

## (ii) Ara Pacis - 2014

### (a) Why was the Ara Pacis built?

The Ara Pacis was built in honor of Augustus by the Senate from 13 BC to 9 BC. The altar not only commemorated the emperor's victories in Gaul and Spain but also celebrated the achievement of peace after decades of civil war and strife.

### (b) Give a detailed description of the Ara Pacis.

The Ara Pacis is first and foremost an altar. The altar is raised on a set of steps and is surrounded by a grand enclosed wall decorated with relief sculpture on both the inside and outside of it. This altar can be entered from both sides.

The Ara Pacis features a lot of nature imagery. The bottom half of paneling, which runs around the entire monument, is adorned with sculpture of acanthus, vine, and ivy leaves. The interior of the enclosed wall is carved to look like wooden fence posts on which hang bull's skulls, sacrificial bowls, and garlands represented in marble. The fruits of the garlands represent all four seasons blooming at once. This use of nature thriving reminds the onlooker that Augustus's reign brings life for the entire year-round sending a message of peace and prosperity.

The Ara Pacis also uses allegorical and mythological imagery. Represented on the east side of the interior is Tellus or Mother Earth with two babies in her lap. This image emphasizes her fertility which was an important value for Romans. Tellus could also represent peace which complements the image of war, Roma, on the opposing relief. A sheep and cow rest peacefully below the woman and an overturned jug represents air and water. Another relief is believed to show Trojan hero Aeneas, wearing a toga over his head, sacrificing a sow. The relief reminds the Romans of Aeneas's piety which was important to Augustus's image as he claimed to be his descendant. Other reliefs include that of Romulus and Remus being suckled by a she wolf.

Meanwhile, on each side of the wall of the altar of peace, two processions march from the back of the enclosed wall to the front. The north side fixated on magistrates, senators, and their families. Families with small children are present and groups are not separated. Figures at the front of the panels are depicted in high relief and those at the back, low relief, which creates subtle

perspective. Everyone in the procession is unique and individual for example, some are young, old, wearing different togas, different hair styles, and some sport beards.

The procession continues on the South side, but this time has the imperial family [Augustus, Livia, Agrippa.] All of Augustus grandchildren are present meaning Augustus's ideas of fertility and children were well reflected. The children also allowed the artist to vary the height of the monument and make it less monotonous. There is also a huge number of figures changing stance or direction to add variety like the veiled lady shushing a young couple and the child tugging on a toga of an adult. Augustus is also present with a veil over his head, but it isn't obvious who he is. The figures are caught in a moment in time when all was well under Augustus.

### **(c) Why is the Ara Pacis such a famous structure?**

The Ara Pacis provides us with a source of the Grecian style of that era. While its frieze has been compared to the Parthenon's, the Ara Pacis has a distinct Roman style. The standard of Roman portraiture is magnificent. The use of high and low relief to create depth as well as the "vivid realism" of the figures on the frieze is very Roman. The details of the figures, like the child tugging on the toga, were also very important components of Roman portraiture during this era.

It is also a brilliant piece of historical evidence. The Ara Pacis reveals the customs of everyday Romans and their lifestyles. We learn about how they dressed, worshipped, and their family values which is clear in their faces of pietas and dignitas. The frieze itself is supposed to capture a moment in time. It is documentation of the procession that took place the day of the Ara Pacis's reveal.

Finally, the Ara Pacis provides us with historical evidence about Augustus. The message of the author is simple. Peace, prosperity, and the divine origins of the emperor. While it may not be obvious, the altar is a propaganda piece, designed to improve his popularity. The images of peace and prosperity tell the Romans that he has brought that to Rome after years of civil war. His own figure being compared to that of Aeneas with them both wearing veils hints that he is divine and descended from the gods without explicitly saying so. Finally, his choice to be seen but not shown demonstrates the idea of "primus inter pares" or first among equals. Unlike later emperors, Augustus was not eager to explicitly appear better than everyone else.