

The Altar of Zeus at Pergamon
An Analysis of the Classicizing Features
In the Gigantomachy Frieze

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On the Great Altar of Pergamon, a colossal frieze was carved depicting a violent battle between the gods and the giants for the supremacy of the earth. The construction of this Altar was probably begun around 180 B.C. and completed by 160 B.C.¹ However, many of the frieze figures and compositional groups appear to derive from classical motifs developed around 300 years earlier and allude to an artistic style which expresses the passionless serenity of fifth century Attic art, in particular to the Parthenon.² Why the Pergamane sculptors included classicizing elements in this Altar frieze and what some of the elements were, are the main concerns of this paper.

The Altar of Zeus at Pergamon, considered one of the most important monuments of the Hellenistic age, was probably begun ca. 10 B.C. by King Eumenes II on the Acropolis towering above the surrounding plains of present-day Turkey.³ The Altar, a victory monument, was dedicated to Zeus and Athena in gratitude for their assistance in the war against the barbarian Galatians threatening the Pergamane Empire from the east. The monument was centrally positioned on a great terrace dedicated to Zeus which was entered through a gateway from the east. The original structure was almost square, measuring 36.44 meters on the east and west sides and 34.20 meters on the north and south.⁴ (Figure 1) A grand stairway cut into this nearly square sub-structure from the west, thus forming projecting longitudinal wings to either side. This stairway led to an inner courtyard set on a high podium which contained the sacrificial altar. An elegant Ionic colonnade ran along the outer perimeters of the building, surrounding the courtyard and defining the shape of the monument.

The dominating decorative feature of the structure was the Gigantomachy frieze which encircled the outer walls of the monument below the colonnade. (Figure 2) This almost two-meter high frieze rested on a pedestal and small basement and could be approached by climbing a series of five steps placed around the monument.⁵ On the two projecting wings flanking the entrance stairway, the colossal relief figures broke out of their enclosing frame to climb and crawl the actual steps used by the worshippers. This new and revolutionary idea which mingled the world of art with real life probably served to dramatically involve the spectator in the extraordinary cosmic battle taking place around them.⁶ The sheer magnitude of the structure, its imposing entrance stairway and the splendour of its decoration combine to invest this monument with exceptional grandeur.

The Gigantomachy theme selected for the Altar frieze was a popular subject in Greek art, appearing frequently in sculptured pediments, friezes and vase-paintings.⁷ Indeed, on the Parthenon alone this battle was depicted three different times; on its eastern metopes, inside the shield of the cult statue Athena Parthenos and woven into the peplos of the original wood image of Athena. The scale of the Gigantomachy on the Altar of Zeus, however, was unprecedented compared to other

¹ J. Pollitt, Art in the Hellenistic Age (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), pp. 97, 309.

² Pollitt, p. 105

³ Pollitt, pp. 97, 309

⁴ Eva Schmidt, The Great Altar of Pergamon (London: Peter Owen, 1965), p. 7.

⁵ Schmidt, p. 7.

⁶ Robertson, p. 195.

⁷ Jane Henle, Greek Myths, A Vase Painter's Notebook (Bloomington; Indiana University Press, 1973), p. 47.

battle representations which normally included only the twelve Olympian gods and their opponents. On the Great altar frieze more than 100 over life-size figures inhabit a 120 meter long field in relief so high as to be almost sculpture in the round.⁸

This battle between the gods and giants traditionally symbolized for the Greeks the struggle of civilization and order equated with their culture, over the forces of barbarism and chaos associated with all other cultures. This theme acquired deeper significance for the rulers of Pergamon who saw themselves as the protectors and saviours of the Greek cultural heritage as their motherland gradually fell under Roman domination.⁹ As the Pollitt succinctly states, "Pergamon was to become to the Hellenistic period what Athens had been to the Classical period... (employing) the arts to make Pergamon a showcase of Greek culture."¹⁰ Thus, the numerous classical quotations on the Great Altar frieze were probably deliberate on the part of its designers and served to strengthen and further enhance this image of the Pergamon people as the preservers and protectors of the Classical Greek heritage. Read on another level, the Gigantomachy frieze possibly alluded to the recent Pergamane victories over the barbarian tribes which inhabited areas to the east and north of the empire.

As Pheidias, together with Pericles, worked out the sculptural program for the Parthenon, here too probably a master sculpture or sculptors developed the frieze design together with the scholars and intellectuals from the court of Pergamon. Indeed, it was imperative for the frieze designers to expand the Gigantomachy beyond the traditional Olympians featured in the battle in order to exploit fully the vast sculptural field of the Great Altar. As a result, the court scholars and intellectuals added about 75 gods and their opponents to the Gigantomachy which were probably drawn from selected mythological sources such as Hesiod's Theogony and the Phaenomena of Aratus.¹¹ Certainly, the additional figures and their arrangement into a coherent program was prescribed by the resident scholars in conjunction with the master designer or designers.¹²

To assist in the identification of the figures, the names of the gods were chiselled on the pedestal. However, only a few of these inscriptions have been preserved making the reconstruction of the frieze and identification of some of the preserved figures impossible based on hard evidence alone. Despite its fragmentary state, the general program underlying the learned design of the frieze has been surmised. This program groups the Olympians on the east side, the heavenly lights and Titans on the south, probably night and constellations on the north, and earth and water on the west ends and flanking the entrance stairway.¹³

On entering the sanctuary-proper, the visitor was immediately confronted with the horrific and violent struggle between the Olympians and giants on the east side of the structure. Many of these giants were represented with snake-legs to symbolize their descent from the earth goddess, Ge, since snakes were believed to live in the earth.¹⁴ Pollitt further suggests that the "snake-infested quality" of the frieze might indirectly allude to a sea battle fought between Eumenes II and Hannibal, who instructed his sailors to throw jars containing poisonous snakes onto the decks of the

⁸ Diether Thimme, "The Masters of the Pergamon Gigantomachy", American Journal of Archaeology, 50 (1946), p. 345.

⁹ Pollitt, p. 82.

¹⁰ Pollitt, p. 81.

¹¹ Margareta Bieber, Sculpture of the Hellenistic Age (New York: Columbia University Press, 1961), p. 114.

¹² Bieber, p. 114.

¹³ Bieber, p. 115.

¹⁴ Bieber, p. 115.

Pergamane ships.¹⁵ Over all the diverse forms of the giants demonstrate the innovation of the Pergamane sculptors. While a few giants are depicted as fully human, many more are portrayed with snake-legs, or endowed with other animal attributes, such as wings, claws, paws, etc. The snake-legs when present, also serve to lower the level of the giants in relation to the gods, thus signalling their barbaric state together with their mixed animal-human torsos.

The wealth of allusions to Classical Greek prototypes is a marked feature of this Gigantomachy frieze. Many of these classicizing elements appear to derive from the Parthenon in terms of the compositional patterns, individual figures and features and expressions, particularly of the gods. One of the most frequently cited classicizing quote from the Altar frieze are the panels containing the figures of Zeus and Athena which allude to the west pediment of the Parthenon.¹⁶ (Figures 3 and 4) Athena swiftly moves in the opposite direction of Zeus, just as she moves away from Poseidon on the Parthenon pediment, although in reverse position. As in the Parthenon pediment, the figures move parallel to the background plane of a strong diagonal which emphasizes their speed of movement. In both renditions, the frontal figures of the gods look back over their shoulders at some central focal point

Athena is similarly clothed in a long, belted peplos and aegis which falls over her breast. Her garment pushes against her legs to reveal the contour of her knee and calf. Deep linear folds on a diagonal slant attest to the swiftness of her forward stride and rush of wind pressing against her body. A near identical drapery style is also worn by Athena's companion goddess from the east pediment of the Parthenon. (Figure 5) Zeus, however, departs from the nakedness of Poseidon. He is draped in a himation which sweeps across his lower torso and winds around his left arm in a manner similar to the dress worn by the gods on the east frieze of the Parthenon. (Figure 6). The Nike which flies toward Athena in the Altar frieze with the crown of victory in her hand, might have derived from a Gigantomachy metope from the Parthenon depicting Athena with Nike and giant, or possibly from a conventional alighting Nike figure from the classical period. (Figures 7 – Plate IV and 8) Indeed, the gesture of the Nike as she reaches out to crown Athena is similar to the fragmentary figure from the east metope, while her garment as it presses against her leg and sweeps behind her in a mass of folds is reminiscent of the Nike by Paionios carved about 420 B.C.¹⁷

Other classicizing figures on the Altar frieze include the giant adversaries of Zeus and Athena and their earth-mother, Gaia. Links to classical prototypes can be traced through vase-paintings of the Gigantomachy from the high and late Classical period which are believed to reflect the lost Gigantomachy painted inside the shield of Athena Parthenos.¹⁸

A neck amphora by the Suessula painter from the late fifth century centres around the figure of Zeus who hurls his flaming thunderbolt at a Giant below. (Figure 9) His opponent is identified as Porphyrion, the traditional antagonist of Zeus and leader of the giants.¹⁹ These figures of Zeus and Porphyrion are remarkably similar to their counterparts on the Greek Altar frieze. The stance of Zeus as his powerful torso shifts to the right as he takes aim at his opponent is almost repeated. Even the garment around his left arm which flutters and flaps in the wind is similar to the garment of Zeus in the Altar frieze. Moreover, the powerful broad back of Porphyrion as he lifts himself up on his snake-legs nearly parallels Zeus' fully human giant adversary in the vase-painting. In both works, the giant's

¹⁵ Pollitt, p. 82.

¹⁶ Pollitt, p. 105.

¹⁷ Robertson, p. 126.

¹⁸ Henle, p.54.

¹⁹ Henle, p. 49.

left arm, draped with an animal skin, is stretched out in a defensive gesture against the onslaught of Zeus. He looks up as he prepares to hurl his primitive weapon at the invincible god. The defiance and determination of Porphyryon are clearly expressed in the Altar panel by his straight brow, penetrating gaze and tense, powerful torso.

On an earlier vase-painting fragment perhaps by the Pronomos painter from the late fifth century, Porphyryon, who is identified by inscription, is the very twin of the giant figure on the amphora by the Suessula painter.²⁰ (Figure 10) His relation to his cousin on the Altar frieze is immediately apparent, even though the latter is portrayed with snake-legs. Certainly Porphyryon, in gesture, stance and dress recalls classical prototypes, evidenced by these vase-paintings of the Gigantomachy which in turn probably reflect the lost shield painting of the Athena Parthenos.²¹

Besides Porphyryon, the adversary of Athena, Alcyoneus, also seems to allude to classical antecedents found in vase-paintings. (Figure 3) In the Altar frieze, Alcyoneus is represented as fully-human except for his large outspread wings. The giant stretches out his left arm in a gesture of supplication, while with his right he tries to tear away the unrelenting grip of Athena on his hair. Its long, winding strands frames his face in almost snake-like waves. His stance is very unstable, with one leg bent over his body and the other fully extended, situation hopeless as he is dragged along without effort by the powerful goddess. This pathetic figure is strikingly similar to a giant represented in the aforementioned vase-painting of the Gigantomachy by the Suessula painter from the late fifth century. (Figure 9) Not only is the pose and gesture of the giant nearly the same in reverse, but even his anguish is similarly expressed by his wrinkled brow, deeply set pleading eyes and half-open mouth which seems to cry out in pain. Even the snake-like writhing of his hair is similar its difference in length.

In the Altar frieze the supplication of Alcyoneus is directed not to Athena but to his mother, Ge, whose torso appears emerging from the earth. (Figure 3) Both her hands are lifted to the goddess in a desperate plea to save her children. Certainly, this figure suggests a classical source as seen on the vase-painting fragment from the high Classical period perhaps by the Pronomos painter. (Figure 10) In both painting and frieze, the upper torso of Ge emerges from the earth with arms raised in supplication. Her long, curly hair which flows down around her shoulders and imploring expression with its furrowed brow and deeply set eyes are highly reminiscent.

One of the most obvious classicizing features in evidence throughout the Gigantomachy is the 'unruffled serenity' of the gods, particularly the Olympian gods and goddesses.²² Their faces immediately recall those appearing on the Parthenon, particularly the Lapith faces from the south metopes. (Figure 11 and 12) In the later Pergamon frieze, the figures have the same small mouth, heavy lidded eyes, broad cheeks and impervious glances of the Parthenon figures. Furthermore, the serene faces of the Olympians, such as the beautiful Nyx, belie the fury of their action, in the same manner which the calm glance of the Lapiths denies their violent struggle with the centaurs.

A third Olympian god, Apollo, also seems to quote from classical prototypes. Although superficially similar to the Apollo Belvedere from the mid fourth century, he is actually much closer in terms of physical type and pose to the Lapith fighting the centaur from a west metope of the Parthenon.²³ (Figures 13, 14 and 15) Unlike the Apollo Belvedere who is elegantly and sleekly rendered, both the Lapith from the metope and Apollo from the Altar frieze are portrayed with

²⁰ Henle, p. 50.

²¹ Henle, p. 54.

²² Pollitt, p. 105.

²³ Robertson, p. 197.

greater realism in terms of anatomical details and figural proportion. They are fully frontal figures who move parallel to the background plane, rather than in depth as the Belvedere Apollo. Moreover, their pose is remarkable similar with an extended left arm and probably bent right arm, as well as stable stance with widely spread legs and feet planted on the ground.

On the south side of the Altar frieze, the giant driven down by the chariot of Helios is almost a direct borrowing from the Parthenon.²⁴ This figure is nearly identical in stance, dress and gesture to the marshals directing the charioteers on the north frieze of the Parthenon. (Figures 16 and 17) Even the positioning of the horses and their detailed execution is reminiscent of the Parthenon panel.

A second group on the south side at Pergamon which recalls Archaic as well as Classical antecedents is the Titan fighting a monstrous lion-headed giant with long, twisting snake-legs. The composition for this group might have derived from images of Hercules fighting the Nemean Lion represented in vase-paintings or on sculptural relief, such as on the Hephaisteion Temple metope carved around 420 B.C.²⁵ (Figures 18, 19 and 20) In this metope, Hercules wrestles a standing lion which tries to maul him with its huge paws. The hero's powerful arms grip the neck of the lion in a strangling hold, in a manner reminiscent of the Altar frieze image. The similarity in overall composition between the Altar panel and its antecedent is unmistakable, even though specific details might vary.

Another compositional group quoting from classical motifs, in particular the Dexiloos relief from the early fourth century B.C., is located on the west side of the Altar.²⁶ In this scene, Triton tramples a fully human giant who has fallen to one knee under his oncoming hooves. (Figures 21 and 22) The giant leans heavily on his right arm, while he throws up his left in a defensive gesture to ward off the oncoming sea god. His face clearly registers his horror and pain as he looks upward this fearsome sea creature. He seems to cry out with his half-open mouth, while his anguish is expressed in his knitted brow and wide, imploring eyes. A very similar scene appears on the Dexiloos relief, although the figures of Triton has been replaced by a warrior on horseback. Indeed, the composition is nearly identical in terms of the gesture and stance of the fallen figure, as well as in the pounding hooves of the sea god and horse. The extreme anguish of the giant, however, is tempered in the relief by the more restrained, composed features of the fallen warrior, even though his situation is as precarious as his giant counterpart.

Although only a few examples of the more obvious classicizing elements of the Gigantomachy have been highlighted, their presence suggests that many more figures and groups can be traced to Classical motifs. On a formal level, these classicized elements have been successfully merged with the stylistic idioms associated with Hellenistic "Baroque" art, which are expressed in the swirling drapery of the figures, the vigorous and exaggerated carving of the torsos, the contorted bodies and anguished expressions. While the "Baroque" turbulence dramatically conveys the fury of the cosmic battle taking place on the surface, the underlying classical structure of the frieze undoubtedly refers to the rejuvenation of Classical Athens at Pergamon.²⁷ The deft mingling of Hellenistic and Classical visions in the Gigantomachy frieze is a testimony to the artistic skill and stylistic independence of its designers and sculptors, as well as serves to celebrate the Classical past in a monument of the later Hellenistic age.

²⁴ Robertson, p. 197.

²⁵ Arnold von Salis, *Der Altar von Pergamon* (Berlin: Georg Reimer Verlag, 1912), p. 87.

²⁶ Pollitt, p. 105.

²⁷ Martin Robertson, *A Shorter History of Greek Art* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), p. 195.

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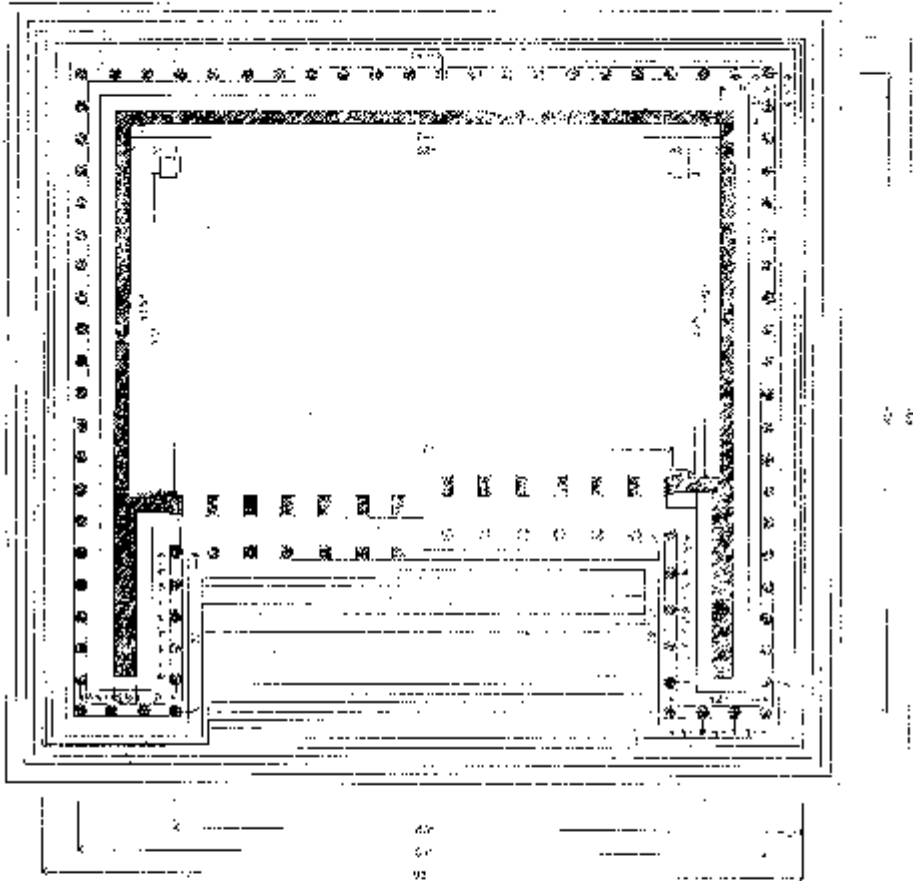


Figure 1. Altar of Zeus from Pergamon. Plan view. Begun ca. 180 B.C.