Dynamis on the Ara Pacis: The Importance of Identity

The Ara Pacis has long been seen as one of the most important pieces of Augustan art, but its interpretation and meaning have been the arena for no end of debate regarding the identity of the *pax* of the Altar and the identities of the various personages presented on its highly detailed processional friezes. The one could perhaps be intimated by the other, if sufficient evidence can be marshaled to prove the identity of various figures. Traditional views of the interpretation of *pacis* in the Altar’s title have followed three distinct lines: that of the goddess Pax, that of an idyllic Augustan peace, and that of a more practical “pact,” indeed the earliest meaning of the Latin word (Momigliano 1942). In conjunction with this, the various unidentified figures on the processional friezes have been claimed to be anything from portraits of Gaius Caesar to unnamed Celtic Barbarians. This paper will attempt to argue that, by interpreting the female figure in the back register of the south processional frieze as Dynamis, contemporary queen of the Bosporus, we can better understand the relationships between some of these figures on the frieze, and thence have a better grasp of the meaning of *pax* in the Altar of Peace.  
 This paper will attempt to reconstruct the timetable surrounding the construction of the Altar with respect to Dynamis’ activities, via consulting certain primary sources such as Dio Cassius and the *Res* *Gestae*. An analysis of Dynamis’ life puts her as a co-ruling queen in the kingdom of the Bosporus in the years around the construction of the Ara Pacis, thus establishing her as a contemporary (Rostovtzeff 1919). The mission of Agrippa to the Bosporus, as part of a diplomatic intervention, coincides with the disappearance of Dynamis from the material record, and marks the period of the Altar’s construction. This could indicate Dynamis’ presence in Rome instead of the Bosporus at the time, (Rose, 1990), making her presence on the Altar a distinct possibility. This is strengthened by the importance of her relationship with Rome, and the greater history between the two nations (Mithridatic wars).  
 Viewing this figure as Dynamis points to the third interpretation of the Altar’s *pax*. By having a descendant of Mithridates Eupator, one of the most violent and outspoken opponents of Rome and a conductor of numerous bloody wars, the chance of this being an altar of “idyllic” peace is somewhat diminished. The lack of a specific inscription to the goddess Pax and the attribution of Augustus of an “Augustan Peace” indicate that this is not an altar *to* Pax herself (Augustus *Res Gestae,* Weinstock 1960). But having this queen, from a land long opposed to Rome, indebted to and friendly with Augustus, Agrippa, and Livia, present on the frieze effectively in contact with Agrippa, makes the interpretation of the *pax* being that of successful “pacts” overwhelmingly preeminent.  
 Dynamis’ presence in the back register, and her interaction with the front register, helps identify the importance of the figures surrounding her even as it strengthens and employs the motif of generational perpetuity oft assigned to the Altar’s iconography. Though in the back register, she is highly individualized. Her presence recalls the memory of her Grandfather as she herself reaches down to touch the head of a seldom-identified boy. This paper argues for him being her own son, which theory is bolstered by his own grasping of Agrippa’s cloak; since Dynamis, and thus perhaps her son as well, may have come with Agrippa to Rome. Thus we have the generational veneration, employed from Mithridates (without mentioning him specifically) through his granddaughter Dynamis, through her son (Aspurgos?), all being led by Agrippa (Rose 1990).  
 This should be able to successfully establish the identity of Dynamis for the eastern figure, and thus her son for the boy. Based on historical evidence, it clarifies certain unknowns about the processional frieze, strengthens the interpretation of the Altar’s meaning, and fits perfectly into the themes traditionally associated with the intent of the iconography of the Ara Pacis, hopefully showing how more individual interpretations of figures can bolster our understanding of the greater monument as a whole.

Works Cited

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