

Myth and Symbols of Power

Learning Objectives:

- To understand the links between myth and the portrayal of power
- To understand the significance of how and why myth was presented in art to demonstrate power



Introduction

As we have seen in **Myth and the City: Foundation Stories**, powerful and influential cities such as Rome and Athens sought to have a good origin story, perhaps referencing a good reason for their rise to power; or, better yet, quoting a prophecy or some suggestion that the city's dominance was destined to be, or the will of the gods. In a similar vein, myth was portrayed in such a way as to demonstrate the power of a city or people, through art and architecture as much as the literature that recorded the foundation stories. Not only could an impressive structure show the construction skills of the people, but the subject matter of the art that adorned it was often chosen to further emphasise the power of that people, and often it was myth that was the first choice.

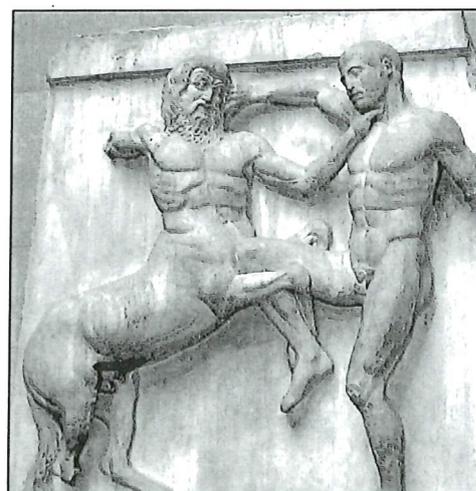
Greece

The Centauromachy

The Centauromachy was a mythological battle between Centaurs, violent creatures who were half man half horse, and Lapiths, a legendary Greek tribe. The two both inhabited Thessaly, in northern Greece, and were neighbours who often fought, but the Centauromachy refers to a specific battle that occurred after the Centaurs were invited to the wedding feast of the Lapith King Pirithous. The story goes that the Centaurs drank wine, but, being unused to it, they became drunk and started a fight with the Lapiths. After a tough fight, the Lapiths succeeded and drove the surviving Centaurs away. Theseus himself was present at the banquet as a guest and participated in the fight, killing many Centaurs and, therefore, greatly aiding the Lapiths. The fight between the Lapiths and the Centaurs is often depicted as representing the battle between civilisation, represented by the Lapiths, and barbarism, represented by the Centaurs.

On the Parthenon

The Centauromachy is the focus of the southern metopes of the Parthenon. Here this conflict is depicted, with each metope focusing on an individual fight between a Lapith and a Centaur. The focus is very much on the combat itself, with different poses chosen in each sculpture to show Lapith and Centaur embroiled in the fight. The choice of placing this subject matter on the Parthenon is powerful. As we have previously discussed, this temple was a symbol of Athenian power, and this theme is continued in the choice of subject matter here. The general theme of Centaur barbarism versus Lapith civilisation has been interpreted in this case as a specific metaphor for the victory that the Athenians (or Greeks in general) had over the Persians, who represented barbarism in the eyes of the Greeks. The Centaurs interrupted a wedding ceremony, demonstrating their disrespect of tradition, and so could reflect the Persian destruction of Athenian temples that occurred during the Persian Wars. The presence of Theseus in the story as well as on the metopes refers to the specific role that the Athenians played, or at least that they wished to emphasise to the world to demonstrate their power. Theseus's help is crucial to the victory of the Lapiths, just as the Athenians would wish to portray their role as crucial to the survival of the Greeks.



One of the Parthenon metopes depicting a Centaur (left) fighting a Lapith (right).

The Amazonomachy

The Amazonomachy was a series of mythological battles between various Greeks and the Amazons, a legendary race of warrior women who lived in the east. The Amazons were usually portrayed as enemies of the Greeks and featured in many myths, often pitted against famous Greek heroes. The particular Amazonomachy that concerns us is the subject of the Bassae Frieze. This depicts the stories of the Trojan Amazonomachy and the Heracleian Amazonomachy. The former occurred during the legendary Trojan War as the Amazons came to help the Trojans to fight the Greeks. During this conflict, the Greek hero Achilles killed the Amazon Queen. The latter is the story of Heracles' attempt to acquire the girdle of Hippolyta, the Queen of the Amazons, for one of his Labours, which resulted in a battle and Heracles ultimately gaining the girdle. Similarly to the Centauromachy, the fight with the Amazons is often portrayed as a metaphor for civilisation versus barbarism, with the Amazons representing the latter. They were depicted as very warlike, with war their primary focus, and, therefore, a contrast to the Greeks, who also prided themselves on their culture as much as their skill in war – this set them apart from the barbarians.

On the Bassae Frieze

The Bassae Frieze is a marble sculpture which originally decorated the interior of the *cella* (inner chamber) of the Temple of Apollo at Bassae in southern Greece. It was built by locals as thanks for the end of a plague that had devastated the region. According to an ancient source, one of the architects who designed it was Iktinos, who had also worked on the Parthenon. As mentioned above, both the Trojan and the Heracleian Amazonomachy are depicted. In both



Part of the Bassae Frieze showing Greeks fighting Amazons.

cases, the story develops along the frieze from the start of the fighting to, in both cases, the eventual Greek victory. The battle of the civilised Greeks versus the barbarian Amazons has been taken for a metaphor to the Greek victories against the Persians in the Persian Wars. There were two wars between Greeks and Persians, and so the two separate battles against the Amazons could be seen to reflect this. Again, this was an impressive portrayal of Greek power in the face of great adversity. While the Amazons are ultimately defeated, they were known for their prowess in war and so were difficult opponents. The Greek victory against the Persians likewise was a great achievement for the Greeks, given that a small band of city states defeated an empire that spanned the entire Middle East.

Rome

The Prima Porta of Augustus

The Prima Porta statue of Augustus is a famous statue of the Roman leader from his reign. It was discovered in Prima Porta, north of Rome, at the home of Augustus' wife. It might be a replica of an original. The statue was commissioned during his reign and would have originally been displayed in a public place in Rome itself. Augustus had ultimately succeeded Julius Caesar after winning a civil war which made him have ultimate control in Rome, though he avoided titles such as King or Emperor. However, Rome was more used to being a republic and so his position was a precarious one; he had to demonstrate himself worthy of being in charge but at the same time avoid being considered a king, a position disliked by the Romans; Caesar had, after all, been assassinated because some in the Senate thought he had become too powerful. As part of Augustus' plan to strengthen his position, this statue

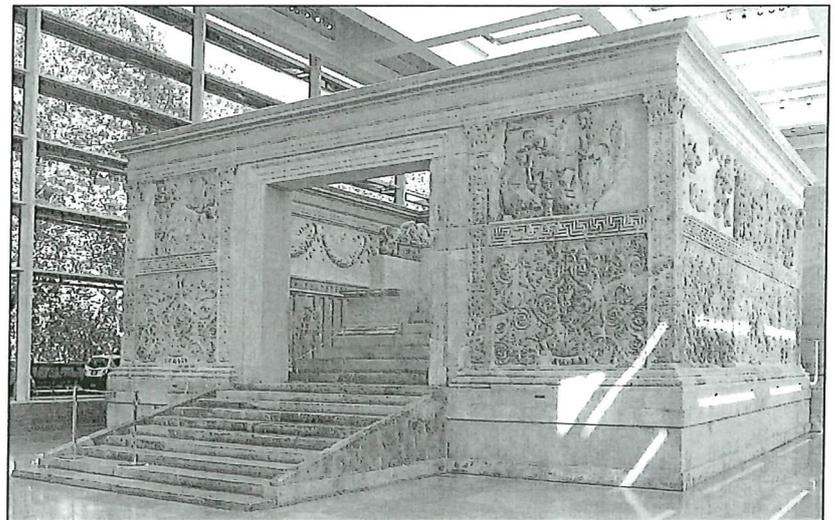
served to remind the Romans of his greatness. On the breastplate is depicted the return of the legionary standards from Parthia (modern-day Iran). Several years prior, a Roman expedition to Parthia had been defeated and its standards, a symbol of Roman power, lost. Augustus was able to recover them, albeit diplomatically, and this was a huge boost to his standing and one that he was keen to emphasise. There are also references to his divine heritage: Cupid, the son of Venus, is at his feet, and both Caesar and Augustus claimed descent from the goddess Venus herself. Another link is that he is portrayed as barefoot, simultaneously presenting a break with the overall military look he has but also hinting again at his divinity, for normally only the gods would be depicted barefoot in statues. While Augustus never claimed to actually be a god (though this became popular after him, and he himself was deified – made into a god – upon his death), he did claim divine heritage, with which came prestige and a good way to justify his success and position. By displaying such a statue in the centre of Rome, Augustus would have demonstrated both his achievements and his power to the people, and so hopefully justifying his position of power to the Romans.



Augustus of Prima Porta

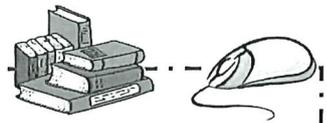
The Ara Pacis

The Ara Pacis is an altar in the city of Rome that was dedicated to Pax, the Roman goddess of peace. It was built to celebrate the return of Augustus from his campaigns in Spain and Gaul in 13 BC. It stood on the Campus Martius (the Field of Mars), an important public space in Rome which was also home to the Pantheon. Depicted on the altar is a procession of senators and other officials as well as the family of Augustus, perhaps the very one that marked the event the altar's construction celebrated. Interestingly, while Augustus himself is there, he is



The reassembled Ara Pacis

not as prominent as later emperors would make themselves on such buildings. This demonstrated his need to present a strong portrayal of himself while trying not to appear too prominent and powerful. The dedication of the altar to peace is also significant given that the period before Augustus rose to power was dominated by a lot of civil war. Augustus wished to emphasise that he had brought peace to Rome, and crucially an end to the infighting among Romans. There are also mythological scenes depicted on the altar: that of Romulus and Remus being suckled by the she-wolf and of Aeneas making a sacrifice. Both are significant as Augustus sought to be related to them in some way; Aeneas because Augustus claimed descent from his family, and Romulus as Augustus sought to present his rule as a new beginning for Rome.



Independent Research

There are many other such buildings that evoked myth to present power. Research one from the Greek world and one from the Roman world and describe how they do so. Offer any relevant comparisons between the two as well if appropriate.

Here are some ideas of buildings that you could research:

Greek

- Temple of Hephaestus, Athens
- Monument of Lysicrates, Athens

Roman

- Temple of Janus, Rome
- The Arch of Septimius Severus, Rome

Consolidation Questions

- What did the conflicts between Centaurs and Lapiths and Amazons and Greeks represent?
- What were both the Prima Porta statue and the Ara Pacis aiming to achieve?
- Briefly explain one difference between the Greek and Roman sculptures discussed.



Source Questions

Classical source-based units include **unseen sources**. These are sources you are not expected to have seen before as they are not on the prescribed list. However, you will be expected to discuss them using the skills you have.

- Look at the source below.



Athenian coin,
fifth century BC

Now answer the following questions:

- Which mythological elements are depicted here?
- What is the significance of this art form?

- Read the source below.

Now turn your two eyes in this direction and look at this family of yours, your own Romans. Here is Caesar, and all the sons of Iulus about to come under the great vault of the sky. Here is the man whose coming you so often hear prophesied, here he is, Augustus Caesar, son of a god, the man who will bring back the golden years to the fields of Latium... and extend Rome's empire... Hercules himself did not make his way to so many lands...

Virgil's Aeneid, Book 6 788–802. In the underworld, Anchises shows Aeneas his future.

How does this source use myth to increase the standing of Augustus?

