

Major Monuments of Roman Spain, I.  
The Theatre at Emerita

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The Roman city of Augusta Emerita (modern Mérida in western Spain) was the capital of the province of Lusitania. Founded by Augustus' legate Publius Carisius in 25 BC as a colony for veterans (*emeriti*) of the Fifth and Tenth Legions, it occupied a strategic position on a hill beside the river Guadiana, overlooking the surrounding countryside. Emerita was also an important commercial centre because of its port facilities and its location on the road from Salmantica (modern Salamanca) to Hispalis (Seville). The city boasted many fine public monuments: a bridge 792m long, with 60 arches;

an aqueduct on pillars with alternating courses of stone and brick, which stands an impressive 25m high; an amphitheatre dug into a hillside, with seats for at least 14,000 spectators; and a temple of the Imperial Cult, with 30 Corinthian columns on a 32x19 metre platform. But the most famous building of all is the theatre.

The theatre stands beside the amphitheatre, in the highest corner of the city. It has three concentric, semicircular *caveae* (seating sections), as recommended by the Augustan architectural writer Vitruvius, with a maximum diameter of 86.8m. The *caveae* are separated from each other by walls two metres high. The lowest *cavea* and part of the middle one sit directly on bedrock. The seats are long, curved benches of local granite, 70cm wide by 30cm high (Fig. 1). Seven stairways allowed people to get to their seats. Allowing 55cm space per person, the theatre could have seated about 6,000 spectators. In front of the *caveae* is a semicircular pavement of marble squares known as the *orchestra*, 17.5m in diameter. Around the orchestra, the front row of seats bears inscriptions identifying them as places of honour, reserved for local officials. Comfortable, portable *sellae* (chairs) could also be arranged on the orchestra floor itself, to seat VIPs such as the provincial governor or visiting senators.

In terms of seating arrangements, the theatre of Emerita resembles many others throughout the Roman world. What is remarkable, however, is the two-storey stage building (*scaena*). The *scaena*, 60 m in length, is fronted by monolithic columns of coloured marble, six metres high, with Corinthian capitals (Fig. 2). Each storey has 32 columns, arranged in four porches; the upper storey, which had collapsed, was rebuilt in 1964. The porches are separated by three doorways (*valvae*); the pivot holes on which the doors hinged are still visible. Between the columns of the lower storey were beautiful marble statues of gods and deified emperors, of which many fragments survive. The stage building formed the backdrop for the plays, and characters could enter through the *valvae*. In front of the *scaena* is the *pulpitum* or stage proper, seven metres wide by one high, on which the actors walked and performed. At either end of the *pulpitum* is an arched doorway which allowed actors to enter or exit from the side of the stage.

Trajan. Behind the *scaena* was a series of actors' dressing rooms and storage areas for costumes and stage props. Adjacent to the theatre was a small shrine, in which was found a veiled bust of Augustus, founder of the city.

Although an inscription shows that the theatre was built in 16-15 BC, in the time of Augustus, the existing *scaena* is not Augustan but was added later. The original *scaena*, made of wood, was destroyed by fire in the late first or early second century, and replaced in stone. An inscription records that the statues were set up during the reign of