

FIGURATIVE PAINTINGS IN HERODIUM: NEW DISCOVERIES

(Taf. CXXVIII–CXXX, Abb. 1–10)

Abstract

I Palazzi di Erode nella zona d'Israele erano riccamente decorati con pitture di Secondo e d'inizio Terzo Stile Pompeiano. L'alta qualità del lavoro negli affreschi, la preparazione delle pareti e dei colori secondo la tecnica romana, e l'uso dei colori importati suggeriscono che artigiani qualificati, probabilmente provenienti da Roma, abbiano lavorato direttamente in questi palazzi. Gli aspetti stilistici e compositivi e la fine fattura di alcune delle decorazioni ci permettono di ipotizzare la presenza di artigiani che si sono formati nelle province occidentali del mondo romano, forse addirittura legate alla “bottega colta” al servizio di Augusto e Agrippa. Infatti, le decorazioni delle sale ufficiali nei palazzi di Erode hanno caratteristiche tipologiche e stilistiche simili a quelle usate nelle case imperiali.

L'adozione di chiare modalità di decorazione romana solleva numerosi interrogativi. Ad operare è stata la squadra di decoratori costituita da artigiani locali e immigrati? Possiamo riconoscere le caratteristiche di una sola concezione decorativa, o il lavoro di una squadra specifica di decoratori, in base all'analisi dei motivi individuali, la loro ripetizione o combinazione, gli schemi decorativi, o la peculiarità di esecuzione? La similarità dei sistemi decorativi potrebbe suggerire che le camere decorate nello stesso modo avevano una funzione simile, oppure sono stati il prodotto di una bottega specifica? Se i decoratori dei palazzi di Erode avevano familiarità con esempi originali del Secondo e dell'inizio del Terzo Stile, o almeno con i loro elementi caratteristici, perché non hanno imitato una delle loro caratteristiche più appariscenti, e cioè, l'uso di motivi figurativi? L'assenza di tali temi è da attribuire all'arretratezza dell'arte provinciale rispetto a quella della metropoli, o la conseguenza dell'assenza di pittori figurativi (*pictores imaginari*) tra le squadre responsabili alla decorazione dei palazzi in quel momento? I nuovi dipinti con raffigurazioni di paesaggi sacri scoperti in un piccolo teatro, adiacente al palazzo di Erode a Herodium gettano nuova luce su questo problema e forniscono una migliore comprensione dell'arte erodiana nel primo periodo romano.

Many of the palaces and fortresses built by Herod in the Land of Israel were embellished with frescoes, all relatively well preserved. The palaces at Cypros¹, Herodium², Masada³ and Jericho⁴ yielded both fresco fragments and decorated walls *in situ*. Most of them feature the Second Pompeian Style, the architectonic style of decoration common in the Roman world at that time. In comparison, the distinctive decoration of the Third Herodian Palace at Jericho – with fragments resembling examples of the early Third Style – indicates the presence of a different group of artists, a fact already discussed in previous publications⁵.

The stylistic and compositional aspects of wall paintings and their fine workmanship at Jericho⁶ allow us to assume the presence of artisans who were trained in the western provinces of the Roman world, perhaps even connected with the “bottega colta” in the service of Augustus and Marcus Agrippa. Moreover, the similarity to the decoration of the imperial houses finds expression in all aspects: composition and colour

¹ Netzer – Laureys-Chachy 2004, 233–280; Rozenberg 2008, 337–343.

² Corbo 1989; Rozenberg 2008, 355–364.

³ Foerster 1995; Rozenberg 2008, 343–355.

⁴ Rozenberg 2008.

⁵ Rozenberg 2007, 193–201; Rozenberg 2008, 462–464.

⁶ As, for example, the diversity of decorative schemes, the high quality of the work, the preparation of the walls and colours according to Roman precepts, the use of imported colours painted in complex techniques, and the ornamental motifs.

schemes, style, ornamental models, and even artistic and technical qualities⁷. Adherence to the Western ways of decoration was the dominant trait, and the artisans seem to have been exposed to local traditions only to a limited extent. Although there was a long tradition of wall painting in the Land of Israel and local workshops or teams that could do the work probably existed there, it is logical to assume that Herod preferred to have his palace decorated by Roman artists in the new styles in fashion in Rome. The presence of foreign workers is also evident in the *opus reticulatum* building and in the layout of the Jericho palace gardens⁸.

If we consider the organizational aspect of the wall painter's craft in the Roman world⁹, it seems logical to assume that detailed planning of the decoration of the different palaces was agreed upon between the patron who ordered the work and the artists who were supposed to execute it, and that the final appearance of the rooms was also planned beforehand. Furthermore, the use of a true fresco technique almost certainly forced painters to coordinate their working schedule with the plasterers who applied the final stucco layers on the walls. Plastering and painting were probably inseparable processes carried out by the same team of workmen, so the team probably included plasterers (*tectori*) who prepared the walls for painting and painters who decorated them. Usually among the painters, there was a principal painter in control of the general decoration program, a painter or artist specializing in figurative subjects (*pictor imaginarius*), and a less specialized artist (*pictor parietarius*) who was in charge of the surrounding decoration¹⁰.

It is difficult to assert how many artists worked on the Jericho palace, and how the team functioned. The absence of figurative designs indicates that most of the work was executed by simple wall painters (*pictori parietari*), with the background and ornamental designs probably composed according to pattern books, which contained a wide choice of decorative motifs. The team would probably have included a plasterer who prepared the stucco moldings and finished the plaster work on the ceilings and the upper parts of the wall.

The clear adoption of the Roman methods of decoration raises an important question. If the decorators of Herodian palaces were familiar with original examples of the Second and early Third Styles, why did they not imitate one of their most eminent features, the use of figurative motifs? Figurative motifs and landscapes were an important part of the decoration in imperial houses. The absence of such themes can be attributed to the unsophisticated provincial art in comparison to the metropolis or to the absence of figurative painters (*pictores imaginari*) among the ornamental painters responsible for the decoration of the palaces, as claimed by A. BARBET in regard to the wall paintings at Glanum¹¹. On the other hand, the developed painting of architectonic elements and perhaps, too, the appearance of more complicated perspectival prospects attest to the artists' familiarity with full-scale, elaborate compositions. As claimed in previous publications¹², if Herod allowed himself to bring in artisans who had mastered the new techniques of construction and decoration, they could also have imitated the most complicated forms of decoration. The fact that he refrained from using these figurative elements must have been a rational choice in accordance with the Jewish injunction against figurative representation¹³, and not the result of the absence of a *pictor imaginarius* at the time. Without the existence of figurative paintings amongst the Herodian examples it was difficult to corroborate this claim, but lately the existence of a *pictor imaginarius* capable of creating figurative scenes and landscapes, was reinforced by the last wall paintings discovered at Herodium. In 2006–2007 E. NETZER and his team found the lower part of Herod's mausoleum on the hill's northeastern slope of Herodium, close to the remains of the monumental stairway described by Josephus (Abb. 1)¹⁴. The original tomb was built in the local Hellenistic-Roman style, it was close to 25 m in height and contained three superimposed rooms¹⁵. In 2008 the remains of a small, royal theatre were found to the west of the mausoleum and the monumental

⁷ Rozenberg 1997a, 63–74; Porat – Ilani 1998; Rozenberg 2008, 273 f. 425–464; Edwards *et al.* 1999.

⁸ Netzer 2001, 2006, 256 fig. 386.

⁹ Allison 1989; Allison 1991; Andersen 1985.

¹⁰ Pliny, NH XXXV, 7.19.

¹¹ Barbet 1974, 60 f.

¹² Rozenberg 1997b, 283–285. 415–416; Rozenberg 2007, 200.

¹³ “Thou shalt not make unto thee any graven image, or any likeness of anything...” Ex 20, 4 f.

¹⁴ Josephus, Antiquities 15.324; and Wars 1.420; Netzer 2010, fig. 4–5. 26.

¹⁵ Netzer 2010, fig. 7.

stairway¹⁶. The theatre, partly cut into the bedrock and partly built with local ashlar, consisted of a semicircular *cavea* and *orchestra*, a rectangular stage structure, and narrow *paradoi* (entrance corridors) between the latter and the *cavea*. The ashlar blocks were coated with simple white lime plaster but the decorated architectural elements (column drums, Attic bases, Doric and Corinthian capitals and pedestals), some still covered with painted plaster (in alabaster imitation patterns) and even gold, give an inkling of the lavishness of the stage¹⁷. Above the *summa cavea* was a broad passage (2,4 m wide) which probably included a colonnade¹⁸, leading to a group of rooms and connecting them to the upper part of the seating area.

Some of those rooms were undecorated, whereas others had a minimal, stucco decoration. However, the central, largest, and most magnificent room of all (measuring 8 x 7 m in size with a height of ca. 6 m) was fully open to the north, towards the *cavea* and the stage. This private hall, called by the excavators ‘the royal box’, probably served Herod and his close friends during the theatre activities.

The western, southern and eastern walls of the royal box were finely adorned with wall paintings and stucco decorations of exceptional quality (Abb. 2) in two different layers (Abb. 3)¹⁹. The lower layer painted in the fresco technique²⁰ was at some time partly repainted in secco (on a dry surface rather than a wet one). The walls of the upper layer were vertically divided into three or four sections by pilasters with Corinthian stucco capitals, situated on top of tall pedestals painted in orange. The background of the Corinthian capitals was also painted in orange, with the stucco acanthus leaves projecting in white. The pilasters were framed with a stuccoed projecting profile. The flat white area inside the profile was bordered by light blue and orange frames painted in secco and in its center was a stucco floral decoration (Abb. 4). The wall area between these pilasters was divided horizontally into three sections. The bottom part, 1,85 m high, included a 35 cm black socle and vertical alternating panels in orange and purple-red belonging to a high *dado* area. Above it, the walls (up to ca. 5 m above the floor) were left white, but featured a series of *pinakes*²¹ imitating real three-dimensional wooden panel paintings hung on the walls, each measuring ca. 70 x 50 cm (Abb. 5). Above the *pinakes* were painted strings (held by a nail), and to the sides were folded, painted shutters, held by two painted iron hooks, both emphasizing the place of the pictures on the upper part of the white wall. *Pinakes* with folded shutters are known from the time of the Second Pompeian Style in Italy²², and the closest parallels for the shutters shape with its closing elements come from Late Second and Third Pompeian Styles examples dateable between 20 and 10 BC²³. In contrast to the typical *pinakes* that mostly depict still-life or theatrical scenes emphasizing their disconnection from the wall, the Herodium *pinakes* display a series of painted illusionistic windows portraying views of various naturalistic landscapes²⁴. The latter includes scenes of the countryside with trees, animals, and even human beings (reminiscent of the sacred Augustan landscapes)²⁵, a Nilotic scene with a crocodile (Abb. 5), and a nautical one featuring a ship, its sails billowing in the wind (Abb. 6)²⁶. Only a few of the original nine scenes have survived; some are still *in situ*, some are badly preserved, and others are being restored from the many fallen fragments retrieved from the debris in the room (Abb. 7). For the people sitting in the room it was virtually possible to see the outside

¹⁶ Netzer 2010, fig. 17–18.

¹⁷ Netzer 2010, fig. 19–20.

¹⁸ *Porticus in summa cavea*.

¹⁹ Conservation of the theatre’s royal box is being financed and conducted by the Laboratory of the Israel Museum, Jerusalem.

²⁰ This lower layer can partly be seen below the upper layer in places where the latter is damaged.

²¹ *pinax* [πίναξ], plural *pinakes* [πίνακες], see Gasser 1982; Posautz 1997.

²² As in the Villa of the Mysteries (Maiuri 1931, fig. 68; Posautz 1997, 5–8 fig. 1), the House of the Cryptoportico (Spinazzola 1953, fig. 578 pl. 30B; Posautz 1997, 38–45 fig. 20–25), and the House of the Centenary (De Vos 1980, pl. LVII; Posautz 1997, 67) in Pompeii, the Villa at Boscoreale (Curtius 1929, fig. 77; Lehmann 1953, pl. 8; Posautz 1997, 21–27 fig. 12–13); the House of Liv-
ia (Rizzo 1936a, fig. 14. 23 pl. A; Posautz 1997, 53–57 fig. 32), and the villa under the Farnesina in Rome (Bragantini – De Vos
1982, fig. 40. 51. 172; Sanzi di Mino 1998, fig. 117. 119; Posautz 1997, 58–62 fig. 39–41).

²³ Pappalardo 1985, fig. 15; Posautz 1997, 67 f. fig. 32.

²⁴ A few *pinakes* were decorated with sacral landscape depictions, as e.g. the *pinakes* in Room 15, at the Villa of *Poppaea* in Oplontis (Posautz 1997, fig. 15), and *oecus* 12 in the House of *M. Caesius Blandus* in Pompeii (Posautz 1997, Kat. 9/1) but landscape depictions were an infrequent subject.

²⁵ Silberberg-Peirce 1980; Leach 1988, 197–199.

²⁶ See a similar boat with sails blown up by the wind in a wall painting fragment with a fishing scene from Sirmione, Grotte di Catullo, Third Style, 1st century AD (Baldassarre *et al.* 2002, 189).

world, perceived as an illusionistic picture through the painted openings. Glimpses of landscapes and architecture as if seen through a window or illusionistic openings in the walls became common also in examples of the Second and Third Pompeian Styles, as in the House of the Cryptoportico at Pompeii, the Villa at Boscoreale, or the Villa of *Poppaea* in Oplontis²⁷. In fact, landscapes depicted in their own right, as an independent subject of the wall painting repertoire, as for example at the villa under the Farnesina in Rome, became common during the Augustan period²⁸. It seems that in the Herodium Royal Hall the artists combined two different common traits of the Late Second Pompeian style, the use of *pinakes*, or pictures hanging on the walls on the one hand, with that of a window opening or a prospect landscape on the other. The best preserved *pinax*/window at Herodium, depicted realistically with its wooden shutters folded to the sides, opened onto the vista of a sacred landscape, with animals, a rustic shrine and a faun (Abb. 8–9). In composition and style the high quality work is close to the landscape in a white background small panel in Corridor F at the villa under the Farnesina in Rome²⁹. Clearly the Herodium painting was the work of a *pictor imaginarius* with formal training and practice, of the kind that was uncommon among local painters. The logical conclusion is that it was important for Herod (who did not dare to decorate the public buildings and palaces of his kingdom with subjects that were prohibited by the Jewish religion, but allowed himself to do that in his more private structures), to have a painter in the foreign workshop team working at his palaces who was able to depict landscapes and figurative subjects.

Indeed, the high quality skilled figurative decoration of the royal box is exceptional, and it is firmly rooted in Roman wall painting prototypes. However, the seemingly unrelated selection of landscapes adorning the *pinakes* raises some more questions. The choice of subjects could have been unintentional, only related to the wish of expanding the small room through a series of illusionistic paintings which simply displayed extensive landscapes without any relationship between them. On the other hand, the idea of a *pinacotheca*, or room arranged as a showcase for the display of art objects and framed pictures is known in Augustan times³⁰. In Herodium, the framed pictures, simulating a *pinacotheca* could have been a vehicle for propaganda and their subjects could have had a broader significance, indicating Herod's wish to use the royal box hall decoration as a public statement of sympathy with *Augustus'* rule. Sacred landscapes, as that appearing in one of the *pinakes*/windows, were an important subject at the time of Augustus, as for example in the Room of the Masks at Augustus' House in the Palatine, the House of Livia, and the villa under the Farnesina³¹. On the other hand, Nilotic landscape images were already popular in the Roman world from the second century BC³², and Egyptian and Egyptianizing subjects became notably popular in Rome and Italy in the last three decades of the 1st century BC³³, when, with the conquest of Egypt³⁴, the contacts between Roman and Egyptian cultures intensified. Egyptian motifs acquired a new meaning as victory symbols referring to *Actium*, and became common in wall paintings, as in room 15 (the cubiculo superior) at the House of Augustus on the Palatine and at the *Aula Isiaca*³⁵ at Rome. So, it is even possible that the Herodium Nilotic landscapes (and the marine scene) have a broader symbolic significance reflecting Augustus' victory at *Actium*, and perhaps even the *saeculum aureum*, the start of Octavian's golden age with the victory over Egypt³⁶.

²⁷ Spinazzola 1953, fig. 536; Lehmann 1953, pl. 18. 21; De Franciscis 1975, fig. 23–27; see also Peters 1963, 7–19; 68–72.

²⁸ Ling 1991, 142–146.

²⁹ Sanzi di Mino 1988, fig. 138.

³⁰ As for example in the houses of Livia and Augustus on the Palatine, see Leach 2004, 133 f.

³¹ Carettoni 1983, pl. B–C; Iacopi 2008, 22 f.; Rizzo 1936 a, fig. 37, pl. 5–11; Sanzi di Mino 1988, fig. 52–57. 102–103. 138–141. 143–147.

³² As for example in the Palestrina mosaic, see De Vos 1980, 77; Versluys 2002, 26 f.; recently Meyboom 1995, 96–107, suggested the existence of a traditional Egyptian genre of Nilotic landscapes from the early Ptolemaic period onwards.

³³ See De Vos 1980, 60–64; and also the Third Style paintings at the House of Centenary in Pompeii (IX 8,6) (De Vos 1980, pl. LVII, fig. 7–24. 26), and those in the *tablinum* at the Villa of the Mysteries in Pompeii (De Vos 1980, 12, pls. B–D), including a crocodile, similar to the one in Herodium.

³⁴ 'In 30 BC Egypt was added to the Empire as an imperial province, ... Octavian appointed as his replacement a *praefectus Aegypti*, whom he chose from the order of the *equites*; senators were anyway not allowed to travel and stay in Egypt without permission. So, this important economical and political power remained securely in the hands of the imperial dynasty' (quote from Versluys 2002, 6); see also Versluys 2002, 14.

³⁵ Carettoni 1983, pl. 19–21; Rizzo 1936b, 32–37 fig. 4–5. 26–28, pl. A–C; Iacopi 1997, 4. 10–12. 16–18. 24 f.

³⁶ Versluys 2002, 72.

In addition to the uncommon paintings of this exceptional room at Herodium, the white wall area with the *pinakes*/windows is topped by an entablature with excellent stucco decorations (*cymatium* mouldings, a frieze featuring a floral scroll, and a console cornice) in an Augustan style (Abb. 10)³⁷. In this case too, the quality of the paintings, the stucco and the close parallels in Italy, point to the Roman origin of the artists. Since the decoration is close to Late Second and early Third Pompeian Style examples, it seems reasonable to assume that the construction of the theatre might be linked to Marcus Agrippa's visit to Judea, and Herodium, in 15 BC. Later on, close to Herod's death, the whole theatre was intentionally dismantled prior to the creation of the artificial conical-shaped hill, when the original northeastern side of the hill was re-shaped. As a result the remains of the theatre complex were covered by building debris and a fill which preserved them, allowing the excavators to find the original exceptional decoration of an outstanding *pictor imaginarius*.

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³⁷ Sanzi di Mino 1988, fig. 98. 135; Iacopi 2008, 50.

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