ART AND IDEOLOGY: THE CASE OF THE Pergamon
GIGANTOMACHY*

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ABSTRACT

The Attalid rulers of Hellenistic Pergamon, in Asia Minor, strove to make their city the cultural equal of classical Athens through public building and art. They represented their partial victory over the Galatians as the equivalent of the Athenian triumph over the Persians. A major Attalid public monument suggesting this was the Great Altar at Pergamon, with its frieze depicting Gigantomachy (the battle of gods and giants). The article discusses the representation of gigantomachy in earlier Greek art, and shows how the Pergamon frieze intensifies certain ideological tendencies of that representation. The frieze uses many contrasts — animal vs. human, high vs. low, calm control vs. frenzied emotion — to suggest the superiority of the Attalids over their enemies. But there are many elements that cut across these contrasts, making the frieze more than a simple ideological statement.

During a brief century-and-a-half, from the late third century BCE down to 133, the formerly insignificant town of Pergamon became a metropolis, the centre of a territory, which stretched over a large area of western Asia Minor. As they extended and consolidated their power, the Attalid rulers of Pergamon pursued a remarkably consistent cultural policy. They wished to be seen as the standard-bearers of Hellenic civilisation in Asia, and quite deliberately set out to make their city equal — if not superior — to the greatest contemporary centres of culture in the Hellenistic world. One expression of this was an enormous building-campaign, centring on the acropolis of Pergamon; and among the buildings erected here was the Great Altar, most probably in the decades after 188 BCE.

* It is a great pleasure to dedicate this small Hellenistic offering to my one-time teacher, and friend and colleague of several decades, in grateful acknowledgment of all that he has done for Classics in Southern Africa over many years.

1 On the dating of the Altar see Kähler 1948:142. Callaghan (1981:115-21) has argued for a start on the Altar only after 166, but this later date has not been generally accepted; see Smith 1991:158; Pollitt 1986:309 n. 22. Radt (1999:16870) presents recent evidence for a dating in the 170s. I do not in this paper consider the
The most spectacular, and most famous feature of the Altar is its monumental frieze depicting a Gigantomachy, the prehistoric battle between the gods and the giants for supremacy in the world. For at least a century-and-a-half this subject had borne strong ideological overtones in Greek art. The Pergamon Gigantomachy is no different: it too clearly conveys an ideology of power and control over disruptive forces. But what most interests me about the Pergamon frieze, and what I want to examine in this paper, is the tension that appears in its treatment of Gigantomachy between the ideology that it certainly conveys and elements that seem to run counter to this ideology. In examining this question I want at the same time to insist that the frieze is, first and foremost, a work of visual art which, if it was to succeed in conveying a meaning, had to do so primarily in visual terms.

A detailed examination of these visual terms reveals the tension I have just alluded to. On the one hand, if we look at the visual language of the frieze against the background of earlier art, both at Pergamon itself and elsewhere, we find that the frieze actually intensifies certain ideological elements which were just beginning to emerge in that earlier art. On the other hand, running counter to this, we also find a sort of deconstructive tendency: that is, for every valid generalisation that one can make about the modes of representation of the frieze, one can always find important exceptions and counter-examples. Mere ideology tends toward one-dimensionality and over-expressiveness: what makes the Pergamon frieze so fascinating is that even as it depicts certain relations of power, it insists at the same time on the complexity - even the self-contradictoriness - of real life and real history.

I shall be concentrating on the details of the frieze below. But before doing so I would like to consider the two kinds of background in earlier art that I mentioned above: first, the nature of Pergamene public art before the frieze, and second, the earlier representations of Gigantomachy in archaic and classical art.

The self-representation of the Attalids in art (and other ways) was determined in large part by their conflicts with the Galatian tribes (Gauls) that moved into Asia Minor during the early 270s BCE. Initially, the rulers of

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1 Since 'ideology' is a slippery term, I should explain at the outset what I mean by it. I mean a set of attitudes and ideas, propagated by a certain group, which serves to legitimate and to strengthen the power of that group; this need not be a conscious process. For a discussion of the meaning of 'ideology' in an ancient context, see the introduction to Kloft 1979; and on the long-established ideological meaning of Gigantomachy see Hardie 1986:89, 129.
Pergamon paid tribute to the Galatians. But some time soon after his accession in 241 Attalos I refused to do so, and conquered one of the tribes in a battle in the region of Mysia. This victory marks a turning point in the way the Attalids represented themselves to the people of Pergamon and to the rest of the Greek world. Attalos now for the first time assumed the title of King, was called Soter, and sought to project an image of himself in the public sphere by spectacular dedications both at home and at famous cultural centres abroad. In Pergamon itself large-scale sculptural groups were set up showing defeated and dying Galatians, and the inscriptions below referred directly to the Attalid victory. But it is a monument reported by Pausanias that perhaps best reveals the ideological context in which the victory was meant to be seen. Pausanias describes a dedication by Attalos, on the Acropolis at Athens, of a sculptural group depicting four conflicts: a Gigantomachy, a battle of Athenians against Amazons, the action against the Persians at Marathon - and the destruction of the Galatians in Mysia. Attalos, by inserting his own victory into this series of famous triumphs over the mythological and historical 'other', quite clearly sought to represent Pergamon as a second Athens, as a bastion of civilisation against the barbarian onslaught. The monument also clearly shows us the historical and political meaning that the Attalids attached to the subject of Gigantomachy - obviously a vital clue to the interpretation of the frieze on the Altar.

It is important, however, to be aware that the notion that the Galatians were a monolithic, implacable foe, finally crushed by the Attalids, was an ideological projection that corresponded only partially with reality. The Galatians were never finally defeated, battles were fought against them right until the end of the Attalid kingdom. And many of these battles were fought not against the Galatians alone, but against them merely as allies of other dynasts. Finally, Attalos I, for his own part, did not hesitate to ally himself in war with certain Galatian tribes when the need arose.

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4 Paus. 1.25.2. He does not specify which Attalos made the dedication, but I take it to have been Attalus I; thus Politt 1986:91, who discusses opposing views, and Smith 1991:103. Strangely, Schalles (1985) does not so much as mention this monument, which would be central to his argument; presumably he believes it to be the work of a later Attalid.
6 See Allen 1983:28 and ch. 5; Schalles 1985:100-04.
I turn now to the representation of Gigantomachy in the earlier art of Greece.7 Knowledge of this background helps sharpen our awareness of the sorts of choices exercised by the designers of the Pergamon frieze.

It is very striking that Greek artists of the Archaic period do not strongly differentiate giants from gods, either by iconography or by the composition of scenes involving them. Both gods and giants have purely human shape and are of comparable stature, the main difference between them being that the gods are dressed in their customary clothing, while the giants wear hoplite armour. And the Gigantomachies are composed in such a way that the two groups of opponents stride towards each other on more or less equal terms; it is only a relatively few prostrate or falling giants that indicate the ultimate defeat of their side. The Treasury of the Siphnians at Delphi (c. 525 BCE) shows the giants in this way, as do a large number of Attic black-figure vases.

However, in the 5th century, after the Persian Wars, Gigantomachy gets caught up in the same currents that affect the representation of other mythic conflicts such as Amazonomachy and Centauromachy. As the Greeks, particularly the Athenians, strive to define their own nature by contrast with the barbarian, Persian 'other',8 so they come to redefine the traditional mythic enemies. It is above all the differences marking them off from the Greek ideal that are now stressed. In keeping with this development artists now begin to distinguish giants from gods much more sharply than they had before. The earlier 5th century sees the advent in art of what Vian calls 'Géants sauvages', giants armed, no longer with hoplite gear, but with rocks, torches and clubs, and sometimes naked except for an animal-skin.9 In the later decades of the century we first begin to encounter a non-human, anguiped, type of giant, with snakes for legs.10 Finally, Phidias seems to have invented an entirely new compositional schema for the Gigantomachy, which set the opponents literally worlds apart. In this schema the gods are placed up above in the vault of heaven, and fight from there against the giants below them on earth.11

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7 A comprehensive discussion of the literary and artistic treatments of Gigantomachy in the Archaic and Classical periods is to be found in Vian 1952, updated and extended by the same author's article 'Géants' in *LMC* vol. 4, parts 1 & 2 – see esp. sec. VI of the 'Commentary': 'Évolution de la Gigantomachie'.


10 *Ibid.* 147. This type seems to be modelled on much earlier representations of Typhon with snake-legs and wings for an example, see the Chalcidian hydria, c. 540 BCE, from Vulci, in the Munich Antikensammlungen, no. 596, illustrated by Carpenter 1991: ill. 99.

The Pergamon Gigantomachy is by far the most extensive treatment of the subject known to us, and it makes very large claims on the viewer. Given the monument reported by Pausanias, described above, I think there can be no doubt that the viewer was meant to connect the gods' defeat of the giants with the Attalid defeat of the Galatians. But the frieze's ideological scope is much wider than that of earlier Pergamene public sculpture. It does not limit itself by explicit reference to particular historical enemies, such as the Galatians, but rather expresses the ideas of conquest and control in universal mythic terms. This is evident in the visual language of the frieze.

In the first place, the style and the placement of the Gigantomachy are calculated to impress and even overwhelm the viewer. The Pergamon frieze appeared in the most prominent position possible on its building - on the outside, just above head height; moreover, the figures of the Gigantomachy, carved almost in the round, and over lifesize, often threaten to burst out of their frame. The limbs of several figures overlap the upper or lower edge of their panels, while on the N.W. and S.W. projections of the Altar, the figures emerge, Baroque-fashion, into the real architectural space of the building, resting hands, knees and feet on the stairs. A further significant point: whereas the figures of the Parthenon frieze appear in profile, most of the Pergamon giants are in a more dramatic full-frontal or rear view. All this seems designed to increase the 'naturalness', the apparent reality of the work, and to enhance its impact on the viewer.

Philip Hardie, discussing hyperbole in the *Aenid*, writes perceptively of 'the inescapable tendency of the human mind to ascribe value to the descriptive terms "up" and "down"; physical space is [thus] politicized and moralized...'. This tendency is fully exploited in the Pergamon frieze, where we find a pervasive contrast between upper and lower, the first term being associated with the gods, the second with the giants. Thus the names of the gods are inscribed in larger letters on the cornice above the frieze, those of the giants in smaller letters on the border below. And everywhere within the space of the frieze the giants occupy a lower position than the gods. Whereas the gods almost invariably stand upright, or are seated upright on a mount, out-topping their opponents by at least a head, the giants bend, kneel, or sprawl on the ground. Their inferiority in visual terms is an index of their military, political and moral inferiority.

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12 In all these respects one could contrast the Pergamon frieze with that of the Parthenon, which is carved in very shallow relief, placed high up on its building and partially obscured by columns; on this see Osborne 1987.
14 Smith 1991:159.
Closely related to the spatial inferiority of the giants on the frieze, is the fact that they are most often shown not just as fighting against the gods, but as decisively defeated. Hence such details as, for example, the thunderbolt of Zeus piercing an opponent’s thigh; the jaws of Artemis’ dog closing around the neck of the giant at her feet; a giant sprawling supine over the prone corpse of another as Aphrodite tramples on his face — a violent, almost crude token of superiority, unparalleled in the iconographic tradition. That the giants should be shown as decisively defeated may seem natural and obvious, simply inherent in the nature of the subject matter. But in fact there were in earlier Greek art, as we have seen, other ways of representing the conflict, which rendered it much more even. Choosing to show giants as utterly beaten was thus deliberate, and charged with ideological meaning.

However, as always with the frieze, the contrasts just described are not carried through mechanically; there are exceptions, which render the oppositions more complex and more interesting. Some giants do, in fact, stand upright against their divine opponents; and in some instances they fight back vigorously: the very giant who is bitten by Artemis’ dog, gouges its right eye with his finger, and the lion-headed giant on the south frieze sinks its claws into its opponent’s arm. But, much more remarkable than this, in two instances gods actually appear inferior to giants: in the so-called ‘Biter Group’, in the north frieze, a god (his identity is uncertain) bends at the knees as he is lifted into the air by a giant who bites him in the arm, while another god, towards the east end of the south frieze, kneels before a monstrous bull-necked giant. So striking an exception do these two figures pose, that one scholar interprets them as individuals who are, or at least were, mortal. But, given the numerous other exceptions we shall see to ‘rules’ of representation on the frieze, this is by no means a necessary interpretation.

I turn now to one of the most complex, but for that reason also most interesting aspects of the Gigantomachy: the ubiquitous presence of animals and animal features in the frieze, and their varying functions as visual signifiers. The discussion will bear out the insight of the structuralists, that

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15 This motif— a god’s accompanying animal biting a giant— is a recurrent one: see for example on the E. frieze, Athene’s snake; on the S. frieze, Asterion’s dog; on the N. frieze, Keto’s lion.

16 Cf. Moira stepping on giant’s hip (N. frieze); Artemis trampling the body of a fallen giant (E. frieze).

17 See, for example, the opponent of Artemis (E. frieze); several opponents of gods on the N. frieze.

18 Simon (1975:39) believes them to be, respectively, Phaethon, a temple-guardian of Aphrodite, mentioned by Hesiod, and Tithonus.
elements such as these acquire meaning only in opposition, and that they may have completely different meanings according to the terms to which they are opposed.

Any viewer of the Pergamon frieze can see that, whereas almost all the gods have a purely human shape, many of the giants display spectacular animal features. A number of the giants have huge, coiling snakes for legs, several sport wings, some pointed animal-ears; and there are three unique giants, one of which has, besides wings and a snake-tail, bird-like talons on his fingers and toes, another has a bull’s neck, horns and tail, and a third - a startlingly imaginative creation - has, in addition to his snake-legs, a lion’s head and paws.

In giving the giants these bestial forms the designers of the frieze were tapping into a long-standing Greek tradition according to which ‘the other’ - that which was inhuman, dangerous, uncivilised - could be represented in hybrid form, as part human, part animal. In the iconography of the giants, however, the scope and variety of animal forms used at Pergamon are unparalleled; the fifth-century trend of distinguishing the giants more clearly from the gods is here sharply intensified - again, I believe, for ideological reasons, to render clearer the distinction between the Pergamene élite and its enemies.

When opposed to the fully human forms of the gods, the bestial features of the giants obviously connote inferiority, lack of civilisation. But with good artistic instinct the designers of the frieze pursue the contrast only a certain way and no further; they depict many of the giants as straightforwardly human, bearing items of hoplite armour, like their Archaic ancestors.

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19 An exception, but one that supports the rule, is the figure of Hecate on the E. frieze; she has her triple-bodied form, but is shown in modest profile, so that she has the appearance merely of three women ranged each behind the other.

20 These snake-legs indicate the giants’ chthonic origins, as do a number of their names which survive; e.g. Allekto(s), Chthonophylos, Eryxichthon; see Simon 1975: 41-42.


22 We have only to think of monsters such as the Sphinx, Medusa, Echidna, Scylla and the Centaurs.

23 On my count (it is impossible to be accurate, due to the fragmentary nature of the remains) some 19 giants have at least one, sometimes more, animal feature(s); about a similar number have purely human form; some 10 more are too fragmentary for us to tell.
However, what makes the opposition of human and animal in the frieze all the more intriguing is the fact that the animal element is by no means lacking on the side of the gods as well.

Like some giants, some gods too are winged. But whereas the giants' wings signify mainly animality, those of the gods indicate their lightness and speed, their association with the regions above the earth. Thus, for example, we see the wings of Nike and Eros lifting them above the ground, something the giants' wings, strikingly, never do. Again, many of the gods on the frieze use animals - signifying thereby their own mastery and power - against the giants (many of whom, by contrast, actually are part-animal). The eagle of Zeus appears four times on the frieze, symbolising the omnipresence of the supreme god in the battle, and it bears his lightning and attacks his enemies. And almost every lion, dog, horse or team of horses employed by the gods successfully bites, or tramples underfoot, its opponents. Most paradoxically of all, the gods several times effectively deploy against the giants their kindred snakes - thus seeming to signify the correct use of dangerous chthonic forces; by contrast, the giants' snakes most often hiss impotently against the gods, or uselessly bite their armour.

Winged Nike (E. frieze) and Eros (E. end of N. frieze) are both juxtaposed with winged giants who are rooted to the ground. (It is an extraordinary paradox that the giant on the E. frieze, Alkyoneus, sports wings at all, seeing that he derives his strength from contact with his mother, Earth; see Schalles 1985:33). Eagle: next to Zeus, on E. frieze; next to Rhea, W. end of S. frieze; in two ends of the frieze on W. steps. The eagle next to Rhea bears lightning; the one in the S.W. corner on the steps grips the jaw of a giant's snake-leg in its talons; Simon (1975:18-19) suggests that the eagle on the E. frieze has torn out the eye of the giant below it. On the eagle as symbolising Zeus' presence throughout the frieze, see Simon 1975:57; I find it very difficult to believe, with Panner (1979) that the eagles on the frieze have nothing to do with Zeus.

Lions: either side of S.W. corner of the frieze, W. end of N. frieze; dogs: see panels either side of S.E. corner; horses: mounts of Eos and Selene, S. frieze; horse-teams: of Helios, S. frieze; of Ares and Hera(?) framing Zeus-Athena group on E. frieze.

Snakes form part of Zeus' aegis on the E. frieze, and they coil around the urn wielded by Nyx (?) on the N. frieze, in both cases cowing a giant; the snake of Athena on the E. frieze coils around Alkyoneus and sinks its fangs into him; a snake appears in front of Nyx's face, on the N. frieze, too high up to be a giant's leg - most commentators take it to be an ally of the gods, but identify it variously as an independent combatant (Winnefeld 1910:125), a constellation (Robert 1911:239-40), the guardian of the Apples of the Hesperides (Simon 1975: 14-15); Hekate's shield is bitten by a snake on the E. frieze.
Above I drew the distinction that, whereas the gods *make use of* animals, the giants are animal (or at least part-animal). This distinction holds good for almost the entire frieze, but there is one very remarkable exception. In a prominent position, on the N. projection of the W. side of the Altar, we find the strikingly hybrid figure of Triton, with human head and torso, wings, horse's body and forelegs, and a powerful fish-tail. As if to highlight his animal form, the three giants he fights against are all purely human in shape. What are we to make of this extraordinary figure? If the iconography is not simply taken over inertly from the tradition, then this is an instance where the visual language of the frieze actually seems to deconstruct itself, where its designers prefer complexity, even contradiction, to the mechanical representation of ideology.

Finally, one of the ways in which the frieze most strongly differentiates between gods and giants is through the expressions on their faces. The faces of the gods uniformly display an Olympian aloofness and impassivity, clearly deriving from the fully classical art of the 5th century. By contrast, the giants' faces are contorted by a range of feelings: pain, fear, anxiety, rage. They bellow, roar - almost literally in the case of the lion-headed giant - and scream with wide-open mouths. Once again what was an occasional motif in the earlier tradition of Gigantomachy is transformed by the frieze into a full-blown theme, intensifying its ideological significance. The viewer is left in little doubt as to the superiority of civilised control and self-restraint over unbridled, barbaric emotionality.

I have left until the end consideration of one of the most paradoxical figures of the frieze, namely that of Ge (Earth). It seems to me that commentators have not acknowledged just how ambiguous a presence she is. The awkward fact is that Ge, though herself a god and the ancestress of the Olympians, also gave birth to the giants. The way she is represented on the Pergamon frieze (deriving apparently from a Phidian model) captures this ambiguous status: unlike any of the other gods, she remains in the lower section of the frieze, half-buried in the earth. Her name is inscribed neither below nor above, like those of the other giants and gods respectively, but on the background of the frieze itself, over her right shoulder. And unlike any of the other gods, she betrays deep agitation and distress through her facial expression, dishevelled hair and impassioned hand-gestures. One should

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29 For the face of Nereus as partial exception, see Kähler 1948:124.
30 The full range of gods' and giants' faces is illustrated in Kähler 1948: plates 52-63.
31 The Pergamene Ge would seem to be modelled closely on the Phidian Ge of the Parthenos Shield; see Vian 1952:145.
point out, further, that Ge occupies one of the most conspicuous parts of the frieze, next to the group of Athena and Zeus, the section first seen by visitors entering the Altar precinct. A further indication of her importance is that ‘Earth’ is also seen in another manifestation, as Rhea, at the West end of the S. frieze.

In the case of Ge, as of the theriomorphic Triton, we have to do with an ambiguous figure, which blurs the sharp distinctions that we can otherwise draw between giants and gods in the frieze. Again here what is true in general of the work is contradicted by an important, particular case.

To conclude. What I hope to have shown by this analysis of the Pergamon Gigantomachy is the considerable complexity of the work and the ways in which it resists one-dimensional interpretation of its meaning. Earlier monumental sculpture in Pergamon had been simpler in scope: from what we know of it, it depicted, fairly straightforwardly, an historical subject, figures of defeated Galatians. In choosing to treat the subject of Gigantomachy, and on an unprecedentedly massive scale, the designers of the frieze were setting their sights much higher. The choice of an old mythological theme enabled them to tap into a long tradition which, already since the 5th century, carried strong ideological overtones - the opposition between barbarism and civilization, as embodied by savage giants and anthropomorphic gods - overtones which they were able to exaggerate and intensify for their own contemporary purposes. But myth, like life, like real history, proved too complex to be reduced to a simple formula. Certain elements of the tradition (the distressed figure of Ge, theriomorphic Triton, giants of human, hoplite, form) were allowed their place in the frieze, and the designers actually imported new figures such as the triumphing ‘Biter’-giant, even though they cut across the overt meaning of the whole.

Why the designers of the frieze should have allowed these ambiguous elements, one can only speculate. Perhaps they were showing an awareness that the enmity between Attalids and Galatians, and the defeat of the latter by the former, was not as absolute as the propaganda of the Attalids sometimes implied. Perhaps they were giving rein to a very human taste for the pathetic and grotesque. Whatever the case, in the Gigantomachy frieze, the Pergamene artists produced an extraordinary work, which, even as it

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32 Thus one needs to qualify judgements such as the following: 'What the viewer gets from the frieze is an impression of... a battle in which the superiority of one side over another is absolute' (Spivey 1996:213). While it is true that this is likely to be the viewer's first impression, closer inspection shows that - like most first impressions - it is not wholly accurate.
proclaims an ideologically charged message of power and control, offers us numerous points at which to resist that message.

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