

# Hadrian, Hercules and griffins: a group of cuirassed statues from Latium and Pamphylia

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Three cuirassed statues and one fragmentary torso, all probably of the Hadrianic/early Antonine era, bear a rare breastplate relief. The heraldic design combines a muscular youth, nude except for a lionskin over his head and shoulders, and a pair of lion-griffins, whom he grasps by their horns. His iconography conforms to that of a youthful Hercules, whom we see here in the ancient formula for a “Master of the animals”. The composition has been mistakenly identified as a combat between griffins and an Arimaspos, but the central figure displays domination over the two creatures, rather than *vice versa*. A closely related device that appeared on some cuirassed statues during the same period represented the vegetal god Dionysus-Sabazios between a pair of his sacred panthers. The similarity of the two breastplate devices is no accident, although the two groups represent different deities and animals.<sup>1</sup> Both these heraldic devices seem to have been popular only for a limited time but the device of Hercules with griffins does appear in works from both Italy and Asia Minor. One of these statues certainly represents the deified Hadrian, another is today restored with a head of the same emperor, which may or may not belong to the torso, and the third almost certainly once portrayed Trajan, although the portrait face underwent later recutting; the head of the fourth is lost. The association of the motif in at least one case with Hadrian and in another with his predecessor suggests that the relief alludes to one of Hadrian’s most important but controversial policies. He chose to close the empire’s borders rather than to pursue policies of expansion, and to abandon Mesopotamia after Trajan’s failed invasion.<sup>2</sup> Hadrian devoted his energies instead to traveling throughout the provinces, lavishing generosity on the restoration of cities and provinces, and encouraging cultural assimilation of the empire’s peoples to an idealized, classicizing form of Greco-Roman culture. He also insisted, however, on a constant state of military

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\* Frequently cited:

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Everitt 2009 = A. Everitt, *Hadrian and the triumph of Rome* (New York).

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1 Cadario 2004, 371-77, pls. 48.1-6 and 54.2.

2 Dio 69.5.1; Aur. Vict., *Caes.* 14.1; *HA, Hadr.* 9.1; Everitt 2009, 171-78.