

Livia and the *Ara Pacis Augustae*: An Historical Interpretation of the *Tellus* Panel

The *Ara Pacis Augustae* is undoubtedly one of the most captivating, complex, and controversial monuments of ancient Rome. In particular, the panel located at the southeastern corner has long been a matter of scholarly debate. The panel depicts a matronly woman who holds two children on her lap and is flanked by two accompanying female figures. The traditional interpretation of this relief as a representation of *Tellus* or *Terra Mater* has found support among several scholars. However, other identities for the central figure have also been proposed, including *Italia*, *Ceres*, *Venus*, *Pax Augusta*, and *Cybele*. The purpose of this paper is not to support or defend any of these specific readings, but the important point to consider here is that all earlier identifications of the panel have been based upon mythological interpretations and have thereby neglected any historical component.

Certainly the iconography of the southeastern panel, with its emphasis on prosperity, abundance, and motherly devotion, can be connected with a variety of Roman goddesses. Yet this same imagery can also be associated with Augustus' wife, Livia. Scholars have observed this relationship between Livia and the *Tellus* Panel previously, yet their comments tend to be casual and cursory. In this paper, then, I hope to provide a more comprehensive examination of how and why Livia is assimilated into the *Tellus* Panel. I will argue that support for Livia's assimilation can be found in the relief's iconography as well as in the spatial relationship between the *Tellus* Panel and Livia's placement in the south processional frieze. Evidence for assimilation also comes from the *Ara Pacis* as a whole, since layering of historical and mythological meaning is evident elsewhere on the monument. Furthermore, there are other contemporary instances in which history is conflated with divine myth, both within Augustan art in general and specifically in Livia's portraiture. Thus, an assimilation of the empress within the *Tellus* Panel would not be without precedent. Finally, a subtle reference to Livia also serves an important function in Augustus' larger program of propaganda. By assimilating the wife of the emperor into this picture of fecundity, the panel underscores Augustus' social, ideological, and moral reforms and emphasizes the peace and harmony that Livia and her family brought to the empire. My paper will therefore argue that, in addition to a mythological interpretation, there is also an important historical reading of the *Tellus* Panel that has been largely overlooked in previous scholarship.