



Myth at the heart of the Roman Empire

The Ara Pacis

Jessica Hughes:

Every time I see the Ara Pacis it just fills me with wonder. When I come in here I just imagine what it would have been like when the monument was officially unveiled, and what people would have thought when they saw it for the first time.

By 13 BCE, Augustus was at the height of his power and the empire was flourishing.

Jessica Hughes:

The Ara Pacis is a monument that was voted to Augustus in his honour by the Roman senate in 13BC which is when he'd come back from the provinces of Gaul and Spain. Now the message behind the Ara Pacis is one of peace, PAX, and it's the peace that Augustus himself brought to the Roman empire.

Jessica Hughes:

And everywhere you look on this monument, you just see images of this abundance and prosperity and fertility, so there are lots of images of plants and animals and all of these things that had been allowed to grow under the Augustan empire. And it's really showing all of nature intertwined and very productive and fertile.

Jessica Hughes:

There are images of the legendary founders of Rome, so mythical sacrifices are being commemorated, and celebrated, the birth of Romulus and Remus and their suckling by the she-wolf. And all of this imagery reminded the Romans who they were and where they'd come from and why they should be proud of that.

Chris Smith:

When Augustus comes to power his use of myth, his use of his genealogy, his use of these foundational myths of Rome isn't something that comes from nowhere, it's critically important to understand what Augustus does as part of the power play of the late republic, which involves critically using the foundational stories, and it's one of the keys to Augustus's success that he so successfully manipulates and monopolises those stories for his family and his person, making it very difficult afterwards for anyone else to get access to the constitutional foundations and beginnings of Rome.

Jessica Hughes:

What we see here is a man with a beard, an older man, with his head veiled, which is the typical Roman way of performing a sacrifice, this is a ritual gesture of costume, and he's next to an altar which is garlanded, and he's got attendants, and there's a sow in the forefront, which is the animal that's going to be sacrificed. This is really important because this is one of the first things that people would see when they were coming up to the Ara Pacis, and it actually gives them an image of what was going to happen inside on the inner altar. So, it's a scene of sacrifice. Now, people have argued about exactly which sacrifice this represents from Rome's early history and most people have tended to think that this is Aeneas, one of the legendary founders of Rome.

In the Aeneid, Virgil connects the destinies of Aeneas and Augustus.

Jessica Hughes:

We hear Aeneas receiving a prophesy that when he gets to Italy from Troy he'll know that he's reached the point where he's going to found this wonderful new city, when he sees a sow with 30 piglets. Now, we don't have the 30 piglets here but people have still thought that this

might be the moment that's represented. Other people think it could be Numa Pompilius, who's the 2nd king of Rome after Romulus.

Jessica Hughes:

Whichever one of these figures it is, it's very important that Rome's mythical history is being seen as a kind of prototype or paradigm for contemporary histories and this is something that we see all through the imagery of Augustus, this link back to figures like Numa, Romulus, Aeneas, as a way of showing continuity with the past and the strong foundations of the new Roman world.

Augustus created a lineage that connected his family, via Romulus, back to Aeneas.

Chris Smith:

Families at Rome, the patrician aristocratic families of Rome, need to explain where they come from, and one of the things that they all do is they choose an ancestor, and they drive their genealogy back to that ancestor. So the mythical activity at Rome is doing two different things. It's both explaining the foundation of the city, but it's also giving legitimacy to aristocratic families within the city, that they will use to make their play for power within the politics of their time.

Jessica Hughes:

It's actually quite hard to pick out which one Augustus is. His gesture mirrors that of the mythical figure on one of the panels who is also shown in the act of sacrifice, either Aeneas or possibly Numa. And, like this figure, Augustus has his hand extended to make an offering, and he also has his head veiled. So, it's a very subtle message, but a viewer looking at both of these panels would note that correspondence between the two figures, and it's a way of symbolically showing that they're linked. And that Augustus is performing an action that was previously performed by one of the legendary founders of his city.

Chris Smith:

One of the things that Augustus wants to do in his political settlement is to concentrate power in himself. To limit the number of people who can oppose or challenge him. By using his own person to draw all that power through, he's giving the Romans one story instead of the many that they had perhaps been used to at earlier times. And it's a marker of the success that Augustus has that we struggle to see alternatives. There are just tiny indications that some of these stories could be told in slightly different ways with other families being rather more important, other families claiming their access of the past. But almost all of that is brushed aside by one great narrative which runs Aeneas, Iulus, the Julii and through to Augustus.