PERGAMON AND THE HELLENISTIC KINGDOMS OF THE ANCIENT WORLD

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THE PERGAMON ALTAR: ARCHITECTURE, SCULPTURE, AND MEANING

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"ARA MARMOREA MAGNA": THE GREAT MARBLE ALTAR AND ITS SCULPTURES

To understand the architecture and sculpture of the Pergamon Altar and its potential meaning, one must begin with the justly famous reconstruction of the altar in the Pergamon Museum, Berlin (fig. 53).[1] Unprepared visitors to the museum are often overwhelmed by the monumentality of the altar within its grand, theatrical setting, and yet it bears remembering that only the west side of the altar has been rebuilt at its original size. Five steps rise from the nearly square foundation (36 meters wide by 34 meters deep) to support a monumental pedestal, a massive substructure on which rests the most spectacular feature of the entire monument: the 2.3-meter-high Great Frieze. In terms of sculptural quality and iconographic audacity, the Great Frieze not only marks the crowning achievement of Greek relief sculpture—a medium that had been developed by Greek artists in marble since the seventh century B.C.—but also stands as one of the finest works in the history of world art.

Fig. 53. Reconstructed west side of the Pergamon Altar, Pergamon Museum, Berlin

Fig. 54. Telephos Frieze, detail showing Telephos receiving arms from Auge

The Great Frieze is carved in extremely high relief and crowned by a large projecting cornice. Gracefully fluted columns with Ionic capitals surround the entire altar structure, whose interior is designed as a peristyle courtyard, similar to those of the royal Attalid palaces nearby on the acropolis of Pergamon. The interior walls of this beautifully proportioned space were decorated with a smaller frieze—different in style from the Great Frieze and much more intimate in character—illustrating the adventurous life and deeds of Telephos (fig. 54; see also cats. 126, 127), son of Herakles and founder of the city of Pergamon. Alongside Zeus himself, this Greek hero was a central figure of the Great Frieze, and his prominent appearance in the smaller frieze provides the mythological link between the two strips of relief sculpture.

Originally a large number of sculptures in the round, representing the Olympian gods, stood on the peristyle's flat roof; Athena (cat. 116), Poseidon (cat. 117), and Apollo are still preserved. Along with their chariots and entourage, these roof figures, or acroteria, were depicted just after the moment when, according to myth, they arrive at the battlefield around the peak of Mount Olympus to await the brutal combat of the Gigantomachy: the battle for cosmic supremacy between the Olympians and a race of primordial giants, shown so vividly in the Great Frieze. Especially impressive when viewed on the roof of the altar must have been the well-preserved statue of Poseidon, represented with his hair still wet from a rapid journey across the ocean in his Triton-drawn chariot. Poseidon's chariot was also shown on the north side of the Great Frieze together with spectacular sea monsters. Other well-preserved acroteria include horses (cat. 120), centaurs, Tritons (cats. 118, 119), and griffins.

Within the Great Frieze itself, more than one hundred over-lifesize figures of unbelievably high artistic invention and sculptural quality crowd together in dramatic action. These almost freestanding figures are represented in a wide variety of

Fig. 55. Great Frieze, detail showing Athena battling the giants

scenes and depictions of fierce fighting. A number of goddesses join the battle (fig. 55); although they are seldom shown physically overcoming their enemies, their dominance is made evident through their cool and commanding gestures. In contrast, the bodies and faces of the giants reflect with unsparing realism the pain and suffering inflicted upon them by their adversaries (fig. 56; see also illustration on p. 26). It is nothing less than an artistic miracle, and an almost unbelievable achievement of the unknown artist responsible for these figures, that no fighting group resembles another; differences in clothing, weaponry, hair, and even footwear are elaborated down to the smallest detail. These included many attributes that were added in metal and enhanced by polychromy, of which only faint traces have been found: mainly red pigment to indicate the giants' gruesome, bleeding wounds.

The battle of the gods and the giants was a popular theme in Greek art from Classical times onward, and the monumental gathering of the Olympian gods on the altar's roof clearly alludes to Classical prototypes, such as those known from Greek vases of the fifth and fourth centuries B.C. A primary literary source for the Gigantomachy is Hesiod's *Theogony* (Creation of the Gods), an epic poem dating to the seventh century B.C., but the version depicted on the Great Frieze was derived from contemporary Hellenistic poetry in addition to older narratives, including allusions to Homer.[2] The myth of the Gigantomachy tells the story of the earth mother, Gaia, who from the blood of the emasculated Uranos gives birth to the giants—a monstrous, aggressive race imbued with great strength—who then attempt to overthrow the reign of the Olympians and rule the world. An oracle predicts that the gods will be able to resist the giants only if a mortal can be persuaded to fight on their side. Not surprisingly, this role falls to the hero Herakles, whose figure in the Great Frieze (destroyed in antiquity) was next to that of Zeus, one of the most prominent positions in the entire composition.

Fig. 56. Great Frieze, detail showing Triton, son of Poseidon, battling a fallen giant

The East Frieze, on the back of the building—but actually the first section seen by ancient visitors as they entered the surrounding walled sanctuary—was reserved for the Olympians. Hera participates in the battle on the left, and Herakles, Zeus (fig. 57), Athena, and Ares fight at center and on the right. Visual references to the genealogical relationships among the gods pull the narrative around the corners of the frieze and give it a certain continuity. On the southeast corner, for example, appear the names of goddesses such as Leto, Hekate, Phoebe, and Asteria, while on the northeast corner Aphrodite fights together with Ares. The gods of day and night—Eos (goddess of the dawn), Helios (sun god), and Selene (goddess of the moon)—wage war on the South Frieze, and the sea gods, who fight on the western side, spill over onto the adjacent northern corner and onto the monumental flight of stairs leading to the peristyle courtyard, with its sacrificial altar at center. The North Frieze provides the battlefield for both the followers of Ares (god of war) and the Fates and the Furies (the goddesses of destiny and retribution, respectively).

THE ARCHITECTURAL FORM OF THE PERGAMON ALTAR AND ITS MEANING

Other than the first publication of the architecture of the Pergamon Altar, in 1906,[3] archaeological research has tended to concern itself less with the typological and semantic derivation of the monument's architectural form than with the interpretation of the two famous relief friezes described above. The following lines will therefore focus on a synthesizing explanation of the interaction between the altar's architectural form and its sculptural decoration.

When the first two fragments—containing the scenes of the gods' battle against the giants—arrived in Berlin, in 1871, archaeologist Alexander Conze immediately concluded that they must have originated from the large marble altar mentioned

Fig. 57. Great Frieze, detail showing Zeus battling the giants

in a late Roman compendium, the *Liber memorialis* of Lucius Ampelius. Among the text's catalogued *miracula mundi*, or "wonders of the world," Conze found the following reference to a monument that, evidently, was already famous in antiquity: "Pergamo ara marmorea magna, alta pedes quadraginta cum maximis sculpturis, continet autem gigantomachiam" (In Pergamon there is a huge marble altar, forty feet tall with large sculptures; it also includes a Gigantomachy).[4] Thus, the monument had a generic name even before scholars began to reconstruct a picture of it through excavations.

Jakob Schrammen, one of the original excavators of the altar, credited fellow excavator Richard Bohn "for re-erecting before us the architectural superstructure of the ruined edifice from the jumbled mass of broken, disjunct building elements."[5] Schrammen's 1906 publication of the altar's architecture, which added newly incorporated architectural members, gave further credence to Bohn's proposed reconstruction.[6] In 1901, the French archaeologist and numismatist Antoine Héron de Villefosse had identified what is still the only ancient depiction of the altar, found on the reverse of a coin from the reign of Septimius Severus (cat. 28). The image shows the front of the Great Altar, although not naturalistically proportioned.[7] "It can be discerned," wrote Schrammen, "that a broad flight of steps led up to a platform on which stood a sacrificial altar roofed by a baldachin. Right and left of the stairway, at the height of the platform, four columns on each side carry an entablature upon which figures stand. Underneath these rows of columns are two pedestals, each of which carries a huge zebu."[8] Yet Schrammen did not let himself get carried away by the discovery, highly interesting though it was: "As pleasing as this find is, and however important it is for confirming what we know of the altar's form from the architectural remains, no details of arrangement can be discovered from this depiction; indeed it would rather seem to me as though the monument, as already reassembled from the remains, might contribute more to an understanding of the face design of the coin than the latter does to reconstruction of the altar building."[9] Indeed, it soon became clear to those studying the finds that there was little to be gained from comparisons not

only with the coin but also with other known altar buildings, since the Pergamon Altar was, and to this day remains, the sole monument of its kind.

For many years scholars believed that the Pergamon Altar derived typologically from Ionian altar buildings, a tradition dating back to the Archaic period. (Typically, these buildings comprise a massive podium for the sacred precinct with the sacrificial altar on top; a broad flight of steps flanked by protruding walls, for easy access; and, on top of the podium, a *temenos*, or sanctuary wall, surrounding the relatively small altar.) This basic assertion was repeated in an almost mantra-like fashion by scholars, yet as early as 1978 archaeologist Klaus Stähler had identified certain structural features that distinguish the edifice of the Pergamon Altar from the development of the Ionian altar.[10] For one, the architectural framing of the altar proper forms an enclosed court, with an interior facade and a prospect-like exterior facade above the monumental stairway (fig. 58). The outward-facing colonnaded halls on top of the socle are also deep enough to step inside. Compared to the at-best "implied" inner halls of older courtyard altars, they have a true spatial dimension, and the column-framed court on the altar-building podium is conceived as a fully formed peristyle.

In addition, the lofty podium of the Pergamon Altar is completely at variance with the scale of older monumental altars in Ionia. It provides the colonnaded court around the sacrificial altar with a plateau, for example, not just a flat socle, as is the case with earlier monumental altars, beginning with the Poseidon altar of Cape Monodendri (6th century B.C.) and continuing to the Poseidon altar of Tenos (2nd century B.C.). Moreover, the exterior design of the colossal podium is highly sophisticated and graphically illustrative compared to those examples. From these observations, Stähler concluded that the altar building could not be explained by reference to itself alone, owing to the alleged lack of starting points for an interpretation. Yet the sculptural decoration and, especially, the architectural form of the Pergamon Altar contain clues to its meaning that have yet to be recognized.

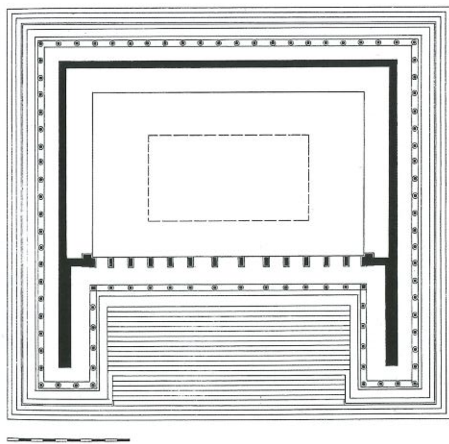

Fig. 58. Plan of the Great Altar

A RARITY IN GREEK ARCHITECTURE: THE STOA WITH PROJECTING WINGS

In antiquity, visitors entered the sanctuary of the Pergamon Altar from the east, as noted above, and first saw the rear of the altar. Once they had passed along the north or south side, where they encountered the extraordinary scenes from the Gigantomachy, they stood in front of the monumental flight of stairs framed by two long *risalits*, or projecting wings, and crowned by an Ionic colonnade. Only now did they realize that the building, which was hermetically sealed on three sides, could be entered, and that the dramatic, tumultuous action depicted in the reliefs of the Great Frieze culminated in the tapering ends on either side of the stairway. If we do not wish to speculate about what associations this unusual architectural ensemble may have evoked in those who saw it in antiquity, then to understand the altar we must instead search for typological comparisons among entrance facades in earlier Greek architecture. In doing so, it becomes clear that colonnaded halls with precisely symmetrical projecting wings were rare and, in terms of semantics, a highly specific motif in classical architecture.[11]

John James Coulton, who has examined the typology of wing-*risalit* stoas in depth,[12] cites as the oldest specimen the great Stoa of Zeus Eleutherios in the Agora at Athens, dating from the last third of the fifth century B.C. He compares this monumental Zeus-dedicated edifice with other classical ensembles that combine a central building with wings of different lengths and designs, such as the asymmetrical propylaea of Mnesikles and the Brauronion, both on the Athenian Acropolis; the asymmetrical stoa in Brauron itself; "and possibly some sort of paraskenia at the Theatre of Dionysos."[13] The latter example is perhaps most compelling, because there are indications that the stage of the high Classical Theater of Dionysos, on the south slope of the Athenian Acropolis, indeed incorporated *paraskenia* (side stages, or wing buildings) in its original wood superstructure in the second half of the fifth century B.C. Although this cannot be proved archaeologically, stage practice—insofar as what can be inferred from the dramatic plays of the three great tragedians of the fifth century B.C. and from Old Comedy—suggests the existence of such *paraskenia*. This supposition is further supported by the stone *skene* (a background building attached to the stage)

Fig. 59. Cup with the Gigantomachy, detail showing Zeus driving his quadriga into battle before the gates of his palace on Olympus, as suggested by the large Doric column in the background. Greek (Athenian), Late Archaic period, ca. 490 B.C. Attributed to the Brygos Painter. Terracotta, red-figure, H. 5⅜ in. (13.7 cm). Antikensammlung, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin (F 2293)

added at the end of the fourth century B.C. by Lykurgos, the politician in charge of Athenian finance and building policy after 338 B.C. Indeed, the manifestly Classicist and restorative tendencies of the Lykurgian building program make it not unlikely that when fifth-century plays came to be performed again in the fourth century B.C.—by which time they were already perceived as canonical—the type of stage associated with them had likewise been monumentalized in stone. Hence, in the Athens of the late fifth century B.C., in addition to the Stoa of Zeus, the only other structure with this type of symmetrical wing-*risalit* stoa was the *paraskenia* stage of the Theater of Dionysos.

Virtually all theater historians believe that this specific form of the Classical stage represented a palace. The evidence for this supposition comes from images of stages on Greek vases and, above all, from the fact that in two-thirds of the surviving classical tragedies the action is set in front of a palace or temple. The great Stoa of Zeus Eleutherios, erected in the Athenian Agora in 430–420 B.C., can thus be seen as a quotation, in form and format, of a palace facade that would have been familiar to the public from contemporary theater, and one that was meant to allude to the mythical abode of the supreme god. Thus, by the beginning of the fourth century B.C. at the latest, the symmetrical wing-*risalit* stoa had acquired the connotation of a "palace." Translated into real architecture, the *paraskenia* stage makes its first appearance in the safely reconstructable marble *skene* building of the Athenian Theater of Dionysos, commissioned by Lykurgos and built between 338 and about 331 B.C.

In the third century B.C., we encounter buildings that combine the wing-*risalit* stoa with the architectural motifs of the stairway and the peristyle court, creating a thoroughly "theatrical" monumental facade. The stoa and propylon of the grandiose Sanctuary of Athena Lindia at Lindos on Rhodes, the most significant testimony to this development, link the freestanding wing-*risalit* stoa of the Classical style with the composite structure that the Pergamon Altar building represents. In the case of both the propylaea of Lindos and the Pergamon Altar, the monumental *risalit* facade is backed by a colonnaded court, but only at Pergamon does it form a fully enclosed peristyle. If we take the concept that the *risalit* facade of the Pergamon Altar represents a palace and extend it to the column-framed interior courtyard, then it becomes apparent that such peristyles must have been a regular component of Hellenistic palace buildings, such as those at Vergina and Demetrias but also at Pergamon itself. Indeed, some peristyle structures of Hellenistic *basileia*, as Wolfram Hoepfner has noted, are comparable to the peristyle of the Pergamon Altar, even in terms of architectural detail.[14]

THE PERGAMON ALTAR AND HOMER'S PALACE OF ZEUS

If we consider the evidence gathered here, then there are grounds to suppose that the colonnaded facade and peristyle court of the Pergamon Altar represent a visualization in stone of the mythical palace of Zeus on Mount Olympus in Thessaly—as the ancient Greeks imagined it—assembled at Pergamon from the repertory of forms and types of Classical and Hellenistic architecture. That the father of the gods and mortals dwelled in a magnificently appointed palace on Olympus was a fact known to every Greek from Homer's epics—especially the famously erudite Pergamenians—all the more so during the Hellenistic period, a time of intensive study of Homer and, indeed, when a cult of Homer flourished. The abode of the supreme god is

Fig. 60. Inner side of the right (south) *risalit* of the Great Altar at Pergamon, detail showing the eagle of Zeus attacking a serpent-legged giant

mentioned several times in both of Homer's great poems. In a vivid picture of the palace of Zeus from the *Odyssey* (4.71–79), for instance, Homer chooses the word *aulé*, meaning an open courtyard or hall of a lord's residence, whose essential furnishings included an altar.

It is unquestionably an archaizing, if not a *Homerizing*, trait of the Pergamene sanctuary of Zeus that the supreme god was worshiped there not in a conventional temple but at an open-air altar, as at Olympia, on the Acropolis of Athens, and in many genuinely old sanctuaries of Greece. Determined to lend their new sanctuary of Zeus the greatest possible degree of venerable antiquity, the Pergamenians, it seems, not only built a Homeric ash altar, possibly modeled on the one at Olympia, but also framed it and heightened it by means of a palace sanctuary composed of Classical and Hellenistic architectural forms. They may have gone even further and imagined the spectacular setting of the altar building to be an allusion to the mythological location of the palace of Zeus. This interpretation finds solid support in the long iconographic tradition of the Gigantomachy in Greek art, for beginning in the fifth century B.C., Greek artists—in a radical break with literary tradition, which sites the battle in the Phlegraean Fields or on the Pallene peninsula—regularly showed the battle taking place on the summit of Mount Olympus, even directly in front of the palace of Zeus (fig. 59).

In the interpretative model proposed here, then, the relief-decorated socle of the Pergamon Altar is an allusion to the steep summit zone of Mount Olympus, crowned with the palace of Zeus, and around whose exterior walls rages the savage battle between the gods and the giants in its decisive stage. The deep relief carving of the figures, which achieve maximum possible detachment from the architectural field surrounding them, reinforces the impression of the tempestuous, endlessly surging flood of nearly freestanding sculptures encircling the podium.

The breathless drama of the battle as it plays out in the altar's series of fighting groups reaches a climax in the tapered ends of the Great Frieze on either side of the stairs. The design of these sections, which in antiquity the visitor saw only when ascending the stairway, is frequently misunderstood. On the inward-facing sides of the north and south *risalits*, some of the giants have almost reached the Ionic colonnaded facade of the palace on the summit of Olympus and are about to storm the peristyle court containing the altar of Zeus, the imaginary seat of the father of the gods, but at the last possible moment they are halted by Zeus's eagles. In the better-preserved southern end section, on the right-hand *risalit*, the eagle of Zeus has sunk its claws into the lower jaw of a serpent-leg of a winged giant (fig. 60). On the opposite side of the stairway (figs. 61, 62), two giants have charged past the sea god Okeanos and his now all

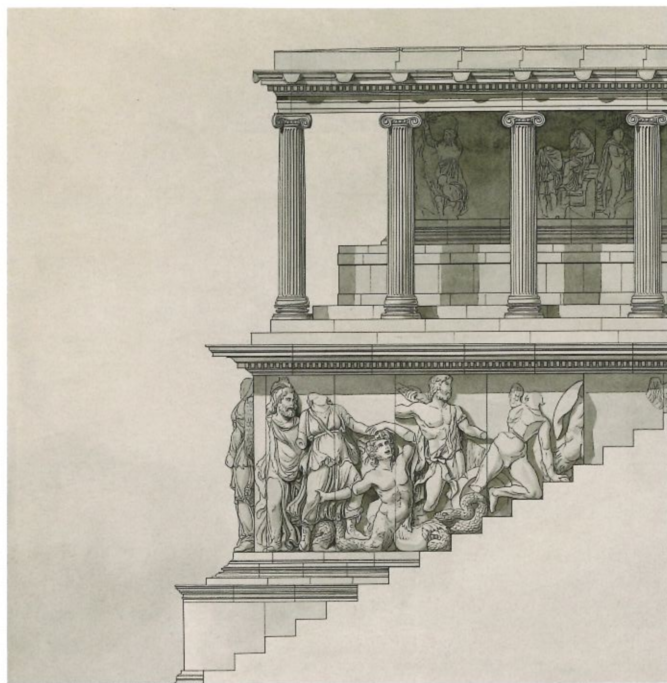

Fig. 61. Reconstruction of the north *risalit*

but completely destroyed spouse, Tethys. Defending themselves from the sea gods at their rear, the giants are on the point of breaking through to the altar courtyard; the giant on the left, as he rushes forward, grasps a rock lying on a step in order to hurl it at the supreme deity (fig. 63). Here, too, Zeus (in the form of an eagle) is barely able to prevent the giants from bursting through. Consequently, it is the ends of the Great Frieze, on the inner faces of the *risalits*, that show how the battle for world dominion was decided by the intervention of Zeus at the gates of his own palace on Mount Olympus. At the same time, it is clearly a celebration of Zeus as the victorious force in the Gigantomachy; not only does he appear in person and in all his majesty in the East Frieze (see fig. 57), he also battles against the giants in the form of an eagle at least four times in the frieze as a whole. Nowhere else in the altar did the master of the Great Frieze weave architecture and sculptural action so closely together as in these end sections on either side of the stairway. In an almost spectral manner, the larger-than-life figures seem to leave the cold stone, detach themselves from the relief ground, step out onto the stairs, and stand in front of their human spectators—quite literally on the same level.

Fig. 63. North *risalit*, detail showing Okeanos fighting two giants charging up the stairs

Unlike the giants, who were decisively repulsed at the last moment, it was granted to the Pergamenians and their visitors to enter the palace and altar of their victorious patron deity to give thanks and offer sacrifices. The inner courtyard of this sanctuary of Zeus—which we can probably take to be a stylized reflection of the contemporaneous royal palace at Pergamon—was decorated with a frieze that, as noted above, celebrates the hero Herakles in the presence of Zeus, imagined to be ever-present at the sacrificial altar. As savior of the world, without whose help the gods would have failed—and also as the father of Telephos, the city's founder—Herakles is accorded the place of honor in the Homeric-inspired *aulé*, the court of Zeus. This high-profile role links into the history of Pergamon and its kings, who built a palace for Zeus the Savior here, not far from their own residence, much as the Athenians may have done in the late fifth century B.C. when erecting the Stoa of Zeus Eleutherios, preserver of their liberty. Just as Zeus defeated the giants in a colossal struggle, so the Pergamenians, under the leadership of their kings, defeated the barbarian Gauls at the very gates of their city by dint of a supreme effort.

Opposite: Fig. 62. Inner side of the north (left) *risalit*, detail showing Okeanos and Tethys battling the giants