Identification

Nomination   The archaeological ensemble of Mérida

Location   Autonomous Community of Extremadura

State Party   Spain

Date   1 October 1992

Justification by State Party

Mérida is symbolic of the process of Romanization in a land that had hitherto not been influenced by the urban phenomenon. It contains the substantial remains of a number of important elements of Roman town design, including an amphitheatre and theatre and a circus which is considered to be one of the finest surviving examples of its type; the aqueducts and other elements of Roman water management are also especially well preserved and complete.

History and Description

History

Colonia Augusta Emerita was founded by Augustus in 25 BC at the end of his Spanish campaign. Its first inhabitants were time-expired veterans of the legions that made up his army. Three years later it became the capital of the new Roman province of Lusitania, and played an important role as the base for the conquest of the northwest of the Iberian peninsula. Its site was a classic one, where a major road crossed an important river (the Guadiana), and it quickly became a very important administrative, commercial, and communications centre. The town was a paradigm of Roman urbanization, with a checkerboard layout, public buildings, efficient drainage, and an elaborate water supply system, with an ordered hinterland of agricultural estates.

Spain, and with it Emerita, benefited from the rule of the Spanish Emperors Trajan and Hadrian, who endowed it with splendid public buildings. The power and prosperity of Emerita were reinforced when it became the seat of the Vicarius of the whole Diocese of Spain following Diocletian's administrative reforms in the late 3rd century. Christianity was established there in the 3rd century, and it was quickly to become the see of an archbishop.

It seems to have suffered little from the successive barbarian invasions from 409 onwards, and in 422 became the capital of the Suebian kingdom. With the pacification of the peninsula by the Visigoths from 457 onwards it flourished as the

capital of one of the six provinces, and enjoyed a special role as a cultural centre.

After its defeat at the hands of the Moors at Guadalete in 711, the remains of the Visigothic army took refuge in Mérida, but surrendered peacefully after a siege lasting over a year. The town was always a centre of opposition to Moorish rule, to such an extent that in 834 Abderrahman II ordered the walls to be levelled and a fortress (Alcazaba) to be built to guard the Guadiana bridge. From that time on the town underwent progress-ive economic decline.

Mérida was recaptured by a Christian army in 1230, but by then its archbishopric had been relocated at Santiago. A brief revival under Los Reyes Católicos in the late 15th century came to an end when the town was drained of resources, both human and material, during the Portuguese and Catalan rebellions against Philip II. Its impoverished state was made worse by its sufferings during the War of the Spanish Succession in the early 18th century and the Peninsular War a century later, and a slow economic revival has only begun again in recent years.

Description

The inventory of archaeological monuments in the nomination has 29 items, two of which are museums. Of the remainder, the majority are from the Roman period, both intra and extra muros, but there are also monuments from the Visigothic period and the 9th century Moorish fortress. The main monuments on the inventory are the following:

- The Guadiana bridge   The bridge, which is still in use, is one of the longest known from the Roman period at 792 m overall length. It consists of two sections of arches linked by a large pier with massive cutwaters, built in granite and concrete. Much of the original Roman struc-ture survives, especially at the two ends. It dates from the foundation of the colony in 25 BC. Another, smaller, bridge from the same period spans the Albarregas brook, a tributary of the Guadiana.

- The Amphitheatre   This formed part of the original layout of the town and occupies two insulae; there is seating capacity for 15,000 spectators. It is a typical ellipti-cal structure (126 m by 102.65 m), with an arena measuring 55 m by 41 m, containing a cruciform fossa arenaria to house stage machinery and animal cages. It is a somewhat crudely built structure by comparison with other Roman amphitheatres, using a mixture of materials. According to an inscription it was inaugurated in 8 BC, and was embel-lished during the Flavian period; it was abandoned in the 4th century.

- The Theatre   This is a classic Vitruvian semi-circular theatre, partly set into a low hill. The upper part (summa cavea) is somewhat ruinous, but the lower sections proved on excavation to be well preserved. An inscription to M. Agrippa suggests that it was inaugurated in 16/15

BC, and there is evidence of Flavian improvement; it was reconstructed in AD 333-5. It had an estimated seating capacity of 5500. The <u>scenae frons</u> has been restored to its original height over much of its breadth.

- <u>The Temple of Diana</u> This temple, which is peripteral and hexastyle, like its Iberian near-contemporaries in Barcelona and Evora, was constructed in granite and measures 31.8 m by 21.9 m. It probably dates to the early years of the 1st century AD. The intactness of the structure is attributable to the fact that it was converted into a private residence in the 16th century; some Renaissance elements have been preserved in the structure.

- <u>The "Arch of Trajan"</u> This granite arch, 14 m high and 5.7 m wide, was originally clad with marble, which has entirely disappeared. Its ascription as a commemorative arch to Trajan is dubious: it may have been an entrance gate to the original town or, more likely, to the enceinte of the Temple of Diana.

- <u>The Circus</u> One of the largest in the Roman world, it was probably contemporaneous with the foundation of the <u>colonia</u>. An inscription suggests that it was restored in the 4th century. Part of the original facade has been reconstructed.

- <u>Columbarii</u> These two family tombs from the Flavian period are remarkably well preserved; they contain some fine wall paintings.

- <u>Water supply system</u> There is a number of important remains of the water supply system to Emerita, including three dams (one alongside the Guadiana), well preserved stretches of underground water channels, and substantial remains of aqueducts. The Proserpina and Cornalvo dams, both still functioning, are the most remarkable surviving examples of Roman water management systems.

- <u>The Basilica de Casa Herrera</u> This is a Paleochristian basilica with a double-apsidal nave and side aisles of a well known North African type. It lies outside the Roman town.

- <u>The Martyr Church of Santa Eulalia</u> Excavations beneath the nave of the present church, which dates to the 18th century and later, have revealed substantial traces of the original church dedicated to Santa Eulalia, martyred under Diocletian. There are some outstanding wall paintings from c. 570.

- <u>The Alcazaba</u> The present structure dates from the mid 9th century, but there are some indications that it may have been begun in the Visigothic period, since it exhibits some characteristic Byzantine features. The massive 10 m high walls, with their 25 bastions, enclose an almost square area: the perimeter measures 538 m. The entrance to the fortress, which guards the bridge over the

Guadiana, is from the northwest, through a barbican. Excavation has produced no evidence of permanent buildings in the interior that are contemporary with the walls (apart from a substantial cistern), but there are abundant traces of the Roman houses and streets that were removed to permit its construction, which are on public display.

Management and Protection

Legal status

The archaeological monuments are for the most part owned by the Spanish State; others are the property of the Diocese of Badajoz. They have been protected by successive legislation since 1911, and now come within the provisions of Law No. 16 of 25 June 1985 concerning the Spanish Historic Heritage. They are jointly administered by the Autonomous Community of Extremadura (Consejería de Educación y Cultura, Dirección de Patrimonio Cultural) and the central Government (Instituto de Conservación y Restauración de Bienes Culturales, Ministerio de Cultura).

Management

The Patronato de la Ciudad Monumental, Histórico-Artística y Arqueológica de Mérida was founded in 1963. There followed a long period of disagreements with the Ayuntamiento (Town Council), which saw conservation and presentation of the heritage of Mérida as a brake on its future economic and social development. The Comisión de Protección del Patrimonio Histórico-Artística y Arqueológico was created in 1971 with an adjudicatory role, but when the town was designated as a Conjunto Histórico-Artístico by Decree in February 1973 the Ayuntamiento took its protest (unsuccessfully) to court.

The situation has greatly improved at the present time, However, there is inadequate protection for the heritage in the current Plan de Ordenación Urbana and work is in progress on a special plan for the Conjunto Arqueológico.

Conservation and Authenticity

Conservation history

The excavated sites are in an excellent state of conservation, and the upstanding buildings, such as the amphitheatre and theatre, have been sympathetically conserved and restored during the present century.

Authenticity

Interventions appear to have been minimal on the archaeological sites excavated in recent years. There has been some earlier elaborate reconstruction on one or two sites, notably the Theatre, but most of this comes within the definition of

anastylosis. The monuments still in use, such as the bridges, have obviously been modified over two thousand years.

Evaluation

<u>Qualities</u>

Mérida is an outstanding example of a Roman town implanted upon a conquered territory and conforming with all the precepts of Roman urban design. It is especially noteworthy in that its role during the Empire was an important one in political and economic terms. Despite local opposition a sustained campaign of dedicated scientific excavation, conservation, and presentation has been established.

<u>Comparative analysis</u>

There are already over twenty Roman sites around the Mediterranean on the List. Of these, some are single monuments (eg the Pont du Gard, the El Djem amphitheatre) and others are largely Roman-period remains on an earlier foundation (eg Palmyra, Cyrene). Of the purely Roman foundations, some are largely or completely open archaeological sites (eg Tipasa, Timgad). Mérida is an example of a Roman foundation underlying a modern town; others are Evora and Segovia. Mérida differs from these in having been a provincial capital of great political and commercial importance and in having much more extensive remains.

<u>Additional comments</u>

An ICOMOS expert mission visited Mérida in April 1993 and examined the properties included in the nomination in the company of representatives of the competent authorities at national, regional, and municipal level. The quality of conservation and restoration was considered to be high and in full conformity with accepted principles.

It was pointed out that the sites included within the nomination were not clearly defined on the maps supplied with the nomination dossier. The authorities subsequently provided new maps with the proposed properties precisely delineated; details were also supplied of the buffer zones, which conform with the requirements of the <u>Operational Guidelines</u>. In the case of those monuments within the modern town, these are in fact provided by the protection under Spanish antiquities legislation of the ensemble. The remarkable Roman dams are equally covered by means of other forms of protection, such as inclusion in a designated natural park in the case of the Cornalvo dam.

Opposition to conservation of the cultural heritage of Mérida appears to be a thing of the past. Substantial infrastructural and financial support for protection, conservation, and presentation is now available, not least as a result of the strong support of the municipality and in particular of the major. A policy of acquisition of parcels of land surrounding the major monuments has been in force for several years, with the result that they will be better displayed; in some cases small

archaeological parks have been created, forming reserves for long-term scientific excavation projects.

A draft plan for the cultural heritage of Mérida is in existence, but it not yet been fully approved. However, the Municipality of Mérida has provided written evidence of its continuing commitment to the better conservation and presentation of its cultural heritage.
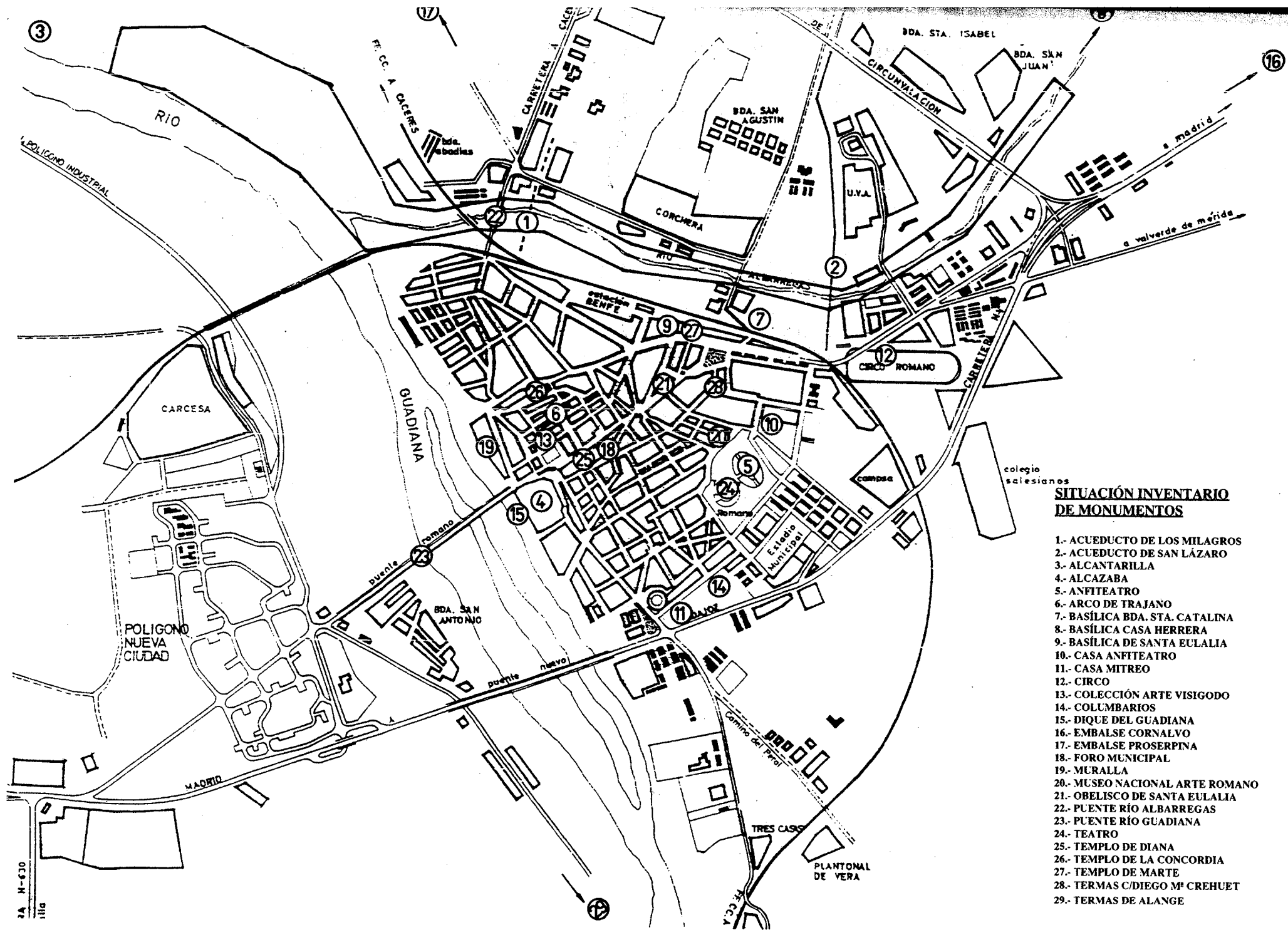

Recommendation

That this property be inscribed on the List on the basis of criteria iii and iv:

- <u>Criteria iii and iv</u> The monuments of Mérida are outstanding examples of the public buildings of a major Roman provincial capital, both in its Imperial heyday and in its subsequent history.


ICOMOS, October 1993

Mérida : plan de situation des monuments /
location map of the monuments

RÍO

FF. CC. A CACERES

BDA. STA. ISABEL

BDA. SAN JUAN

CARRETERA A CACE

BDA. SAN AGUSTIN

CIRCUNVALACION

POLIGONO INDUSTRIAL

BDA. Abadias

CORCHERA

U.V.A.

a madrid

a valverde de mérida

estación RENFE

RÍO ALBARREGAS

CARCESA

GUADIANA

CIRCO ROMANO

colegio salesianos

POLIGONO NUEVA CIUDAD

puente romano

BDA. SAN ANTONIO

campsa

Romano

Estadio Municipal

puente nuevo

MADRID

Camino del Peral

BAJOZ

VA N-630

tilla

TRES CASAS

PLANTONAL DE VERA

FF.CC.A

SITUACIÓN INVENTARIO DE MONUMENTOS

1.- ACUEDUCTO DE LOS MILAGROS
2.- ACUEDUCTO DE SAN LÁZARO
3.- ALCANTARILLA
4.- ALCAZABA
5.- ANFITEATRO
6.- ARCO DE TRAJANO
7.- BASÍLICA BDA. STA. CATALINA
8.- BASÍLICA CASA HERRERA
9.- BASÍLICA DE SANTA EULALIA
10.- CASA ANFITEATRO
11.- CASA MITREO
12.- CIRCO
13.- COLECCIÓN ARTE VISIGODO
14.- COLUMBARIOS
15.- DIQUE DEL GUADIANA
16.- EMBALSE CORNALVO
17.- EMBALSE PROSERPINA
18.- FORO MUNICIPAL
19.- MURALLA
20.- MUSEO NACIONAL ARTE ROMANO
21.- OBELISCO DE SANTA EULALIA
22.- PUENTE RÍO ALBARREGAS
23.- PUENTE RÍO GUADIANA
24.- TEATRO
25.- TEMPLO DE DIANA
26.- TEMPLO DE LA CONCORDIA
27.- TEMPLO DE MARTE
28.- TERMAS C/DIEGO Mª CREHUET
29.- TERMAS DE ALANGE
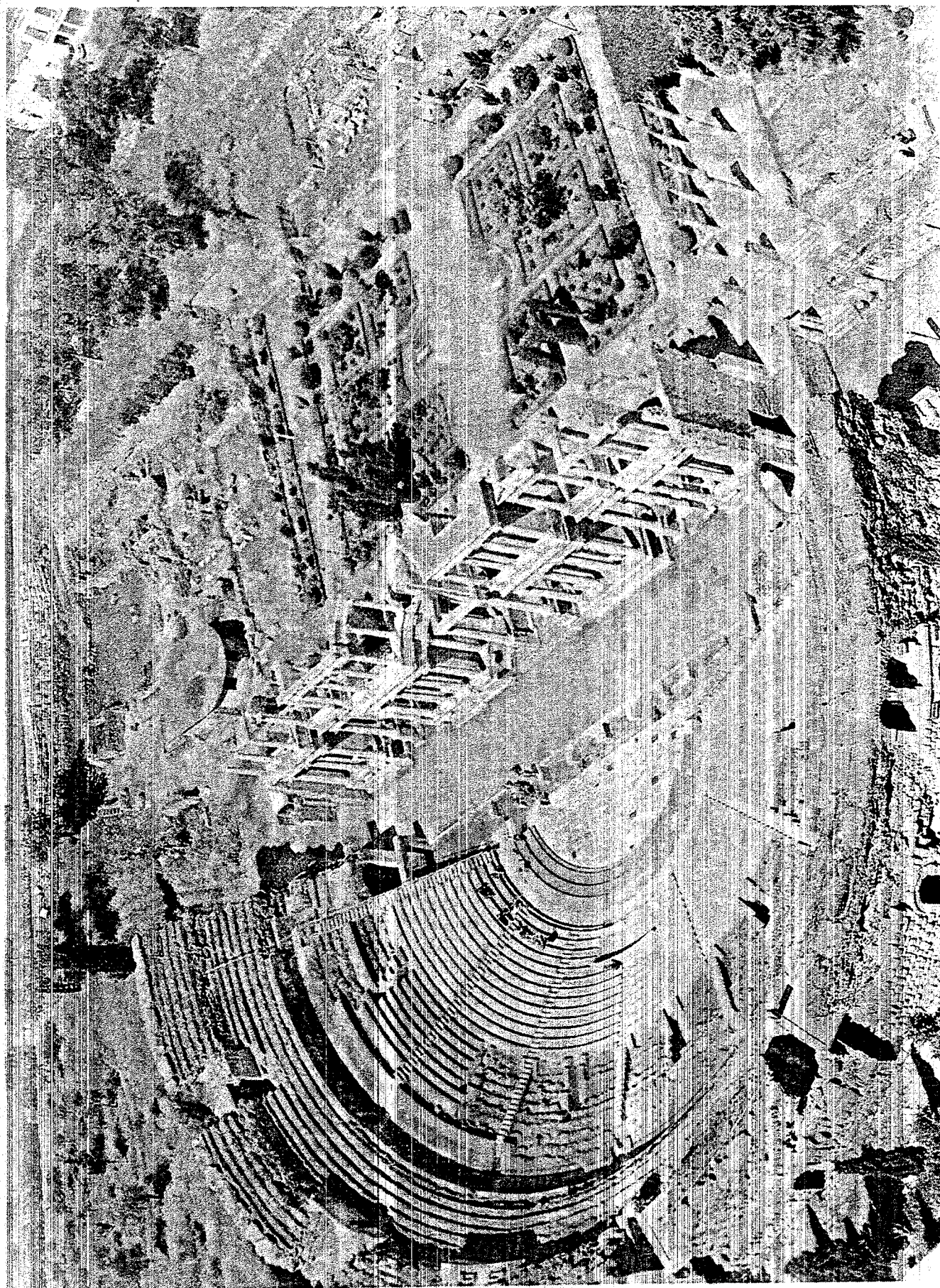
Mérida : vue d'ensemble du théâtre /
general view of the theatre
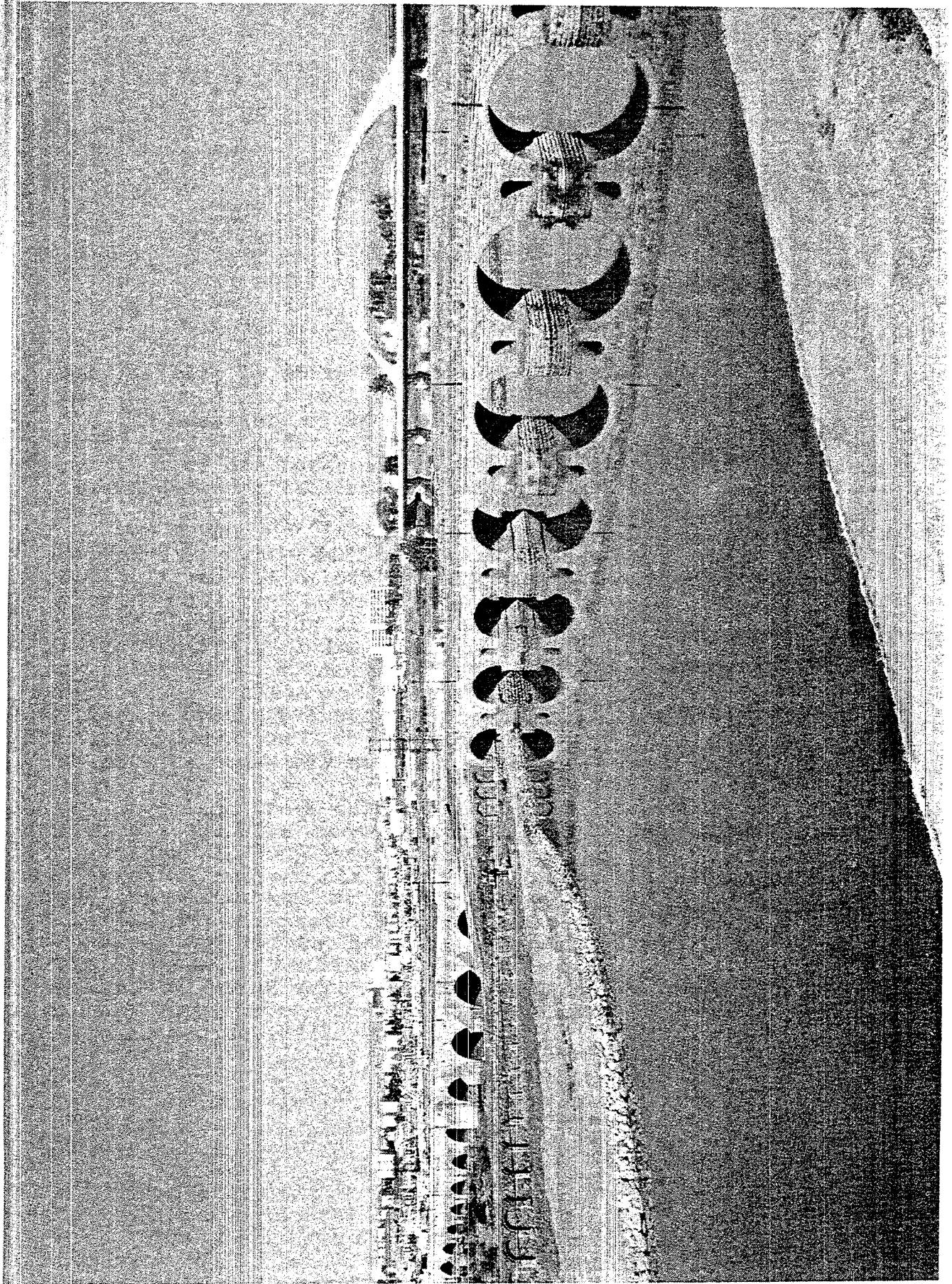
Mérida : vue du pont sur le Guadiana /
view of the Guadiana bridge