The jewellery from grave 10 of Pontezuelas in *Colonia Augusta Emerita* (Mérida, Spain): family heirlooms?

**Abstract**

Between 1934 and 1936, the archaeologist Antonio Floriano directed excavations in the city of Mérida, the ancient colony *Augusta Emerita*. Some years later, once the Civil War had ended, he published a good deal of the finds. These included the explorations conducted in the Oriental Necropolis of the city, an area whose extent he established and considered as a whole for the first time. Grave-goods from this cemetery were recorded, including the so-called Grave 10 of Pontezuelas. The grave is pinpointed on the published excavation plan and the grave-goods listed, but no mention is made of the context of their find. This highly interesting assemblage is particularly opulent due to the gold jewellery it contains. Especially noteworthy is a bracelet combining pairs of gold hemispheres—in the style of well-known examples from Pompeii but technically very dissimilar—with jet beads, some of which follow the model of the gold pieces. Other pieces consist of a finger-ring with a highly original sandal-shaped bezel whose closest reference is to sandal-shaped *fibulae* known in the provinces of the *limes*, from *Britannia* to *Pannonia*; several hollow pieces; an earring; and a brooch. Various considerations point to the broad timespan of the types of jewellery in the assemblage and could indicate that they represent family heirlooms, brought together over a lengthy period of time (perhaps spanning over a century), passed on from generation to generation.

Ancient *Augusta Emerita* (modern Mérida, Spain) was founded by veteran legionaries discharged from the *V Alaudae* and *X Gemina* around the year 25 BC. The colony was settled *ex novo* at a convenient crossing of the Guadiana river. Its location at the junction of several major communication routes is key to understanding the strategic position it would later hold, acting as an intermediate control point between the peninsula’s main mining zones: the area of Sierra Morena in the south and the gold mines in the northwest. This privileged position could partly explain why it became the capital of the new province of *Lusitania*, created by Augustus in *Hispania* during his administrative reorganisation.

The cemeteries of the colony lie around the main routes departing from the city. Funerary monuments and graves extend along the routes linking *Augusta Emerita* to *Hispania’s* main

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1 Nogales Basarrate, Álvarez Martínez 2018, 21-23.
cities in accordance with the traditional Roman model. The monuments originally were placed beside these roads but were placed in intermediate spaces between roads in the late Roman period. This process produced a “funerary crown” around the city wall.2

The archaeologist Antonio Floriano Cumbreño directed excavations in Mérida from 1934 to 1936. This was a crucial period in the history of the city, just after the discovery of large archaeological sites, such as the Roman theatre, the amphitheatre, and the funerary area of “Los Columbarios,” excavated by Maximiliano Macías and José Ramón Mélica.3 Amongst other great finds, Floriano discovered the veiled portrait of the colony’s founding emperor—a bust of Augustus of the “Via Labicana” type—in the postscenium of the theatre. Floriano also conducted archaeological excavations in the Oriental Necropolis of the ancient colony, Augusta Emerita, uncovering a funerary zone of great importance within the city.

The Oriental Necropolis, and particularly the area known as “Campsa-El Disco,” constituted a highly busy and important area outside the centre of the colony. It was passed by many routes from the public performance area, where the theatre and amphitheatre stood, and was close to the circus. Intense funerary activity can be documented here from the first to third centuries AD.4 In 1934, due to the remodelling of Mérida, Floriano was able to excavate a part of this necropolis, known as Pontezuelas, where he documented 19 graves. His research, however, came to a halt with the outbreak of the Spanish Civil War, which lasted from 1936 to 1939. Some years later in 1944, Floriano published the results of his archaeological excavations including the work carried out at the Oriental Necropolis (Fig. 1).5

Several types of burials were documented at Pontezuelas, including both inhumation and cremation. In addition, there were two outstanding funerary monuments consisting of a remarkable hypogeum-like double-chamber grave and a columbarium, a type rarely found within the city. Today, nothing remains of these structures.

In the inventory of materials, Floriano described the funerary assemblage from grave 10 of Pontezuelas. This grave was pinpointed on the map, but unfortunately there is no information concerning the type of burial or any other details of this grave. According to the publication, the deposit consisted of an assortment of jewellery and two bronze hoops that were “used as rings,” according to Floriano, and which were never incorporated into the collection of the National Museum of Roman Art. The six pieces of jewellery he described constitute an outstanding group due to the uniqueness of the items (Fig. 2). Although no data are provided regarding their find context other than that they were from grave 10, their analysis reveals significant aspects regarding the city’s funerary environment, the social and cultural value attached to the use of jewellery, and the final decision to deposit them with the deceased.

Analysis of the funerary deposit

The funerary assemblage from grave 10 included a finger-ring, an earring, a brooch, two “beads,” and a bracelet. The finger-ring (Fig. 3) has an oval hoop, flat in section, expanding to the shoulders, on which a bezel is soldered flanked by a ball on each side between the hoop

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2 Bendala Galán 1976, 141.
3 Velázquez Jiménez 2010, 87-122.
4 Murciano Calles 2019, 377. For bibliography on the funerary area, see Velázquez Jiménez 2011.
5 Floriano Cumbreño 1944, 151-186.
and the bezel. The bezel is shaped in the form of a shoe sole (solea/caligae). Five garnets are set on a base plate, with a top plate with vertical edges forming a box to hold them. The garnets simulate nails on the sole. The closest typology is Guiraud Type IV, which is defined by a heterogeneous group of finger-rings typically boasting bezels of various shapes set on narrow hoops, often with granulated decoration on the shoulders. They typically feature the use of colour on the bezels. This type dates from the fourth century AD.

The highly peculiar bezel on the finger-ring found in grave 10 of Pontezuelas can only be related to sandal-sole type brooches, which also feature this shape. This type of brooch is generally inlaid with enamel redolent of the studs of sandals, as in the case of the garnets on the ring found in Mérida. These brooches were common enough in Britannia and other provinces of the limes in the second century AD, particularly in military contexts. Interpretations vary, with some scholars linking them to the idea of travel because of their solea or caligae shape and therefore to some elements of protection from danger during a journey. They have also been interpreted as elements of religious cults and linked to Mercury, the Roman god of travellers. The bezel from Mérida could be interpreted as a transposition of the Roman type of brooch into a finger-ring—an interpretation of a model in a context very far removed from their normal use, both in function and location.

The earring (FIG. 4) has a central openwork body in the shape of a four-petalled flower open in the middle where a pearl is inset. The pearl is held by two of the four claws on the reverse. Another pearl hangs from the lower part of the earring and is threaded on wire. On the reverse, stemming from the four claws, is a pointed hook of decreasing thickness. This type corresponds to an intermediate point in evolution towards the opus interrasile technique, which features a central four-petalled flower and a pendant. More commonly, instances exist of a central flower with a bead in the middle, an evolution of first-century AD types that eventually resulted in models made up of several parts in the third century AD. The closest parallel is an earring of unknown origin from the second or third century AD housed at the Louvre Museum. It has a flower with an emerald in the middle using the same system as the piece from Mérida but with no pendant below.

The gold brooch (FIG. 5) is of an openwork cruciform shape, the hollowed corners having notably rounded angles. The straight, tapering pin hooks around a central indent on one side. I have not found any parallel for this piece, although its small size suggests its use to hold a cloak, like the fibula of the Lyon treasure. The turned corners are deeply carved, characteristic of the jewellery of the third century AD.

Two hollow gold pieces (FIG. 6) were classified as beads. Made of gold sheet, they are deformed, one of them very badly. Their exact shape and original size are hard to establish.

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6 Inv. no. MNAR-CE29529. Inner diameter 14.58 mm, thickness 1.44 mm; bezel: 17.92 mm long, 8.45 mm wide.
7 Guiraud 1989, 188-191.
8 Johns 1996, 178.
9 Allason-Jones 1986, 71 and 79.
10 Crummy 2007, 225.
11 Inv. no. MNAR-CE29530. Height 17.4 mm.
12 Besson 2003, 16-17.
13 Inv. no. MNAR-CE29531. Length 16.69 mm, width 16.54 mm, thickness 1.1 mm, weight 2.3 g.
14 Pirzio Biroli Stefanelli 1992, no. 189.
15 Inv. no. MNAR-CE29538 and MNAR-CE29539. Height 10 mm, weight 0.19 g.
They could represent cubes with five holes, one on each side and one on the lower surface. The upper surface, however, is broken, and no traces exist of the edge which would indicate the existence of another hole. The lack of a plate on the upper part as well as the poor state of the pieces challenges their classification as beads; what their function may have been is difficult to establish. Beads for necklaces or bracelets usually exert pressure on adjacent beads and would therefore need to be sturdier and more solid. The Pompeian earring hook “a crescente” model is perhaps the closest parallel. This type of earring is formed by two parts: the central bottom with hook and the quadrangular body with circular openings, inlaid with glass and stones.  

The bracelet (Fig. 7a and b) consists of gold six figures-of-eight.  

Each bead is made up of two hemispheres of gold sheet, and the two pieces forming a figure-of-eight were soldered together. Two holes for threading run transversely through the hemispheres. The ends of the beads are open, perhaps for the purpose of saving raw material. Only two of the beads are different: one in the middle, which is without one of the front openings, and the final bead, which does not have an opening on one of the sides but has a hook on a small rectangular plate soldered onto the bead. The hook could be part of the clasp. On the reverse, all the beads bear a small D-shaped tab cut into the metal. These tongues perhaps helped the goldsmith hold the beads during execution. There are two different types of jet beads in the bracelet: (two) jet versions of dumbbell beads, with two pairs of holes for string crossing the beads at right angles; and (twelve) “D-shaped” beads with notches cut into the edge to create a tooth-like pattern and two transverse perforations.

This description is of the bracelet as it is currently displayed in the museum. However, in his publication of the find, Floriano stated that the bracelet had a fastener with “a clasp on one end and a hoop for the hook on the other end.” An old photograph (Fig. 7c) shows that a hoop with opposing rings, now displayed separately at the museum, is actually part of the bracelet’s original fastening system, separated from it at some stage and never reassembled.

The gold beads in this bracelet are a variant of a widespread, early imperial model of jointed bracelets with double gold hemispheres. Nevertheless, while the visual effect is highly similar to known Italian pieces, the manufacturing process differs considerably. All of the Italian bracelets known have double, hollow hemispheres, although instances also exist of a single row of hemispheres. The beads are always hollow and could be filled with a paste or filler, judging by the remains preserved when they were found. In contrast, each bead from Mérida is made in three parts: a back plate and two soldered hemispheres. Furthermore, in pieces from the Vesuvian area, pairs or individual hemispheres were linked using lateral rings to join the pieces together, whereas in the case of the Mérida bracelet, all of its components must have been strung through the perpendicular orifices, which cross all the pieces. Finally, the fastening mechanism was always carefully devised in Italian pieces, with granulated or

16 Pirzio Biroli Stefanelli 1992, no. 26, Fig. 88; D’Ambrosio, De Carolis 1997, no. 19.
17 Inv. no. MNAR. CE29533. Length 147.89 mm.
18 Floriano 1944. 185.
19 Inv. no. MNAR-CE24703.
22 Héron de Villefosse 1899, 267.
23 Pirzio Biroli Stefanelli 1992, no. 48.
openwork and filigree decoration. This highly sophisticated fastening system is nowadays known as “bayonet mount.” In the Mérida piece, the hook is preserved on one of the clasps. The related ring could have acted as an intermediate fastening piece, and another hook must therefore have existed at the other end.

Almost every known parallel of the bracelet’s gold beads originates in the Italian Peninsula. The type is conspicuous particularly at Vesuvian sites, to the point that it was once considered a local type. Outside of Italy this type was documented in the Kocakizlar Tumulus in Eskişehir (Turkey), in a piece dated to between the first century BC and the first century AD. In addition, this type was present in a fragment of a bracelet and two complete pieces from Egypt, one of them in the Cairo Museum and another in the Benaki collection in Athens.

The bracelet, therefore, seems to follow a well-known model of the first century AD, although with technological variations—of lower quality—which could indicate a local workshop. The inferior quality of these probable imitations of the Vesuvian model are apparent in details such as the fastening mechanism, the joining of the two hemispheres without decorative covering of the solder, and above all the soldering of the hemispheres to the back plate, the lateral openings, and the lower flap, which were probably linked to the production of the beads themselves. Moreover, the twelve jet beads follow the model classed by Allason-Jones as “plain elliptical bracelet beads” with one curved edge and the other edge decorated with a deeply cut motif. This type is widespread, though not in Hispania. Bracelets with this type of bead, however, were generally graduated and composed only of such beads, so that the patterns ran from one bead to the next. Dumbbell-shaped jet beads in such a bracelet are unparalleled and clearly imitated gold dumbbell beads. This may have been a specific commission by the purchaser, which would explain the highly peculiar shape of the jet beads.

The presence of jet in the jewellery assemblage is certainly peculiar as the material is rarely attested in Roman Hispania. Despite the existence of significant sources for jet in the northern Iberian Peninsula, they do not seem to have been exploited in the Roman period. However, examples of jet jewellery clearly did exist in Roman Hispania. An example can be seen in a necklace from the collection of the Mérida Museum (Fig. 8). It is made up of 180 round beads with a central hole and both sides serrated to perfectly fit together. It also has two beads, which are plain on one side and serrated on the other. Finally, there is another larger baluster bead most of whose surface is ring-carved. The clasp of the necklace features two pearls and a gold hook on one side while the other side must have had a gold link. This type of necklace with the same type of beads is well known from Yorkshire.

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24 Pirzio Biroli Stefanelli 1992, no. 47.
25 Héron de Villefosse 1899, 267.
27 Ogden 1990, 248-249, Fig. 500-502. The parts of two gold hemisphere bracelets in the Cairo Museum: CM CG 52561 and CM JE (?) 46349.1. The gold hemisphere bracelet probably from Egypt in the Benaki Museum (Athens): 104/56.
29 Menéndez Menéndez (2019, 149-152) presents references for bracelets with similar beads from across the empire, from Troia (in the province of Lusitania) to Margum (Serbia) to the Cataractonium fort (Catterick, North Yorkshire).
30 For an extensive study of jet in Roman jewellery in Hispania, see Menéndez Menéndez 2019, 123-203.
31 Inv. no. MNAR- CE37248; Barrero Martín 2017, 174, Fig. 4.
Jet has held appeal since prehistory\textsuperscript{33} and has always been treated as a precious material. Its physical features, intensely bright black colour when polished, as well as the protective and magical qualities attached to it in antiquity made it prevalent in personal adornment items and amulets, particularly those associated with women.\textsuperscript{34} Pliny the Elder in his \textit{Natural History} lists among its virtues the ability to repel scorpions or to ascertain virginity.\textsuperscript{35} Its use in this bracelet, imitating the gold beads, clearly acknowledges it as a precious material.

\textit{Interpretation of the assemblage}

The chronology of the bracelet from this funerary assemblage is highly uncertain. On the one hand, as previously stated, the gold beads follow a pattern, which is restricted to the first century AD. On the other hand, as Allason-Jones claims, it is difficult to find jet artefacts in the Roman empire prior to the third century AD.\textsuperscript{36} The chromatic and material combination rendered using gold and jet in the bracelet from grave 10 corresponds to jewellery advances in the second and third centuries that then were developed in succeeding centuries.

Based on these considerations, I suggest the possibility that the assemblage from grave 10 may have been a family collection, finally deposited in this special burial where the deceased was interred with her family jewels. Even if the gold bracelet was produced in a local workshop between the late first and early second centuries AD following popular Italian models, it is hard to envisage a broader time span for its production. It seems more plausible that the bracelet was used generation after generation within the family, and that it was repaired in the third century, with jet beads added perhaps from another disassembled bracelet.

Therefore, the bracelet seems to be the product of at least two important phases: firstly, the gold beads were created reproducing the models of the Vesuvian area with some local technical elements (the pieces present a back plate and different fastening and soldering systems between the hemispheres); at a second stage, the bracelet needed to be repaired with the addition of new beads. This addition included figure-of-eight beads and D-shaped beads. It is possible that this actually represented three phases with the different beads added at two different times. The use of jet suggests a date in the early third century AD for the second phase of this bracelet.

While the openwork beads may have come from a pendant with a similar chronology as the gold beads from the bracelet’s first phase, the remaining pieces seem to belong to a later date. The earring was produced between the second and third centuries, and the brooch most likely dates to the third century AD. Finally, the finger-ring marks the latest piece of the set, probably from the fourth century AD. Moreover, the presence of jet alongside the type of finger-ring in the shape of a sandal could indicate a relationship between the collection and the province of \textit{Britannia}, from where the trend in using jet stretched to the westernmost capital of the empire, the colony \textit{Augusta Emerita} – as can be seen in the aforementioned jet necklace.

\textsuperscript{33} Álvarez Fernández 2009, 45-59.
\textsuperscript{34} Allason-Jones 1996, 8-10.
\textsuperscript{35} Pliny \textit{Hist. Nat. (HN)37. 140-142}.
\textsuperscript{36} Allason-Jones 1996, 6-7. She also suggests that jet workshops may have started to operate in York during the second century AD, but that jet did not become popular until the third century AD.
Amassing jewellery within a family was a common occurrence, especially because of the value attached to precious materials. This is best noticed in cases of “treasure” that was hidden for various reasons—economic, war, etc.—at different times. The collecting of jewellery and coins over a relatively long period of time has been documented in hoards, such as those of Lyons, Parma, and Naix. It is nonetheless highly unusual to find such a significant collection of jewellery amidst funerary goods accompanying the deceased.

Jewellery, as an element of a woman’s assets, was usually inherited, either as part of a daughter’s dowry or as inheritance from mothers to daughters in the form of *fideicommissum*. Justinian’s *Digest* legally established which goods were to be considered *ornamenta muliebria* (women’s ornaments) and, in addition to the most common jewellery forms, it considered that unset pearls and gemstones were also part of “jewellery” in legal terms. This tradition of inheritance pertained mainly to the most Romanised provinces, where significant collections of jewellery are not commonly found in burials.

The phenomenon of including jewellery in burials was analysed by Andrew Oliver, who interpreted some of these instances as graves of prematurely dead, young, and unmarried women. The presence of toys and protective amulets along with rich jewellery in these graves has also been explained by Stefanie Martin-Kilcher as a way to identify the rich burials of young unmarried girls, in cases known as *mors immatura*. In this case, one part of the dowry of the young woman, namely the jewellery, was placed in her grave to accompany her to eternity, despite the fact that the law stipulated that her father should receive this unused dowry.

It is not possible to claim this motive for the assemblage in grave 10 of Pontezuelas, as data regarding the context of the grave and the individual are unavailable; however, this possibility must not be discarded given the exceptional number of gold pieces and their long lifespan as part of a family’s heritage. The owner of the bracelet decided to have beads added to this heirloom piece, this time using jet, which imitated its Vesuvian “traditional” gold beads. The study of each individual piece of the assemblage has allowed for the identification of cultural contacts and relationships between the colony *Augusta Emerita* and both *Britannia* and the Italian peninsula. In addition, this analysis has served to demonstrate that the collection of jewellery from grave 10 is the result of the accumulation of pieces over time, likely as family heirlooms. This indicates the importance of this jewellery as well as the high regard for the deceased, who was buried with the family jewels.

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37 Pirzio Biroli Stefanelli 1992, 52 and 77-79.
38 *Dig.* 34.2.16.
39 *Dig.* 34.2.25.10.
40 *Dig.* 34.2.25.11.
41 Oliver 2000, 115-124.
42 This could be the case of some well-known graves such as the grave of Crepereia Tryphaena and the grave of Valle-rano in Rome; see Bedini 1995 and Bordenache Battaglia 1983.
43 Martin-Kilcher 2000, 64-70.
44 *Dig.* 11.7.16
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Fig. 1 – Plan of the archaeological excavations conducted at the Oriental Necropolis. Photo: Floriano 1944.

Fig. 2 – Jewellery from grave 10 of Pontezuelas. Photo C. López. Archive MNAR.
Fig. 3 – Gold finger-ring. Inv. no. CE29529 Photo: L. Planas. Archive MNAR.

Fig. 4 – Gold and pearl earring. Inv. no. CE29530 Photo: L. Planas. Archive MNAR.

Fig. 5 – Gold brooch. Inv. no. CE29531 Photo: L. Planas. Archive MNAR.
The jewellery from Grave 10 of Pontezuelas in Colonia Augusta Emerita

Fig. 6 – Two openwork gold pieces. Inv. no. CE29538 and CE29539. Photo: L. Planas. Archive MNAR.

Fig. 7a and b – Bracelet with gold and jet beads. Inv. no. CE29533. Front and reverse views. Photo: L. Planas. Archive MNAR.
Fig. 7c – Early photograph of the bracelet in the Museum Archive.

Fig. 8 – Necklace with jet beads. Inv. no. MNAR-CE37248. Photo: L. Planas. Archive MNAR.