaming ballista bolts and volleys of arrows. Antony’s galleys, for their part, rammed and sank their smaller opponents. Octavian’s fleet was slowly gaining the upper hand when, for mysterious reasons, Cleopatra’s galleys withdrew from the fight. Antony turned to follow her, and the battle turned into a rout. Octavian pursued his enemies to Alexandria, where both Antonius and Cleopatra committed suicide. Egypt became a province, and Octavian returned triumphantly to Rome.

No one knew what to expect next. Octavian had the absolute loyalty of fifty legions; and, having seized the treasures of Egypt, he had the money to pay them. If he so wished, there was nothing to prevent him from ruling Rome as a king. But Octavian was far too savvy to attempt anything so ham-fisted. After triumphing, he ceremoniously laid down his unconstitutional powers, proclaimed the restoration of the Republic, and took on a new role as “princeps” (first citizen) of the restored government. Behind the Republican façade, his power was still absolute; he paid, and so controlled, virtually the entire army, could veto any legislation that displeased him, and enjoyed unchallengeable personal prestige. His careful observance of traditional forms, however, placated the all-important aristocracy.
The finishing touch was the name “Augustus” – that is, “revered or illustrious one” – which he adopted in 27 BC. This title, with its implications of moral and divine authority, was perfectly suited to the princeps’ informal brand of autocracy.

Closely related to Augustus’ faux-Republican style of rule was his endorsement of traditional religion and morality. He reconstructed no less than 82 temples in the city of Rome, assumed the position of Pontifex Maximus (that is, high priest of Jupiter), revived or invented a series of sacred festivals, and promulgated laws promoting marriage and ethical behavior. The cult of Pax and the Ara Pacis represent the capstone of the Augustan religious agenda. Pax personified both the peace that the princeps maintained and the moral, cultural, and physical rebirth associated with his reign. Equally importantly, the reliefs of the Ara Pacis itself seamlessly connected the reign of Princeps with the favor of the gods.

The Ara Pacis’ north and south enclosure walls show Augustus and his family, the chief priests, and a number of eminent senators marching in a grand procession. The reliefs are probably not meant to represent any single occasion, but to project an idealized vision of the divinely-sanctioned sociopolitical order Augustus claimed to have restored. The Princeps himself appears on the south wall, flanked by the high priests of the state cults in their spiked caps. A short distance behind is Marcus Agrippa, Augustus’ best general, closest friend, and son-in-law. Julia, Agrippa’s wife and Augustus’ only child, walks just behind her husband. Within a few years of the altar’s completion, Augustus would exile her from Rome for violating his laws on adultery – an indication of how far he would go to protect the image of moral authority he had so carefully crafted.

The ambitious boy Gaius Octavius Thurinus, the ruthless warlord Gaius Julius Caesar Octavianus, and the benevolent statesman Imperator Caesar Augustus were the same person. But they were very different personas – each, in its way, as carefully crafted as the reliefs of the Ara Pacis. As he lay dying in his villa at Nola, we are told, Augustus ordered a mirror brought in so that he could see his reflection a last time. Regarding himself critically, he ordered slaves to comb his hair and set his slack jaw straight. Then, smiling at the friends gathered around his bed, he rasped: “If I have played my part well, applaud as I leave the stage.” A few minutes later, he breathed his last.

The man was dead, but the image lived on.