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Group Egotism in the Pergamon Altar: Debunking the idea of individualism in Hellenistic Art

Alison Leigh Cofrancesco

The Hellenistic period of art, ranging from 323 BCE to 31 BCE, has often been characterized as the beginning of individualism in the Greek world.¹ The idea of individualism is partially attributed to citizens having been exposed to a government under one powerful individual, Alexander The Great, and the lessened role the people had in government. After the death of Alexander the Great, his empire broke up into loosely connected monarchies. The Greek poleis remained in many places in its original form, though the role of citizens in government changed in those areas controlled by kings. It is theorized that since people's role in government was diminished under these new forms, and since they were exposed to more cultures through increased trade with one another thanks to the Alexandrian empire they began to attempt to define themselves and create a clearer idea of the individual. That is to say that people came to identify primarily as themselves and secondarily as part of society.²

This idea has been rejected recently by some scholars, including Professor Luther H. Martin. In his essay, "The Anti-Individualistic Ideology of Hellenistic Culture" Martin argues that the new forms of government had a much smaller effect on society than they are often given credit for. Rather than becoming simply self-serving, Hellenistic Greeks found new ways to participate in group life. They joined eating clubs and participated in non-governmental community activities³. The idea of Socratic self-care was also widespread in the Hellenistic sphere, countering the theory that people were only interested in themselves⁴. The interest of being useful for the common good, and keeping themselves able to contribute to larger society. Even with the changing government and increased exposure to other cultures, it is problematic to say that individualism was a product of the Hellenistic period. As mentioned earlier, the Greek poleis still remained in most areas, and the societies under the control of kings still encouraged alternate forms of group life.⁵ The idea of individualism was not born from the Hellenistic age, but was projected onto the time period by historians who attempted to study the Hellenistic era in the context of their own time.⁶ The modern idea of 'individualism' began to take shape under philosophers of the 18th century, and became popularized through Alex de Tocqueville's study of the American people in the 1830s. This was conveniently around the time that the characteristics of the Hellenistic period were being defined by historians. Historians creating and defining the Hellenistic period were exposed to Tocqueville's ideas, and used them

¹ Pollitt, JJ *What is "Hellenistic about Hellenistic Art?"* University of California Press pg. 1

Pollitt introduces his paper by acknowledging, "As others have long argued, the social instability of the Hellenistic Age and the decline of small, tightly knit communities contributed to the development of still another distinctive mind-set of the Hellenistic period, individualism."

² Tarn WW Griffith *Hellenistic civilization* pp 227

³ Martin, Luther H. *The Anti-Individualistic Ideology of Hellenistic Culture*. 117-40.

⁴ Martin pg. 123-124

⁵ Martin pg. 125 Here Martin cites Tarn who paradoxically argued that there was a heightened sense of group life and a rise in individualistic ideals. Martin finds it strange that historians like Tarn are attempting to project the idea of individualism on an age that they acknowledge had an increase in non-governmental clubs.

⁶ Martin pg. 119

to help explain the change in society and artwork in the post-Alexandrian world. Thus, the modern notion of individualism was imposed onto a past era that never held it as a value.

Despite the idea of Hellenistic individualism being deeply flawed, most art from this period is now said to have been made to reflect the ideals of the individual. There is greater attention to the unideal figure type, bodies become more naturalistic, and there is a heightened use of pathos in sculptural work. Because of these characteristics, art from the Hellenistic period is seen as a form of rebellion against the Classical ideal figure type (exemplified by appendix figures 1 and 2). The Boxer (appendix figure 3) is an example of the non-ideal type. He has none of the serene beauty of Classical times and shows the harsh reality of life. Many scholars take the reading of such a figure one step further, saying that the attention to the unideal means a turn towards the individual.⁷ But while the physical qualities in such Hellenistic sculptures as the Boxer are apparent, they do not necessarily imply individualism. These physical characteristics can be read very differently, not as motivated by the individual, but influenced by political and artistic motivations. Reading artwork within its own historical context rather than defining it by modern ideas today prohibits historians from projecting modern prejudices and definitions on a world with a very different social structure. In order to understand why these qualities of Hellenistic sculpture existed, we can turn to a specific piece of sculptural art and study the possible motivations behind the stylistic choices. The Gigantomachy frieze from the Pergamon Altar is a good example of the height of Hellenistic sculptural art. It offers us a varied and wide array of figures that are certain to be from the same time period, eliminating the problem of dating that is often an issue for Greek art (due to Roman copies of earlier works). The monument includes all of the characteristics of Hellenistic art. The bodies are naturalistic and filled with movement, the faces are ripe with emotion, and the figures of the Giants are not idealized in the slightest. These qualities are usually attributed to an individualist ideal in Hellenistic art, but viewed within the context of the time it becomes clear that this is not the case. The debate sparked by the Gigantomachy, its influences, the carving process behind it, and its intended message all help us to understand the true intention behind the stylistic and compositional choices on the Altar and how this intention came to be misread by later historians.

The Pergamon Altar became one of the most famous pieces of Hellenistic sculptural art when excavated in 1864 by Carl Humann. The continuous movement, the imposing size, and the raw emotion earned it the name ‘The Throne of Satan’. It quickly became the subject of debate amongst German historians as they attempted to understand what art forms were the primary influences of the Gigantomachy frieze and what its intended purpose was. These early debates are a good example of the biases of art historians, as they partially consisted of historians projecting their own views of artistic ideals onto the monument.

The main debate between Alexander Conze and Heinrich Brunn regarded whether the sculpture was too ‘naturalistic’ to be seen as comparable in quality to Classical Art. The first of the problems for art historians was whether the Gigantomachy frieze of the Altar was to be viewed as having been primarily influenced by paintings, sculpture, or architecture. This was an issue since sculpture with “painterly” qualities was held in low esteem by the German art world. Alexander Conze put forth a study noting the painterly qualities in the work. He argued that the naturalistic (a style generally looked down upon at this time in Germany)⁸ qualities of the frieze supported its ties to paintings, as did the use of the building which acted as a painterly landscape

⁷ Gardner, Helen, Fred S. Kleiner *Art Through the Ages* pg. 160

⁸ Hills, Helen. *Rethinking the Baroque* pg. 50

or background for the frieze. Under Conze's assertion the frieze showed the influence of amphorae paintings on sculptural art and the rebellion against the Classical idealism of more

refined figures in the round. Conze's theory diminished the relief to an excessive gimmick, which was supported by his contemporary Heinrich Wolfflin who denounced any ornamentation of this type as being frivolous and decadent due to "excess force of form."⁹

Conze's 'painterly' theory was denounced by Brunn, a German archeologist and Conze's contemporary. He argued that the sculptural work was a part of the architecture and meant to be viewed as an extension of the monument rather than a weak imitation of a painting.¹⁰ To help explain this, he presented the idea of viewing the monument from afar (appendix figure 4). From this view, the monument seems even more imposing, as its great weight causes the figures to flee from the frieze to avoid being crushed by the powerful building above. In this view the figures are primarily part of the greater statement of power, and work to leave the viewer in awe of the overall structure. Brunn explained the frieze as "tectonic decorative," since it was a crucial part of the architecture, not simply an add-on. This reading increased the importance of the frieze in the overall structure.

In explaining the methods used by the frieze to affect the monument's viewer, Brunn cited Gottfried Semper, saying that the pathos evoked by the frieze was used to make the monument more powerful to viewers. Gottfried Semper's empathy theory has to do with the emotional response caused by art. In his paper "On the Optical Sense of Form: A Contribution to Aesthetics," Semper argues that imperfection in a figure evokes a physical and psychological pain in the viewer¹¹. By Semper's theory, the non-ideal figures of the Great Altar would have had a profound psychological effect on the original viewers, underscoring the monument's power. Brunn used this argument in discussing why the baroque style of the Altar was justified and not in bad taste. Evoking that response rather than adding on decadent painterly ornamentation, he argued, was the goal of the Pergamene sculptors. The Altar therefore, was meant to evoke a universal kind of awe in every viewer. It was not meant to cause viewers to think of themselves as individuals, but rather to understand the overall power of the Pergamene military and government.

Despite Brunn's well-reasoned argument, the German debate helped set up the Hellenistic versus Classical art dichotomy. It put the two eras in opposition to each other, and made it seem as if the Hellenistic artists were consciously rebelling against Classical ideals by creating the altar. This was not the case at all, but the differentiation between the periods was projected onto them.

The Hellenistic period of art was not so much a rebellion against Classical art as it was a melding of Classical, Hellenistic, and foreign influences. The difference in style is often assigned to the rise of individualism in the Hellenistic age which rejected the Classical ideal type. Though the Hellenistic style of art seems very different from the Classical, Hellenistic artists did not devalue Classical art. The Attalid kings of Pergamon actually commissioned their masters to make copies of Classical masterpieces before they commissioned their own artists.¹² The Altar of Pergamon was not really a deviation from the progression of Classical to Hellenistic sculptural

⁹ Hills pg 56 (Note that the ideas that I present about the German debates are drawn from English accounts of the original arguments)

¹⁰ Pellizi, Francesco. *Res: Anthropology and Aesthetics* pg. 187

¹¹ Koss, Juliet. *On The Limits of Empathy*, *Art Bulletin* 139-157

¹² Dreyfus, Renée, and Ellen Schraudolph. *Pergamon: The Telephos Frieze from the Great Altar* pg. 11-12

types. The architectural setup of the Altar is reminiscent of luxury altars from the 3rd century BCE. The low podium with a pi-shaped wall decorated with relief art had already been used at

Priene, Magnesia, and others that were influenced by even older altars like that of Altar court at Samothrace.¹³¹⁴ The idea of a stepped square altar is also derivative, initially of Egyptian influence. The columns used were in the ionic style, which was popular throughout Classical architecture.¹⁵ This intermingling of influences was more possible in the Hellenistic period than in any other due to the continued trade between diverse areas that had once all been controlled by the Alexandrian empire. Though a melding of influences, the Pergamon Altar was certainly not a rejection of the past. The actual frieze itself has both Hellenistic and Classical influences. The idea of a Gigantomachy is not new, as it was used in both Archaic art and Classical amphorae paintings. Several individual figures are also clearly influenced by Classical works. The idealized Apollo on the Gigantomachy (appendix 5) is a clear example of this influence. It is almost identical to the Belvedere Apollo (appendix 6), a Classical era sculpture. The portrayal of Athena and Zeus parallels the portrayal of Athena and Poseidon on the Parthenon's western pediment (appendix 7,8) Even the stylistic choices derive from the Classical period. The treatment of drapery is done with the same tools; S-curved bodies (appendix 9), railroad track robe folds, and the omega patterns at the ends of garments are all ideas from the Classical period. They are used differently on the Gigantomachy, angled more sharply to enhance the action, but these styles are just more extreme versions of Classical methods. The Classical precursors to the Gigantomachy Frieze show that it is not a radical deviation from the old style, but a logical progression.¹⁶ They serve as a reminder that the periods of art are not so cut and dry as they seem when classified in art history books. They meld together, influence each other, and do not simply stop existing at the end of their defined era. Despite the fact that the Great Altar is such an important Hellenistic work, carvers clearly looked to the Classical period to inspire and justify the quality of their work.

The process of carving is also important for a greater understanding of the Gigantomachy frieze, not as an individual conception, but as a collaboration between Classical and Hellenistic artists. The frieze would have been a great undertaking for artists at the time, and it is clear that there was not just one single carver. It is likely that a single master designed the general layout of figures and carvers worked using cartoons. Though carvers were assigned their figures, they would have been responsible for their own work. This provided individual artists with some autonomy regarding styles they used on their figures, causing vast stylistic differences between them. The number of artists who worked on the frieze has recently been estimated by Art Historian Diether Thimme to be near forty, and it is clear from a close study that not all figures are done by the same hand.¹⁷ The idea that the use Hellenistic style in the Gigantomachy was meant to convey a message is flawed because there is no homogenous style to the frieze. Some

¹³Ridgeway, Brunilde Sismondo. *Hellenistic sculpture 2* pg. 25

¹⁴ Scholl, Andreas *The Pergamon Altar Architecture Sculpture, and Meaning* Pergamon and the Hellenistic Kingdoms of the Hellenistic World pg. 49

¹⁵ Hoffmann, Herbert. "Antecedents of the Great Altar at Pergamon." *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* pg. 1

¹⁶ Ridgeway pg. 41

¹⁷ Thimme, Diether *Masters of the Pergamon Gigantomachy* *American Journal of Archaeology*, pg. 348

figures are extremely Classical; some are what the Germans would refer to as ‘baroque’. The treatment of each figure is too independent to contribute to a single stylistic statement.

We can find stylistic differences in even the most similar figures. Carl Shuchhardt’s original theory regarding similarly positioned figures was that they must have been created by a single master.¹⁸ This theory was more recently challenged by Diether Thimme, who argued that the figures are too stylistically different to be attributed to a single carver. Kybele and Selene (appendix 10 and 11) on the north frieze are both positioned in the same way and therefore were once attributed to the same carver. But Kybele is depicted in a much more Classical way with minimal turning of the body, relatively static features, and only a single background plane. To contrast this, the Selene figure makes use of light and shadow in a more ‘baroque’ style. There are multiple planes, and her body twists to help pronounce this further. Her clothing is tensed to show motion, and even her horse’s head contributes to the turmoil. Another example of figures being similarly positioned but different stylistically, is the pairing of Phoebe and Hecate (appendix 12 and 13). Once more, both figures are physically close to each other on the frieze and are relatively similar in stance, but the styles differ. Hecate is more classical in terms of garb and static body, while Phoebe shows more potential for motion. Thimme again asserts that the treatment is too different to be the work of one carver.

The number of carvers who worked on the frieze and Thimme’s theory regarding the treatment of these extremely Classical figures would imply that individual artists still specialized in the Classical style (as seen in Kybele and Hecate), yet were still held in high enough esteem to work on a monument as important as the Great Altar. Though the Altar incorporates both styles there would have been very prominent artists who worked only in a very Classical style like that used for Kybele and Hecate. This challenges the view of the Hellenistic period as a time of rebellion against Classical idealism, as specialists in both styles still existed and were successful. The use of so many artists and so many varied styles also shows us that there was no conscious stylistic message of individualism or otherwise intended by the Altar. There is too much variation from figure to figure to say that the Altar was intended to stand as a symbol of the Hellenistic art period in contrast to another period.

There are several readings of the intended message of the Gigantomachy frieze, none of which seem to support the individualist ideal projected onto the Hellenistic era. The Altar has two primary readings that likely would have been understood by the everyday viewer. It is a victory monument meant to praise the Attalid kings, and it is meant to reaffirm the ties between Pergamon and the West. In the first reading, the depiction of the gods triumphing over the giants is meant to represent the Attalids defeating their enemies. There are two different dates that are assigned to the Pergamon Altar. Under the first dating (188 BCE) the Altar would have commemorated the defeat of the Gauls under Eumenes the Second. Under the second dating (166-156 BCE), the Altar would likely be an account of the Pergamene defeat of the Seleucids, Macedonians, or Celts. In either case, military prowess would have been one of the primary readings of the Altar. Using the gods to convey military prowess is not a new theme at all, having been used famously in the Parthenon. It affirms the strength of the Pergamene people a collective, but does not praise any one individual. There is an inscription on the Altar that should be acknowledged here. It is argued that it is honoring Eumenes or Attalos the second, and acknowledging their patronage.¹⁹ Though the inscription could well praise an individual king, we cannot say that this shows to emergence of individualism, as the names of commissioners and

¹⁸ Thimme pg. 349

¹⁹ Hellenistic Sculpture pg. 31

rulers were often carved in or around the works they commissioned.²⁰ Once again, the context of the time reveals that the Altar was much less radical than it seems at first glance.

The second message of the Altar would be the assertion of Pergamon's ties to Athens and the western Mediterranean. After the death of Alexander the Great, Pergamon came under the control of a lineage of independent kings, the Attalids. Pergamon was a newly powerful city with some military prowess in the east, but was not seen as a central power in the Mediterranean. The Altar was an attempt to show Pergamon's potential to be the new Athens. It is thematically very similar to the frieze on the Parthenon, making it clear that the Attalids valued their ties to the western world. As previously mentioned, the Zeus and Athena group at Pergamon (appendix 8) is extremely similar to the Poseidon and Athena pair from the Parthenon's west pediment (appendix 9). The Altar's legitimacy is partially due to its association with past great societies and artwork. The frieze uses similar figures and figure pairings and motifs to the Parthenon in order to show the Attalids' close connection to the west and their potential to be a new power over the Mediterranean. The idea of highlighting Pergamon's ties to Athens is even more obvious in the smaller Telephos frieze, which should be briefly touched upon for the important role it plays in the overall monument. This frieze occupies the upper part of the Altar, and chronicles the life of Telephos, the mythological son of Heracles and Ague and founder of Pergamon. The attention paid to Telephos' Greek lineage allows the Attalids to make up for their weaker historical ties to mainland Greece. Telephos, according to myth lived in mainland Greece during his youth, so the frieze focuses on this period of his life. The frieze stresses Telephos' piety towards the Olympians, and highlights any connection between Pergamon and Greece.²¹ The Attalids were not trying to identify themselves as individuals, they were trying to strengthen their ties to Athens, the center of the Classical Greek world.

To show the lack of individualism intended by the Gigantomachy, it can be compared to the Ara Pacis. The Ara Pacis makes use of both mythological and historical individuals.²²²³ On the south frieze each figure can be identified as a specific family member or courtier (appendix 14) It was meant to underscore the importance of the Julian line, and more specifically affirm Augustus' power. Whereas the Ara Pacis is celebratory of Augustus specifically and portrays identifiable people, the Gigantomachy only uses mythological figures. The one mortal portrayed on the Gigantomachy is Heracles, due to the myth that said the gods could not win the fight against the giants without mortal assistance. Though this puts humans in a place of higher importance, it is still mankind being represented by Heracles, not an individual man like Augustus. Heracles is a mortal, but since he is a mythological rather than a historical figure, his presence on the frieze can support the idea of power of all Pergamene people rather than individuals. This makes the Altar seem much more traditional, and much closer to the Athenian ideal discussed above.

The stylistic choices of the frieze reveal that one of the motivations behind the treatment of figures was an attempt to show artistic prowess. In sculptural work preceding the Great Altar, there is a heightened attention to the unideal figure type. As seen in the Boxer (appendix figure 3) or the old market woman (appendix figure 15) there is more attention to real life and a turn away from the serene and beautiful. This is often extended by historians to signify an attention to

²⁰ Gardner, Kleiner pg. 108-153

²¹Dreyfus pg. 13

²² Lamp Kathleen *Visual Rhetoric in Augustus' Principate*

²³ Gardner, Kliener pg. 199-200

the individual. There is, however a stronger argument for the shift to these unideal figures. Artists during the Hellenistic era were exposed to other cultures much more than during earlier periods, due to trade amongst diverse areas promoted under Alexander's rule. The ability to accurately render diverse figures, rather than simply replicating the Classical ideal types would have been a marker of skill for the Hellenistic artist. Many worked from models to properly achieve certain treatments of the skin. The Hellenistic style was, in no small part, motivated by the artist's need to show their skill and ability. Under the Pergamene tradition there was a good deal of attention paid to the artist who could accurately render figures in odd positions, or with different textures in hair or clothing.²⁴ This attention to strange and difficult figures is present on the Altar, in the rendering of giants with snake legs (this was particularly difficult to show without making the figures look ridiculous) and in the melding of Classical and Hellenistic style. In no small part, the different styles used on the Altar were shows of technical skill.

Defining art periods can cause problems in our perceptions of style and intent. While some art periods are rebellions against others, this is not always the case, and it is historically inaccurate to imply that one period necessarily stops when another begins. Classical art was not being rebelled against by the Pergamon Altar, it was being added to and enhanced. The prevalence of Classical style on the Gigantomachy frieze shows us that Hellenistic developments did not at all imply a denouncement of the Classical ideal. Likewise, the ideals behind the stylistic choices on the Gigantomachy were not actually all that different from the Classical period. The frieze was another tool for conveying the idea of overall Pergamene power and esteem. There is no historical individual being explicitly praised in the visual rhetoric, and no single artist is given credit as the master of the entire piece. If anything, the Altar speaks to the power of the Pergamene people as a whole and enhances the importance of societal unity. The Pergamon Altar was many important things. It was a political device, an opportunity to showcase artistic prowess, an example of emotive power in visual art, a meeting of diverse stylistic techniques, and a powerful example of the Hellenistic tradition. All of these qualities can explain the true motivations behind the Gigantomachy frieze, and can help to further explain the Hellenistic art world. It may be tempting to impose modern ideals on ancient art, but in this case that practice would obscure complicated reality that led to the Pergamene Gigantomachy.

²⁴ Dickins pg. 5

Dickins argues that "The motive (of early Pergamon figure types) was unimportant...but it is used for the purpose of demonstrating the technical skill of the artist."

Appendix

Figure 1- Kritios Boy circa 480 BCE



Figure 2- Polyclitus' Doryphoros (the spear bearer) circa 440 BCE

This figure was explained by Polyclitus' "Canon," a treatise in which he outlined the perfectly proportioned body. The Doryphoros is a realization of this ideally proportioned figure.



Figure 3- The Boxer circa 100-50 BCE

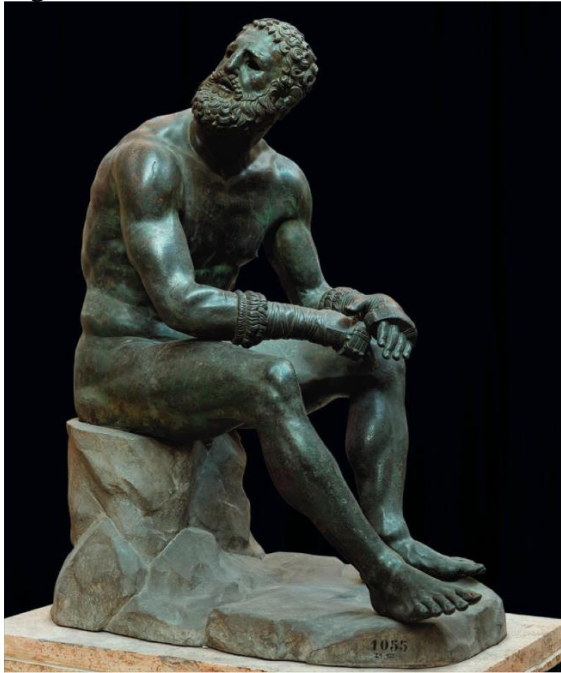


Figure 4- Brunn's 'far away' view of the Altar



Figure 5-Apollo from Gigantomachy



Figure 6-Belvedere Apollo circa 350-325 BCE



Figure 7-Athena from Pergamon



Figure 8-Athena and Poseidon reconstruction from Parthenon



Figure 9-S curved bodies in Classical sculpture and at Pergamon

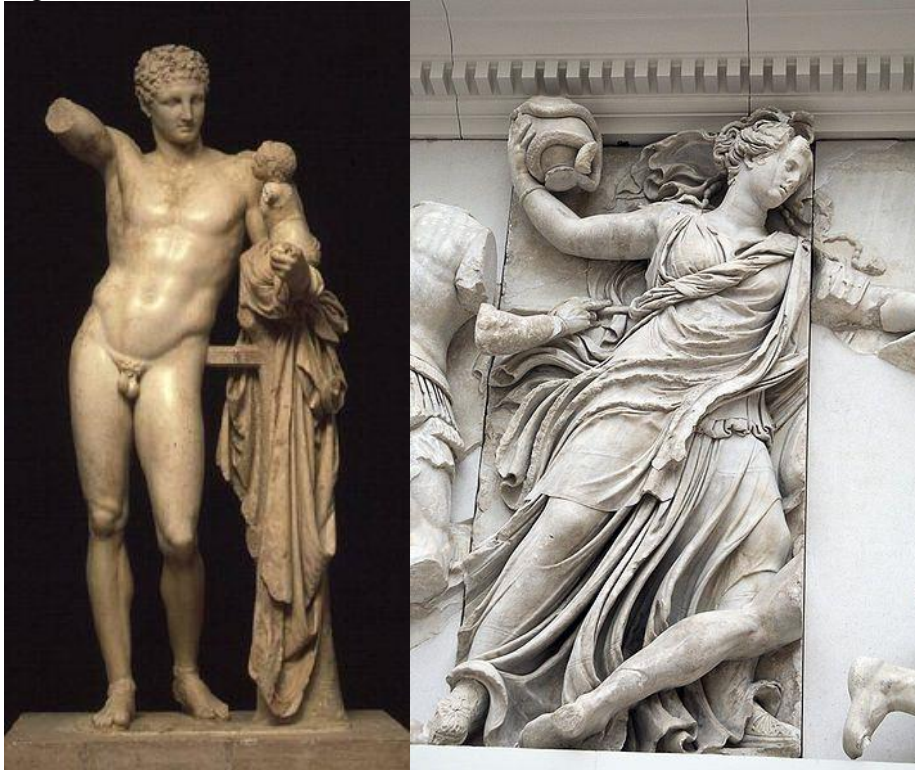


Figure 10-Selene from Gigantomachy frieze



Figure 11-Kybele from Gigantomachy frieze



Figure 12-Phoebe from Gigantomachy



Figure 13-Hecate from Gigantomachy



Figure 14-Ara Pacis, court scene



Figure 15-Old Market Woman circa 150-100 BCE



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