

## The Ara Pacis of Augustus

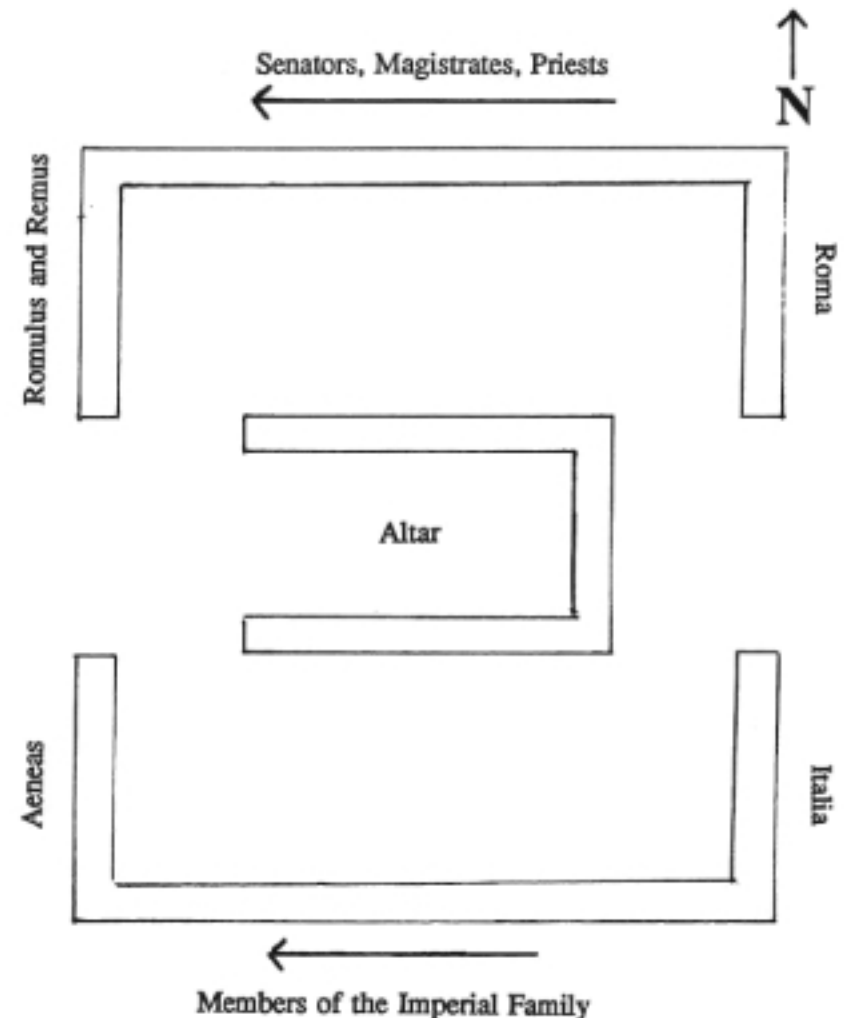
by P.Y. Forsyth

Augustus, the founder of the Roman Empire, was a consummate politician who knew well the power of propaganda. During his reign (27 B.C. - 14 A.D.), both literary and visual artists were encouraged, by imperial patronage, to celebrate the new age of peace (the Pax Augusta) inaugurated by the emperor. There resulted such masterpieces as the *Aeneid* by Vergil in literature, and the *Ara Pacis Augustae* in sculpture. While Vergil's poem is justly famous even today, few people are aware of the artistic genius exhibited in the Ara Pacis, or "Altar of Peace".

The Ara Pacis should be viewed as one of many structures intended to beautify the city of Rome as well as glorify its ruler. During the reign of Augustus, Rome was graced with the restorations of long neglected public works, and with the construction of new temples, parks and gardens, baths, theatres, docks and markets, and even a brand new Forum - the Forum of Augustus, containing an impressive temple to Mars. But the Ara Pacis was unique, and raised the art of visual propaganda to new heights. Built between 13 and 9

B.C. in the Campus Martius near the Tiber River, the Ara Pacis was essentially an altar enclosed by a screen wall some 11 by 10 meters in size. While the altar itself was intricately decorated with religious scenes, it was the screen wall and its sculptured decoration that set this monument apart from all others.

The screen wall, some 6 meters tall, was sculpted in relief on both its interior and exterior. In the interior, one would see two registers: the upper half of the wall bore a frieze of garlands, flowers, and ox skulls - all items connected with ritual sacrifice, as befits an altar; the lower register, however, was simply carved to resemble a fence - probably to reproduce in stone the actual wooden fences that once surrounded altars in Rome.



But it was the outer screen wall that dominated the entire structure. Broken by two doorways, one on the west and one on the east, the outer wall contained scenes that were both allegorical and commemorative in its upper register. On the west side (whose opening formed the main approach to the altar within) were carved scenes from Roman legend. To the right of the door (as one approached) would be seen the almost life-size figure of Aeneas, the mythical founder of the Roman race; he was depicted in the act of offering a sacrifice, his head devoutly covered. To the left of the doorway, balancing the Aeneas scene on the right, were Romulus and Remus, the twins who founded the city of Rome. The allegory is clear: Augustus is like Aeneas, Romulus and Remus - he, too, is a "founder" figure, a man who has ushered in a new age of peace for Rome and the Romans.

The east (or rear) wall also bore allegorical scenes, but of a slightly different nature. To one's right, again as you approached, was carved the figure of Roma herself, enthroned upon a cache of arms, symbolizing, of course, the great conquests of the Romans. To the left of the rear door was another female figure: Mother Italy herself, with two babies in her lap and symbols of fertility all around her; thus the amazing fertility of the Italian peninsula was celebrated.

The slightly longer north and south walls of the screen bore figures moving in a procession towards the western entrance. On the north wall were depicted, almost life-size, a group of magistrates, senators, and priests - some accompanied by their wives and children; these are individual portraits, not artistic stereotypes, and most likely represent the actual officials who took part in the ceremony that consecrated the altar. Balancing this scene, the south wall concentrates upon the imperial family: depicted are Augustus himself, leading his family towards the western door and dressed in the robes of a priest; Agrippa, Augustus's best friend; Julia, the daughter of Augustus and the wife of Agrippa; and, of course, Livia, the wife of the emperor who exercised a great deal of power at the imperial court. The children of the family were also shown, and, like the children carved on the north wall, are intended to symbolize the emperor's strong belief in the importance of the family unit.

Running all around the lower half of the outer screen wall is a frieze that nicely contrasts with the strong political images above: a simple motif, intricately carved, of tendrils and

acanthus leaves, and including tiny animals and insects. Whoever the sculptors were who created this astonishing tour de force, they deserve our lasting admiration!

This monument to peace, Rome, and Augustus has survived only in fragments, but in the 1930s a major reconstruction was made, and today the rebuilt Ara Pacis sits encased in a modern concrete box not far from the Tiber River. It is well worth a visit, for even the most jaded tourist is likely to be overwhelmed by its beauty. But the Ara Pacis is much more than a beautiful structure: it was intended as a monument to the man who brought Rome out of decades of bloody civil wars to an age of peace and prosperity, and who wanted to be remembered for that achievement. Rarely has art in the service of politics been so successful, both on the political and the artistic level.