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Propylaea of the Roman Forum in Tergeste: Origins and Meanings of the Architectural Form

The Propylaea of the Roman Forum in Tergeste (modern Trieste) have been known since the 17th century, when some elements of a previously unknown Roman building were discovered in the belfry of the medieval cathedral on San Giusto hill (Ill. 24). The measurements of the monument, its tripartite structure, and the magnificent decorative program made 19th century scholars suggest that this was the Capitoline Temple of Roman Tergeste [12, p. 65–66]. During further excavations in the 1930s, F. Forlati offered a hypothesis that this monument could be propylaea [7, p. 391] and made its first visual reconstruction. This hypothesis was proved in the middle of the 20th century when the northern projecting part of the gate was found inside the belfry [24, p. 760]. It became clear that this was a free-standing portico. Since the second half of the 20th century, the propylaea have been studied in a broader context — in comparison with other Roman monuments, and using methods specific for art historical research: the stylistic analysis of the monument and its decoration conducted by G. Cavalieri Manasse [4, pp. 116–118], the iconographic description of the reliefs (M. Mirabella Roberti [14, p. 422], C. Lugnani [13, p. 14], M. Vezár-Bass [24, pp. 764–772]), and the dating of the propylaea clarified in the works of A. Degrassi [5, p. 318], G. Cavalieri Manasse [4, p. 116], C. Zaccaria [28, p. 69–71], and others. The comprehensive historiography of the propylaea and the results of the latest archaeological research, the detailed description of the building, and the discussion about its dating were presented by M. Vezár-Bass [24, pp. 753–798].

The propylaea formed a part of the Roman forum spectacularly situated on a terrace raised above the city of Trieste. Next to the medieval Cathedral of San Giusto there are the remains of a Roman rectangular square, which was surrounded by porticoes, and a basilica. The magnificent gate marked the entrance to the forum terrace from the south, where the main street led from the lower city. However, the exact disposition of the propylaea, separated from the forum square, does not suggest that they served as the forum entrance; rather, they might have led to a sacral area just behind them [16, p. 8; 3, pp. 202–203] or on the top of San Giusto hill [25, p. 203], where a Venetian castle was built in the 15th–17th centuries.

Based on the stylistic analysis of the relief decoration and on an inscription found not far from the propylaea¹, the building dates back to the middle of the 1st century A. D. [5, p. 318; 16, p. 9; 28, pp. 70–71]. On the other hand, near the propylaea the base of an equestrian statue dedicated to Gaius Valerius Festus was discovered, which dates to 80–85 A. D. [28, p. 68]. The statue itself did not survive, but in Roman times, it was placed just in front of the northern wing of the propylaea, and although it had its own base, it was conceptually linked with them

¹ The inscription honors Publius Palpellius Clodius Quirinalis, who presumably was the fleet-commander in Ravenna during Nero's reign and committed suicide in 56 A. D., as mentioned by Tacitus: Tac. Ann. XII, 30.

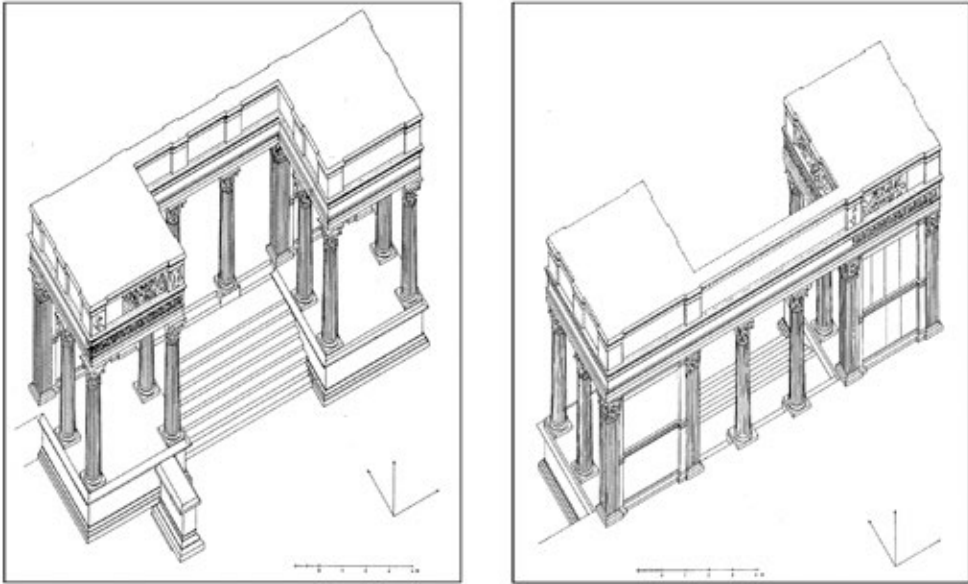


Fig. 1. Reconstruction of the propylaea in Trieste (R. Sponer). Adapted from: M. Verzár-Bass [24, p. 795]

[15, p. 13]. However, M. Verzár-Bass notes that the presence of the statue is insufficient to shift the dating of the propylaea towards the reign of Domitian [24, p. 781], though it provides another piece of chronological evidence proving that the building could not have been erected after 85 A. D. [5, p. 316; 28, p. 69]. The statue also shows the importance of the propylaea in the city: they served not just a ceremonial purpose, as an entrance to the forum terrace, but also had a representative function typical of buildings placed on the forum square.

Despite the vast research, both the propylaea and the forum of Trieste itself still raise a number of questions concerning their structure, their patron, and their origins and meanings. It will be interesting to continue the ongoing discussion of some issues and make further assumptions regarding the unusual, as I will show later, appearance of such a type of monument in this territory. This article explores the following aspects of the propylaea: architectural typology and possible prototypes, semantic and iconographic characteristics, and the ideas which this monument might have carried as part of the city forum.

According to archaeological data and reconstructions (see, for example, the axonometry by M. Sponer [24, p. 795]) (Fig. 1), the propylaea had a tripartite structure with a row of columns in the center and projecting wings, each with its own podium and a flat ceiling with coffering. The eight-step staircase led to the entrance through three intercolumniations created by two columns in the center and two corner pilasters. The number of columns in each wing is still discussed, therefore there are two different versions of reconstruction, with two and three columns on the facade of each wing respectively. The question about the exact type of covering also remains open.

It is evident from the decorations, that, apart from their immediate function, the propylaea had also a symbolic, in particular memorial, meaning. On the western attic, facing the city, there was a relief with weapons (Ill. 25), which is frequent in the decoration of triumphal

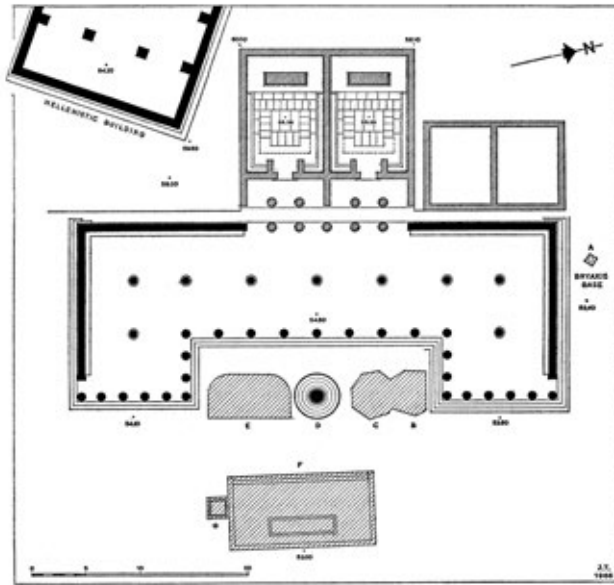


Fig. 2. Stoa of Zeus Eleutherios on the Athenian Agora, 430s – 420s B. C. Adapted from: H. A. Thompson [23, p. 173]

and memorial arches, as well as public spaces in general. The depiction of weapons is clearly connected with the theme of military triumph, as in the following monuments: the Arch of the Sergii in Pula, the triumphal arch in Orange, the reliefs depicting weapons from the Cesi collection, which are considered to have decorated Augustus' triumphal arch in the Roman Forum [22, p. 327], the nymphaeum in Glanum [6, p. 87], and other similar monuments with the depictions of armature. We should also note that the depiction of weapons could have had both funeral and heroic connotations, indicating the military status of the dead and their posthumous glory. The corpus of funerary stelae and built tombs, such as the Tomb of Caecilia Metella, give numerous examples of that.

Our funerary associations may not be accidental, because the erection of the propylaea could have been connected with a particular patron, one of the euergetes of Tergeste, whose name is mentioned in an honorific inscription found in close proximity to propylaea and belonging to the basilica of the 1st century A. D. [28, pp. 70, 76]. Thus, the propylaea could have been erected in honour of the military success of the Roman army during the campaign to Dalmatia [24, p. 785] as well as in memory of an honoured citizen.

On the eastern side of the gate, the images demonstrate a different, more sacral scene. The attic relief shows a winged figure with two vases in its hands (Ill. 26). The figure grows from a kantharos and is flanked by two griffins. There is a poorly conserved relief representing a figure with a patera in its right hand on a projecting block over the attic [24, p. 760]. The composition has various interpretations, a number of which have been presented in the article by M. Verzár Bass [24, pp. 765–768]. Most scholars associate the image with the cults of Dionysos or Apollo, which were closely related to the imperial cult during the reign of Julio-Claudian dynasty [24, p. 767, 3, p. 200].

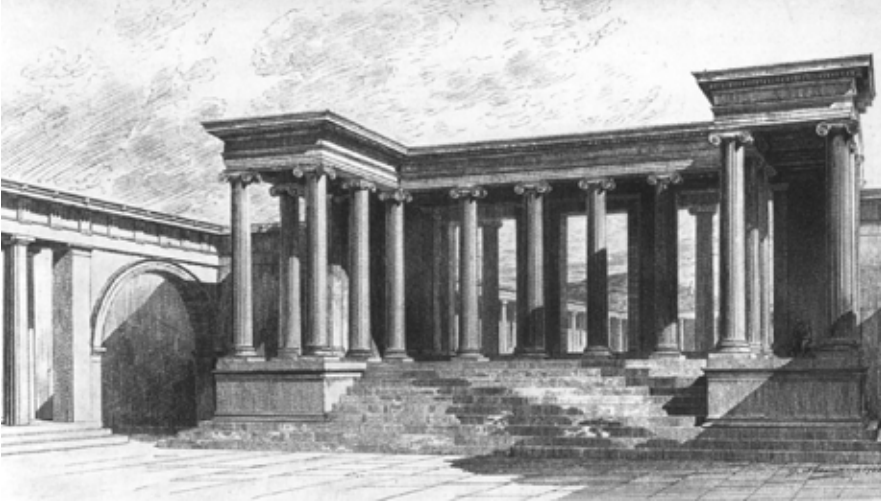


Fig. 3. A possible reconstruction of the West Gate of Tetragonos Agora in Ephesus (G. Niemann 1904).
Adapted from: P. Scherrer [18, p. 143]

The duality of the decorative program — military scenes on one side and sacral images on the other — can be explained by the difference in the functions of two spaces divided by the border accentuated by the propylaea. The eastern facade with the cult scenes could have been turned towards a sacred precinct, while the western, frontal part demonstrating triumphal scenes faced the city. This led some researchers to the hypothesis that the propylaea could serve as a solemn gate to the temenos of either the Capitolium [20, pp. 63–64; 5, pp. 317–318; 16, p. 15], or a temple dedicated to the Imperial cult [3, pp. 202–203].

We should note that this architectural form was not typical for Roman architecture of the 1st century including Northern Italy, so the appearance of the propylaea in Trieste raises the questions of their origins and prototypes. We do find examples of Roman propylaea mainly in Greece and in Asia Minor, where the use of this type had a long tradition connected with the Greek past [2, pp. 7–8]. However, the architecture of the monumental gate in Trieste seems very different from the most widespread form of Greek propylaea. Archaic and Classical propylaea usually had a simple rectangular plan with two porticos “in antis” [2, p. 189], for example, the propylons of the sanctuaries of Athena Aphaia in Aigina and of Poseidon on Cape Sounion, one of the Herakleia on Thasos. The only Classical propylaea with projecting wings (as in Trieste) are the propylaea of the Acropolis of Athens. Their well-preserved eastern wings flank the staircase rising to the central columned portico and have symmetrical facades with three Doric columns turned towards the staircase. The identical architectural solution of the facades of the wings makes the composition visually more balanced and accentuates the central axis.

This type of architectural decoration of a processional way, where a staircase rises towards the facade of propylaea, with a temple and other buildings of a sacral precinct hidden behind them, was also applied during the Hellenistic period. A striking example is the monumental complex of the Acropolis of Lindos. Here, the sacred way was adorned with two propylaea with projecting wings flanking a columned facade. However, because of the length and complexity of this building, the propylaea resemble much more a stoa rather than a gate, which

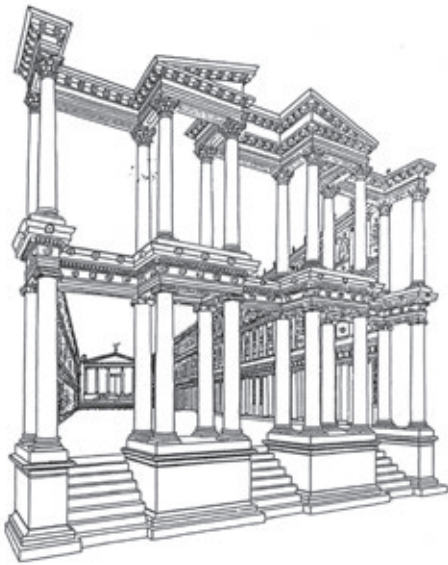


Fig. 4. Monumental gate to the Sebasteion in Aphrodisias. Adapted from: P. Gros [10]. Available at: <https://books.openedition.org/efr/2514?lang=de> (accessed 10 February 2023)

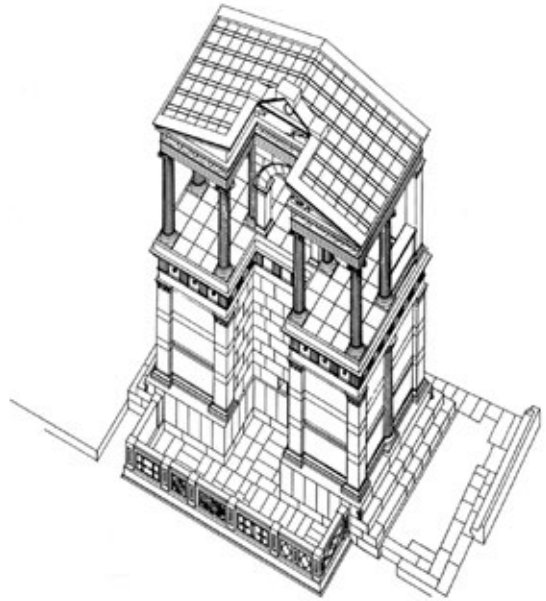


Fig. 5. Reconstruction of the Androklos heroon in Ephesus. Adapted from: M. Galli [8, p. 578]

has already been mentioned by a number of scholars, for example, by M. Hollinshead [11, p. 62]. We can recall some more examples of this type, one of which is the stoa of the Athena Sanctuary on the Acropolis of Kamiros.

Such elongated stoaes with projecting wings, it seems, appeared in the Classical period. In particular, we can remember the stoa of the sanctuary of Artemis at Brauron with a similar plan. However, even if such building type had originated from the Athenian Propylaea, it diverged considerably from their compact plan. Moreover, the main function of these buildings was not to accentuate the movement towards the sanctuary but to create a kind of theatrical 'backdrop', to 'frame' the space in front of them. Finally, they acquired a complicated interior structure, hiding a row of rooms behind them, which was not common in Classical Greek propylaea.

And yet we have some examples of stoaes that may have served as a link in the genesis of the form of the propylaea which we are interested in: a few more compact buildings with the elongated central part and projecting wings. Among them, there are some quite early monuments belonging to the Classical period, in particular the Stoa of Zeus Eleutherios built on the Athenian Agora in 430–420s B. C. [1, p. 104] (Fig. 2). Traditionally (see [26, p. 147; 27; 1, p. 104]), the epithet 'Eleutherios' is connected with the Greeks' victory in the Battle of Plataea (Plut. Arist. 21). It is considered to be one of the earliest examples of stoa with projecting wings. From the *Description of Greece* by Pausanias, we know that in front of the stoa, there were statues of Athenian military commanders, as well as of Zeus Eleutherios and the emperor Hadrian (Paus., 1.3.3).

It is noteworthy that a building of this type is related both to the theme of memory and military prowess, which connects the Stoa of Zeus Eleutherios with Roman triumphal arches, as well as with the propylaea in Trieste. According to John Camp, the stoa could have served as a storage of shields belonging to soldiers who protected Athens [1, p. 104]. Initially, the stoa did not have the walk-through, so it could not have been a gate; however, its 'potential' to serve as propylaea was apparently noted quite early. Already in the 4th century B. C., a small stone building with an unknown function appeared just behind the stoa [23, p. 178]. This first building was replaced by another one in the 2nd century B. C. [23, p. 179]. Further, in the early Roman period, a sanctuary was erected in a pit hewn out of the rock behind the stoa [23, p. 171], which, in fact, transformed the stoa into propylaea. The sanctuary was placed on the central axis of the Stoa and contained two cellae [23, p. 171]. It dates back to the 1st century A. D. and, according to epigraphic data, might have been dedicated to the imperial cult, perhaps, to Augustus, who was associated with Zeus, and to his family [23, pp. 181–182; 1, p. 105]. The existence of such a solution — putting a small sanctuary behind a stoa with projecting wings — made researchers like P. Casari suggest that, in a similar way, a small temple dedicated to the imperial cult could have been placed just behind the propylaea in Trieste [3, pp. 202–203].

Yet another example of a more compact stoa is the so-called 'building with paraskenia' in Thasos dating back to the 4th century B. C., which follows the type of the Stoa of Zeus Eleutherios in Athens. According to H. Thompson, it also might have been a place where the emperor was worshiped [23, p. 183]. Archaeological data proves the importance of this building in the public space and shows that, in front of this building, there were also statues of honoured citizens, while a list of archons was placed on the inner wall [9, pp. 66–67].

It seems that this form, with the elongated central part and projecting wings, developed by architects in the Classical period, appeared convenient in terms of carrying various, sometimes very different, meanings and functions: from the theme of memoria and military prowess to the imperial cult. For this reason, it is not surprising that a similar configuration was adopted also for altars, which in the Hellenistic period expanded to the scale of buildings and had a decorated inner space. The most famous of them is the Pergamon altar, which, like the Stoa of Zeus, has an elongated central part and projecting wings. Similarly to the propylaea in Trieste, the altar implies movement along the large staircase, with a passage through the row of columns, towards the upper platform. It is possible to seek the origins of this form not just in the development of monumental altar typology, but also in the architecture of stoa and propylaea (and also theatrical scenes with paraskenia) [19, p. 50].

Talking about the closest analogies to the propylaea in Trieste among the gates created in the Roman period, we can find them, as it has already been mentioned, in Asia Minor. Namely, already in 1975, M. Mirabella Roberti [14, p. 424; 24, p. 762] noted the similarity of the propylaea in Trieste with the West Gate of the Tetragonos Agora in Ephesus, erected in the 23 A. D. on the foundation dating back to the reign of Augustus [18, p. 142]. The propylaea performed an important representative function, emphasizing the entrance from the street leading from the harbour to the main commercial square of the city. According to the reconstruction by George Niemann (Fig. 3), the propylaea had a U-shaped form with two projecting wings flanking a staircase of 10 steps and decorated with the columns of the Ionic order. The poor state of preservation of the gate makes it impossible to judge its architecture and decorative program. However, it is evident that it did not lead to a temenos, but to a commercial square, so it is likely that, in contrast to the propylaea in Trieste, this building did not function as a sacred gate.

An even closer analogy to the propylaea in Trieste is a monumental gate to the Sebasteion in Aphrodisias, a complex dedicated to Aphrodite and the Julio-Claudian emperors (Fig. 4). This propylon was commissioned by two brothers, Menandros and Eusebes, and Eusebes' wife Aphia [21, p. 90]. The erection and reconstruction of the gate was undertaken during the reign of the Julio-Claudian dynasty, from Tiberius to Nero [21, p. 92], which coincides with the construction of the propylaea in Trieste. The propylon in Aphrodisias leads to the area dedicated to the imperial cult and also gives us an example of dedicatory architecture. Its central part is very similar to the form of the propylaea in Trieste, except that the propylon in Aphrodisias did not have the back row of columns and the attic. Another possible difference is that the Sebasteion gate has a second level repeating the forms of the lower one, a broken pediment, and additional passages on the sides of the central doorway. At first glance, this form resembles the 'scenographic' architecture of the Hadrian period rather than more compact propylaea in Trieste; however, in the Tergeste monument, we cannot be sure about the presence or absence of the second level or make judgements about its covering.

The third possible prototype of the propylaea in Trieste is connected to their possible memorial meaning. It is the Hellenistic heroon erected in Ephesus, on Curette Street, in the 2nd century B. C. It was associated with the mythical founder of the city, Androklos [8, p. 576]. This monument, raised on a four-meters high podium, is graphically reconstructed as propylaea with projecting wings flanking a passage covered with an arch (Fig. 5). These pseudo propylaea had a sculptural decoration with battle reliefs and, presumably, statues standing inside [8, p. 578].

Summing up, the architectural form of the propylaea in Trieste with a flat entablature and projecting wings flanking the central stair passage was not usual in the decoration of a Roman forum. Its origins can be traced back to the propylaea by Mnesikles on the Athenian Acropolis, which apparently gave rise to this architectural typology and became a model for whole succession of grandiose Hellenistic propylaea. However, already in the Classical period in Athens, this form was developed in buildings with other functions, namely in stoa, which received projecting wings at that time. In turn, both propylaea and stoa could have influenced the development of monumental altars. It seems that altars with their structure and decorative program can be considered as the closest prototypes for the propylaea in Trieste due to their compact plan and, at the same time, their figurative and symbolical richness. Such an original connection of the gate with altars could probably be explained by the function of the propylaea in Trieste leading to a sacred precinct. The area behind the propylaea was not large, so the temple, if it was there, would have had to be quite small (as in Lindos). The propylaea resembling an altar could have — if not literally, then visually — assumed some functions of a cult building. Moreover, we can imagine the situation where behind the propylaea there was no temple at all, and the gate led to a temenos with an altar, as was proposed by A. Rusconi [17, p. 107; 24, p. 762]. In this case, the propylaea could have acted as an architectural frame and even a part of the altar, as it was in Pergamon, so that the presence of a temple was not obligatory.

If we refer to the hypothesis that the propylaea emphasized the ceremonial way to the upper terrace, toward the Capitoline temple, then, in terms of their function, the closest analogy seems to be the monumental gate to the Sebasteion in Aphrodisias.

These functions and meanings do not exclude the memorial significance of the propylaea, which was particularly accentuated on the side facing the city. As it has been noted, the erection of the monument might have been connected with the prefect of Ravenna and the mem-

ber of an influential family in Istria, Publius Palpellius Clodius Quirinalis, whose name is known from the epigraphic data. The building could have been linked to the personality of the euergetes and the military success of the Roman army in Dalmatia in the middle of the 1st century A. D., which might help us explain the military subject of the propylaea decoration. In this regard, the similarity of the architectural form of the propylaea with the form of the Androklos heroon in Ephesus, which also had a memorial function and evoked triumphal and heroic associations, does not seem accidental.

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Title. Propylaea of the Roman Forum in Tergeste: Origins and Meanings of the Architectural Form

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Abstract. The complex of the Roman forum in Tergeste (modern Trieste) includes an element uncommon for the architecture of the Early Roman Empire — propylaea with projecting wings and rich sculptural decoration. This monument, some elements of which were discovered as early as in the 17th century, has extensive historiography, thanks to step-by-step archaeological research, complicated by the fact that the propylaea were built into the medieval belfry of the Cathedral of Trieste. The article develops and complements previously made observations regarding the architecture and decoration of the propylaea, combining semantic analysis of the reliefs with the analysis of the architectural form which seems unique not just for Northern Italy but for the Roman Imperial architecture of the 1st century in general.

The first hypothesis supposes that this form originated from such representative Athenian monuments of the Classical period as Mnesikles' Propylaea and the stoa of Zeus Eleutherius, where projecting wings with columns appeared for the first time. However, considering the territorial and chronological distance and the absence of evidence for a specific link between Tergeste and Athens, it might be assumed that this form refers to Hellenistic propylaea. Nevertheless, we should note that, regarding their plan and proportions, most of those gates with projecting wings have very little in common with the compact plan of the Trieste monument — rather, they resemble long stoa. The article attempts to trace the possible origins of this architectural form in the Roman and Hellenistic world, analyze its possible variations and meanings, taking into account the relief decoration of the monument.

Keywords: Trieste, Tergeste, Istria, propylaea, Roman forum, monumental gates, Roman Imperial architecture, Hellenistic altars, stoa with projecting wings, memorial architecture

Название статьи. Пропилеи форума в Тергесте: истоки и смыслы архитектурной формы

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Аннотация. Ансамбль форума древнеримского города Тергеста (современного Триеста) включает в себя необычный для римской раннеимперской архитектуры элемент — пропилеи с выступающими боковыми крыльями и богатой скульптурной декорацией. Это памятник имеет обширную историографию, что связано с постепенностью его археологического исследования, осложнявшегося тем фактом, что пропилеи оказались встроенными в средневековую колокольню собора Триеста. Автор статьи дополняет и развивает сделанные ранее наблюдения относительно архитектуры и декорации пропилей, соединяя семантический анализ их рельефов с анализом архитектурной формы. Гипотетически можно допустить, что она восходит к таким «знаковым» греческим памятникам эпохи классики, как пропилеи Мнесикла и стоя Зевса Элефтерия в Афинах, где впервые были использованы выступающие боковые крылья с колоннадами. Однако, учитывая временную и территориальную дистанцию и отсутствие свидетельств о какой-либо специфической связи Тергеста с Афинами, легче предположить, что эта форма была унаследована от эллинистических пропилей. Примечательно, однако, что большинство пропилей с выступающими крыльями по своему плану и пропорциям далеки от пропилей форума в Триесте — они скорее напоминают протяженные стои, что отличает их от компактного плана тергестского монумента. В статье делается попытка проследить возможные истоки данной архитектурной формы в римском и эллинистическом мире, проанализировать её функциональные вариации и семантическое наполнение с учётом рельефной декорации памятника.

Ключевые слова: Триест, Тергест, Истрия, римский форум, пропилеи, монументальные ворота, архитектура эпохи Империи, эллинистические алтари, стоя с выступающими крыльями, мемориальная архитектура



III. 24. Cathedral of San Giusto in Trieste with fragments of the propylaea of the 1st century A. D. Photo: E. Mikhailova



III. 25. Relieves with weapons on the western attic of the propylaea in Trieste. Photo: E. Mikhailova



III. 26. Relieves with sacrificial scenes on the eastern attic of the propylaea inside the belfry of Trieste Cathedral of San Giusto. Photo: E. Mikhailova