

# A Relief Decorated with a Griffin Discovered in the Forum Portico in Augusta Emerita (Mérida, Spain)

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This note describes the fragment of a relief decorated with a griffin discovered during an excavation in 2015 in Mérida (ancient Augusta Emerita), Spain. The piece is exceptional for its considerable size and its singular iconography and because the only known parallels are in reliefs on imperial buildings in Rome and Castel Gandolfo. The excavation site is in what is known as the Forum Portico, a Flavian-period cult precinct to the northeast of the Roman forum.<sup>1</sup>

## INTRODUCTION

In autumn 2015, the Consorcio de la Ciudad Monumental, the authority responsible for the management of Mérida's archaeological heritage, decided to improve visitor access to the interior of the monumental area known since the 1980s as the Forum Portico (fig. 1). A ramp was built to replace the stairway installed in the late 1980s on the northwestern side of the area (see fig. 1, bottom; online fig. 1).<sup>2</sup> The excavations related to this work were directed by Teresa Barrientos and provided valuable documentation on the construction, abandonment, and destruction processes of this public space in ancient Mérida.

The site of the structures now open to the public in the Forum Portico (fig. 2) has been known since the 19th century because of the large number of marble statues and architectural elements found there.<sup>3</sup> However, the discovery of these structures took place in two excavations carried out in 1980 and 1986, which revealed the northern corner of a porticoed area to the northeast of the forum and a large amount of marble architectural materials and

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<sup>2</sup>See *AJA Online* for all online-only figures accompanying this article.

<sup>3</sup>For a recent and full review of the history of the research on this space, see Trillmich 2011. On the 19th-century discoveries, see Plano 1894, 27–9. On the statues, see García y Bellido 1949, 147–48, no. 156, pl. 118; 184–88, nos. 207, 210, 211 and 215, pls. 152, 155–57.



FIG. 1. Architectural structures open to the public in the Forum Portico: *top*, front view from inside the enclosure; *bottom*, side view from the outside, with modern ramp visible in the left rear (T. Barrientos).

statuary, including several fragments of *clipei* (shields) and caryatids.<sup>4</sup> Trillmich, who made major contributions to our knowledge of this area, first called it the

<sup>4</sup>The current appearance of the structures is a reconstruction undertaken by the architects Rafael Mesa and Jesús Martínez in 1988 and 1989; see Mesa and Martínez 1992. On the architectural materials and statuary, see Álvarez and Nogales 1990. For photographs of the finds still in situ, see Barrera 2000, pls. 171–79; Álvarez and Nogales 2003, pls. 108 B, 109; Barrientos et al. 2010, nos. 65, 68. The pieces found allowed the series of *clipei* and caryatids with the same characteristics discovered in 1934 to be contextualized. They had all been reused in the construction of a modern sewer near the Molino de Pancaliente, on the outskirts of Mérida (Floriano 1944, 179–82).

“Marmorforum,”<sup>5</sup> and later the “Forum Adiectum.”<sup>6</sup> His was the first interpretation of the architectural configuration and urban integration of this complex.<sup>7</sup> However, Trillmich’s greatest contribution was his study of the statues, among which he identified a gallery of kings of Alba Longa and *summi viri* (illustrious men) of Rome, as well as a group consisting of Aeneas, Anchises, and Ascanius fleeing from Troy. All these, together with the *clipei* and the caryatids from

<sup>5</sup>Trillmich 1990, 309.

<sup>6</sup>Trillmich 1997, 140.

<sup>7</sup>Trillmich 1995, 269–78.



With respect to the southwestern platform, we know of a possible campus or *schola iuvenum* (field or school; see fig. 2[1]) in the western area and a temple (see fig. 2[2]) in the southeast.<sup>14</sup> In a second phase, dated to the Flavian period, the area was completely remodeled, except for the temple and encircling gallery of the Augustan forum.<sup>15</sup> A new plaza was built and lined by porticoes (see fig. 2[5]) that served as entrance halls to various buildings on the southwest, southeast, and northeast sides. These buildings include, to the southwest, the curia (see fig. 2[6]), the *aerarium* (treasury; see fig. 2[7]), and a building with an unknown purpose (see fig. 2[8]), and, to the southeast, the basilica (see fig. 2[9]).<sup>16</sup> Contemporary with this remodeling was the construction of the northeastern platform, an artificial terrace raised 3 m above the new forum pavement that was created following the demolition of the structures that had occupied the area since the Augustan period.<sup>17</sup> This terrace is the location of the Forum Portico, a 100 m x 75 m cult precinct flanked on its northwestern, northeastern, and southeastern sides by a portico with Corinthian columns (see fig. 2[10]). *Clipei* and caryatids alternated on the attic above the columns (see fig. 1, top), and niches along the length of the rear wall of the portico (see fig. 1, bottom) and exedras on its northern and eastern corners housed statues celebrating the history of Rome. A water channel (see fig. 2[11]) ran in front of the portico. The center of this area was not occupied by the precinct altar suggested by Nogales but by a temple (see fig. 2[12]), the remains of which were documented in the excavations of 2007 and 2010.<sup>18</sup> The evidence suggests a hexastyle and probably prostyle temple of approximately 20 m x 40 m, with Corinthian columns. A stylistic comparison of the Corinthian capitals of the portico and the temple with capitals from firmly dated buildings in Brescia, Rome, and Castel Gandolfo suggests dating the Forum Portico not in the Claudian-Neronian

period, as Trillmich and Barrera proposed, but in the Flavian period, as argued by Peña.<sup>19</sup>

#### THE RELIEF WITH A GRIFFIN HEAD

Numerous marble architectural and sculptural elements were found during the 2015 excavations (online fig. 3). In this note, we present an exceptional object from those finds. It is a fragment of a relief decorated with the head of a griffin (fig. 3) discovered in the lowest stratum filling the water channel. This stratum, which apparently represents the period when the Forum Portico was abandoned, was made up almost exclusively of brick fragments, stones, pieces of mortar, many marble fragments, and the remains of *opus signinum*—all of these small and medium-sized—and a small amount of reddish-colored earth. This stratum also contained some very fragmented architectural elements of uncertain origin and no pottery whatsoever. Above this stratum were the portico destruction levels, which contained many of its architectural elements. These were mostly fragmented (volute and acanthus leaves from capitals, cornices, moldings, *clipei*, white and colored marble plaques, and unidentifiable fragments), although some pieces were complete (a pilaster base, and one plain and one decorated cornice). The sherds of red slip ware (Terra Sigillata Africana D) and other types of orange slip ware allow us to date the destruction levels to late antiquity, possibly the fifth century C.E. or a little later.

The relief fragment (see fig. 3; online figs. 4–7) is carved in medium-grain white marble. Visual analysis suggests it was the same as the marble used in the architectural and sculptural decoration of the cult precinct, coming from the Estremoz quarries in Portugal.<sup>20</sup> It has a maximum height of 30 cm, a maximum width of 32 cm, and is 8 cm thick, including the 2 cm of the relief background; it is broken on all sides; the back is smooth. Remains of red paint are preserved around the eyeball; however, until a detailed analysis using the appropriate techniques is carried out, we cannot know what other colors were used. The relief

<sup>14</sup> Ayerbe et al. 2009c, 779–806. It is not known to what deity the temple was dedicated.

<sup>15</sup> Ayerbe et al. 2009b, 816–28.

<sup>16</sup> Ayerbe et al. 2009c, 695–744.

<sup>17</sup> Ayerbe et al. 2009c, 745–71; Ayerbe et al. 2011.

<sup>18</sup> On these excavations, see Ayerbe 2009; Ayerbe et al. 2011, 222–23.

<sup>19</sup> Peña 2009a, 568–71; recently on this area, see Fishwick 2017, 185–228; Peña 2017.

<sup>20</sup> On this type of marble, see Lamberto and Sá Caetano 2008; Mañas 2012, 332–37; on its use in the sculptures of the cult precinct, see Lapuente et al. 2014, 338–39, 349, nos. 11–15, 26, 27, 29–32, 34, 47.



FIG. 3. Relief fragment with a griffin head from the Forum Portico at Mérida: *top*, front; *bottom left*, back; *bottom right*, left side. Mérida, Consorcio de la Ciudad Monumental de Mérida, inv. no. 12020/372/1 (C. López).

viewed frontally shows the profile view of the head and neck of a griffin with the eagle's head looking toward the left.<sup>21</sup> The beak is slightly open, and one of the nostrils is depicted by means of a concave incision. The eye is framed at the top by two fleshy protuberances. A pointed ear, partly broken, can be seen behind the eye. A smooth crest flows down the back of the neck. Starting from the back of the beak, a beard follows the inner curve of the neck, and in front of the beard there are two feathers, probably from the griffin's wing. The small incisions that run across the head, ear, and neck represent hair, while the diagonal lines on the inside of the neck can probably be interpreted as belly scales. Above the head there are two pieces of fruit, each wrapped in two leaves; the largest piece, situated above the eye, appears to be an apple, while the smaller one, above the base of the ear, could be a fig.

Given the findspot, the relief clearly came from one of the buildings in the Forum Portico. We should therefore seek parallels for it in public buildings. As far as we know, nothing similar has been found either in Mérida or in other places in Hispania, where griffins were sometimes used to decorate the armor of military statues.<sup>22</sup> Comparisons are only possible with the architectural friezes of imperial buildings in Rome, among which we can include the *Domus Flavia*, the *Templum Gentis Flaviae*, the temple of *Venus Genetrix*, *Trajan's Forum* (fig. 4), and the temple of the deified *Antoninus and Faustina*, as well as the theatre at *Domitian's villa in Castel Gandolfo*.<sup>23</sup> The

reconstructed height of the Mérida griffin is approximately 90 cm. Griffins of this size are only paralleled by the griffins from the Type IV frieze ("lion-headed griffins, Cupids and vases") in *Trajan's Forum*, which are 88 cm high, and those on the frieze in the temple of the deified *Antoninus and Faustina*, which are 1 m high.<sup>24</sup> While there are many griffin heads with similar features, we have not been able to find any with pieces of fruit on top, either on the aforementioned friezes or in other depictions in public or private spheres. The fruit may have been part of a garland, but without any comparable examples, we cannot be sure. This detail, as well as the considerable size of the restored figure, makes it a unique piece and hinders attempts to reconstruct it. We do not know whether the griffin was standing or was sitting on its hindquarters. Neither do we know whether it stood alone or was accompanied by another griffin (in which case the pair would have flanked an unknown central motif) or whether it formed part of a larger composition. We can say that the creature was depicted with its two wings, as a small part of its right wing can be seen between the beak and the beard. This representational form is common on sarcophagi.<sup>25</sup> The griffins on the rear of a Hadrianic-period sarcophagus in the *Istanbul Archaeological Museum* (fig. 5) serve as a comparison for the head, crest, beard, wing, and neck scales of the Mérida griffin.<sup>26</sup>

The Mérida figure is carved in high relief, and the beak is completely separated from the background. In contrast, the two feathers from the right wing are in very low relief. The anatomical details were carved with a chisel; however, a drill was used to separate the two mandibles of the beak and the neck from the beard, as well as to individualize the pieces of fruit above the animal's head. The furrows on the neck and around the fruit are not continuous but are interrupted by *puntelli* or fine marble threads. Taken as a whole, this style is common in relief carvings from the second half of the first century C.E.<sup>27</sup> Such a date is compatible with the chronology of the pottery found in the building fills at the eastern corner of the portico on the northeastern platform, which indicates a termi-

<sup>21</sup> On the motif of the griffin, see *LIMC* 8(1):609–11, s.v. "Gryps." In general, on its use in the Roman period, see Delplace 1980. It was very common in the decoration of *trapezophora* (Cohon 1984; Moss 1989, 2:463–539, type four: "protomes on feline legs"), armor on military statues (Stemmer 1978, 152–54; Cadario 2006), architectural reliefs (Grüssinger 2001, 191–95, 222–28), and sarcophagi (Delplace 1980, 284–86, 291–92, 309–15). On its meaning, see Simon 1962; Flagge 1975; Delplace 1980, 363–426.

<sup>22</sup> Acuña 1975, nos. 1, 3, 6, 17, 19, 21.

<sup>23</sup> *Domus Flavia*: Iara 2015, 100–1, nos. 1134–35, figs. 60–1 (Hippodrome); Nicotra 2015, 147–48, no. 5.4.1; 205–11, no. 7.4.1.7. *Templum Gentis Flaviae*: Grüssinger 2001, 350–55, no. 49; Gazda 2009; Paris 2009a, 2009b. Temple of *Venus Genetrix*: Nicotra 2015, 108–10, no. 4.5.2.1. *Trajan's Forum*: Nicotra 2015, 72–232); she identifies four iconographic types: "eagle-headed griffins, with candelabra and vases" (Type I); "eagle-headed griffins and tripods" (Type II); "eagle-headed griffins and Cupids" (Type III); and "lion-headed griffins, Cupids and vases" (Type IV). Temple of *Antoninus and Faustina*: Pensabene 1996, 248–50; Grüssinger 2001, 400–16, no. 62. *Domitian's theater*: Grüssinger 2001, 347–50, no. 48.

<sup>24</sup> *Trajan's Forum*: Nicotra 2015, 175. Temple of *Antoninus and Faustina*: Grüssinger 2001, 400.

<sup>25</sup> *Supra* n. 21.

<sup>26</sup> Matz 1968, 100–1, no. 3, pl. 4.3.

<sup>27</sup> Peña 2002, 83–5, with reference to other pieces that present similar characteristics.



FIG. 4. Part of a relief decorated with griffins from Trajan's Forum in Rome. Paris, Musée du Louvre, inv. no. Ma 3127 (© Musée du Louvre, dist. RNM-Grand Palais, Christian Larrieu).

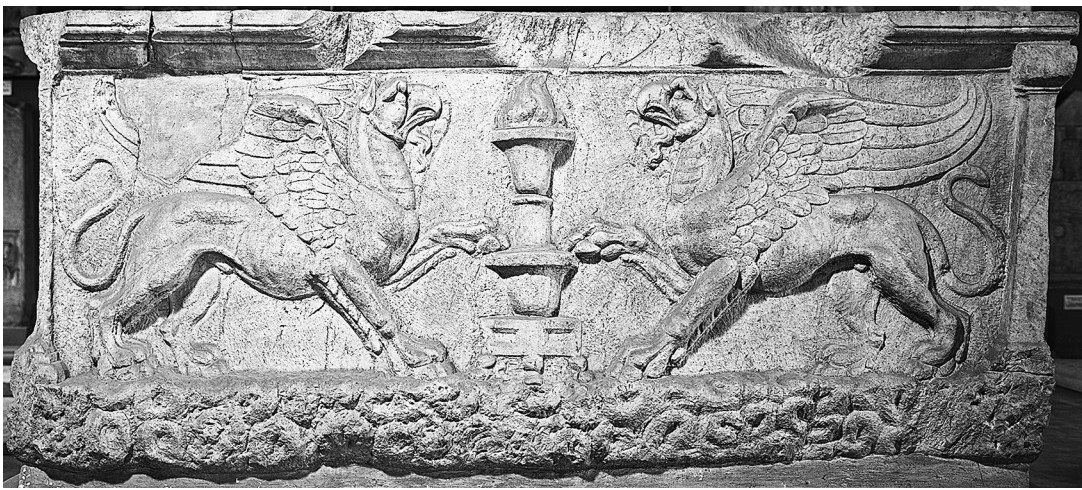


FIG. 5. Rear side of a Hadrianic sarcophagus decorated with griffins. Istanbul, Archaeological Museum, inv. no. 366 (D-DAI-ATH-Konstantinopel 8; E. Czako; courtesy Deutsches Archäologisches Institut).

nus post quem of the mid first century C.E., probably during the second half of that century.<sup>28</sup> Therefore, the relief could be dated to the Claudian-Neronian period, in accordance with Trillmich's opinion about the sculpture in this complex and Barrera's hypothesis about its architectural decoration.<sup>29</sup> However, it could also be attributed to the Flavian period, if we accept Peña's conclusions about the same architectural material.<sup>30</sup> Given that most of the griffins found on friezes of public buildings in Italy belong to the late Flavian-Trajanic period,<sup>31</sup> we believe that the Mérida griffin is most likely to date from the Flavian period.

The excavations have yet to confirm that there was an altar in front of the temple of the Forum Portico. However, if such an altar did exist, it is unlikely that the griffin would have been associated with it. It is more likely, as Peña suggested, that the altar was decorated with reliefs depicting garlands of fruit and a sacrificial scene, which Nogales attributed to a precinct altar.<sup>32</sup> Since the relief was found in the water channel in a context probably associated with the robbing out of the most accessible marble plaques and paving when the area was abandoned, and not in the actual destruction

<sup>28</sup> Aquilué and Bello 2009, 438–41.

<sup>29</sup> *Supra* n. 10.

<sup>30</sup> *Supra* n. 19.

<sup>31</sup> Grüssinger 2001, 222. Some other examples correspond to

the first half of the second century C.E. The rest, which are much less numerous and belong to funerary monuments, are dated to the late Republican and early Augustan periods (Grüssinger 2001, 222).

<sup>32</sup> Peña 2009b, 613–14.

levels of the portico, it would not necessarily have belonged to the sculptural decoration of the portico. In fact, there is no suitable place for it on the portico, either between the *clipei* and the caryatids of the attic or in the statue niches and exedras.<sup>33</sup> The only available space would have been at the northern end of the rear wall on the northeastern side (online fig. 3), some 25 m from where it was found. In that place, two corner pilasters framed a large niche, with an unknown function, that measures 4.17 m wide x 0.76 m deep and was lined and paved with marble plaques.<sup>34</sup> However, there is no evidence to connect the griffin relief with this niche. We therefore believe that the most likely place for the relief is the temple, which was probably dedicated to the imperial cult. Indeed, although there is no inscription to confirm its dedication, the similarities between this and other cult precincts in Mérida, and in the other two Hispanic provincial capitals, Córdoba and Tarragona, whose epigraphic testimonies relate their temples to the imperial cult, support this hypothesis.<sup>35</sup> Based on Peña's dating of its capitals to the period of Domitian, the temple could have been dedicated either to the deified Vespasian, perhaps with the deified Titus, or to the Gens Flavia.<sup>36</sup> If the temple was dedicated to the imperial cult, the relief would have been very appropriate for its decoration, as the griffin was sometimes associated with the concept of apotheosis.<sup>37</sup> The most obvious example of this iconography can be seen on the frieze of the temple of the deified Antoninus and Faustina, where the griffins face candelabra.<sup>38</sup> We do not know whether the griffins that decorated some of the architectural elements of the *Templum Gentis Flaviae*, a complex we consider

to be contemporary with the temple of the northeastern platform, had the same meaning.<sup>39</sup> In the Mérida temple, the relief might have been used as external decoration,<sup>40</sup> or, even more probably, as ornamentation in the cella, as in the case of the temple of Venus Genetrix,<sup>41</sup> either attached to the wall or to the podium of the cult statue.<sup>42</sup>

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- <sup>33</sup> Ayerbe et al. 2009c, 760–61.
- <sup>34</sup> Ayerbe et al. 2009d, 315–17, fig. 248.
- <sup>35</sup> Mérida: Mateos 2006. Córdoba: Peña et al. 2011 (cult precinct to the south of the forum); Murillo et al. 2003 (cult precinct on the eastern wall). Tarragona: Macias et al. 2010; Mar et al. 2015, 83–129. On epigraphic evidence, specifically: Stylow and Ventura 2009, 486–89, no. 11, figs. 37, 38 (Mérida); Ventura 2007 (Córdoba, cult precinct to the south of the forum); Peña et al. 2015 (Tarragona).
- <sup>36</sup> Peña 2009b, 621.
- <sup>37</sup> The first testimony regarding this significance was not related to any emperor but to Antinous if, as proposed by Blum and accepted by Engemann, the figure shown mounted on a griffin on the coins minted in Calcedonia was not Apollo, the tutelary deity of the town, but the youth deified by Hadrian (Blum 1914, 47; Engemann 1982, 174–76).
- <sup>38</sup> Pensabene 1996, 248–50; Grüssinger 2001, 400–16, no. 62.
- <sup>39</sup> On this complex, Grüssinger 2001, 350–55, no. 49; Gazda 2009; La Rocca 2009; Paris 2009a, 2009b.
- <sup>40</sup> Apparently, it would not fit the frieze of the temple, whose reconstructed height of 82 cm (Peña 2009a, 566) would have been less than the 90 cm reconstructed as the height of the intact griffin.
- <sup>41</sup> See Nicotra 2015, 110, though the exact original location of the relief is unknown.
- <sup>42</sup> The absence of similar examples does not allow us to prove this hypothesis.



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