

ROMAN PAINTINGS OF THE *VILLA URBANA*
IN THE CIVILIAN CITY OF *CARNUNTUM* (LOWER AUSTRIA). A SELECTION

(Taf. CLXII, Abb. 1–5)

Abstract

Die im Zuge des Großprojektes 2001–2011¹ durchgeführten Grabungen in der Zivilstadt in *Carnuntum* brachten vor allem im Bereich der *villa urbana* besondere Ergebnisse zu Tage. So war eine im Hof R 85 aufgedeckte Grube mit Bauschutt verfüllt, der durch ein Erdbeben in der Mitte des 4. Jhs. n. Chr. verursacht wurde² und somit einen *terminus ante quem* für die Malereien liefert. Vorwiegend handelt es sich um zwei Deckenmalereien, wobei der geringere Anteil zu einer oktogonalen Kassettendeckenimitation gehört. Aufgrund der Tatsache, dass einige der Bruchstücke in ihrem direkten Zerstörungsmoment auf dem Boden der Phase V im südlichen Korridor R 81³ gefunden wurden, erbringt dieser Fundkomplex neben einer eindeutigen Raumzuweisung auch eine unstrittige Datierung in das letzte Drittel des 3. bis zur Mitte des 4. Jhs. n. Chr. Vergleichsbeispiele dieser Kassettendecke treten in Baláca⁴ (2. Jh. n. Chr.) und *Aquincum*⁵ (3. Jh. n. Chr.) auf und korrespondieren mit den Ergebnissen aus *Carnuntum*.

Die größte Fundmenge entfällt auf eine gewölbte Decke mit verschiedenen geformten Medaillons auf rotem Untergrund, die mit Ornamenten, Figuren und Tieren gefüllt sind. Darunter befindet sich auch ein nach rechts fliegender Eros, der eine Parallele in Bruckneudorf⁶ besitzt. Die Fragmentanzahl, die Farbigkeit und die mythologischen Protagonisten lassen als Herkunftsort Raum 71 mit seiner in Phase V angelegten repräsentativen Apsis wahrscheinlich erscheinen. Dank des Erdbebenbefundes ist es somit möglich, zwei unterschiedliche Decken eines Gebäudes und einer Bauphase zu vergleichen. Raum 81 war durch seinen Ziegeltessellatboden und das geometrische Deckenmuster als Verteilerraum⁷ charakterisiert, während Raum 71 mit seinem aufwendigen Dekor zum Verweilen einlud⁸.

The ancient city of *Carnuntum* is located nearly 40 km outside of Vienna, next to the modern village Petronell-Carnuntum. Most parts of the Roman city have not been disturbed by modern layers of urban development. Several walls had been preserved up to a height of one meter but were later destroyed because of reuse for modern constructions⁹. Because of these visible monuments, *Carnuntum* was interesting for researchers who had conducted limited surveys since the beginning of the 20th century. The focus hereby lay on uncovering monuments for the museums and not on examining the cultural history of the place. As recently as 1948 until 1957, comprehensive excavations were carried out by E. SWOBODA and his wife R.

¹ Humer 2005, 13–16; Humer – Maschek 2007, 45.

² Humer – Maschek 2007, 50 f. 53 f. Abb. 11; Maschek 2010, 268 f. 272 Abb. 1.

³ Maschek – Humer 2007, 692; Maschek 2010, 267 f. 274 Abb. 4 links.

⁴ Kirchhof 2004.

⁵ Póczy 1958, 125 Abb. 33; 128 Abb. 37; Kerdő 2008, 290. 292 f. Abb. 13 d. e.

⁶ Langmann 1979, 111 f. Abb. 15; Kieweg-Vetters 2008a, 166; Kieweg-Vetters 2008b, 99 f. Abb. 9.

⁷ Strocka 1975, 101. 106; Zahlhaas 1978, 14; Wallace-Hadrill 1988, 88; Wallace-Hadrill 1994, 39–44; Zanker 1995, 17; Ellis 1997a, 45; Muth 1998, 61 f.; relativierend dazu: Laken 2001, 298 f.

⁸ Clarke 1991, 16; Zanker 1995, 23–26. 30–32; Allison 1997, 329. 335; Scott 1997; Muth 1998, 54–59; Goggräfe 1999, 173; Zelle 2002, 240. 243–245; Zimmermann 2002, 114 f. Taf. 100, 46.

⁹ Swoboda 1948, 2; Brandenstein 1960, 10; Humer *et al.* 2005, 174.

SWOBODA-MILENOVIĆ¹⁰. The goal was to install an archaeological park; therefore E. SWOBODA was searching for walls, instead of layers, and did not continue excavations when he found one. These walls were covered with concrete. As a result, it was not obvious for visitors that they were from different periods. Apart from this, the Pannonian winters with alternating rain and frost caused the complete destruction of the ancient walls mixed with concrete. Thus, a major project¹¹ was initiated, running from 2001 until 2011, with the aim of revitalising the archaeological park. Hence, the areas have been excavated again, but this time until reaching the last layer without human influence. Additionally, the evaluation of the finds has been launched¹², including the exploration of the wall paintings. Especially one edifice of the archaeological park, the *villa urbana*, renders very important results regarding Roman painting. Very big fragments had been found in a large hole in the courtyard room 85 of this highly representative building. This hoard was later identified as a filling of a spring, which had been become useless because of a huge earthquake¹³. Due to coins we know that this earthquake approximately occurred in the middle of the 4th century AD¹⁴, which provides a *terminus ante quem* for the depictions themselves. Two groups could be classified into ceiling-paintings, as can be seen by marks on their backsides, caused by the wooden slats in the humid mortar¹⁵.

Only a small amount of the fragments belongs to an octagonal coffered-ceiling-imitation on a flat surface. A blue coffer follows a red one (Abb. 1), both with a yellow-brownish rosette in the middle. The coloured octagons are surrounded by brown dentils and egg-and-dart enrichments and in some areas light brown shadows create three-dimensional volumes. Black astragal motifs with light blue shadow-projections function as separations between the coffers. Comparisons of this system can be found at other places in the Pannonian province in modern Hungary. A hexagonal coffered-ceiling-imitation of brown shades with a very similar rosette and two-dimensional egg-and-dart enrichments was found at Balácsa in a villa near Lake Balaton, dating to the 2nd century AD. The rosette consists of serrated petals placed one upon the other¹⁶. The petals in *Carnuntum* are heavily simplified, formed by dark brown serpentine stripes. A colourful octagonal coffered-ceiling was installed at the Governor's Palace at *Aquincum*, decorating a corridor in the 3rd century AD¹⁷. Instead of the dentils and egg-and-dart enrichments, green and brown stripes encircle brown coffers with a two-dimensional rosette. The inner circle with an inscribed cross in the middle of the flower is identical to the one at *Carnuntum*. Around the coffer runs an astragal with brown shadows and, like at *Carnuntum*, a circle is situated where three astragals come together.

During the excavations in the 1950ies, conducted by R. SWOBODA-MILENOVIĆ, some fragments of this ceiling were found, which were published by H. BRANDENSTEIN in an article in 1960¹⁸. Thanks to the newest investigations and the larger amount of available pieces, her often quoted reconstruction-drawing¹⁹ can now be corrected (Abb. 2). Moreover, it is especially noteworthy that some of our fragments were found to the south of corridor room 81, on the floor of period V at the moment of their demolition, with their upper side on the ground. That is important because in the Severan period (period IV)²⁰, rooms 81 and 71 had one common wall. In period V room 71 was equipped with a highly representative apse and the corridor was prolonged to the south²¹. A *terminus post quem* for the decoration itself can be obtained by the fact that some of the fragments were discovered in the south-corridor, in a part that was built up in period V²². The *terminus ante quem* results from their deposition in the fountain filled up with rubble, which was produced by the earthquake around 350 AD. Traces on the ceiling fragments prove that the surface had been roughened for a

¹⁰ Cf. Swoboda 1958; and the annual excavation reports in the CarnuntumJb.

¹¹ Humer 2005, 13–16; Humer – Maschek 2007, 45.

¹² E.g. Petznek 2007; Rauchenwald 2007; Žundálek – Žundáleková 2007; Behling *et al.* 2010.

¹³ Humer – Maschek 2007, 53 f. fig. 11; Maschek 2010, 268. 272 fig. 1.

¹⁴ Humer – Maschek 2007, 50 f.; Maschek 2010, 268 f.

¹⁵ Cf. Gogräfe 1995, 175–177 fig. 24–26; 225 fig. 81; Gogräfe 1997, 11 f. fig. 9; 16–18 fig. 13–14; Weber 2001, 11 pl. 2, 2; Tober 2003, 135; Riedl 2007, 141 cat. 2. 1; Tober 2010, 857; Zimmermann – Ladstätter 2010, 17 fig. 9.

¹⁶ Kirchhof 2004, 262 fig. 3–4.

¹⁷ Póczy 1958, 125 fig. 33; 128 fig. 37; Kerdő 2008, 290. 292 f. fig. 13 d. e.

¹⁸ Brandenstein 1960, 24 pls. 7 k. 1.

¹⁹ Brandenstein 1960, pl. 9; Barbet *et al.* 1997, 33 no. 25 a.

²⁰ Humer – Maschek 2007, 48 tab. 1; Maschek 2010, 270 tab. 1.

²¹ Maschek – Humer 2007, 692; Maschek 2010, 267. 274 fig. 4 left.

²² Humer – Maschek 2007, 52.

repainting²³ after an unspecified period. The mixture of plaster contains mainly limestone, for that reason most parts of this new layer are lost due to the dissolution process when lying in the earth. Only a small quantity is left, depicting plants (Abb. 3) and red-brownish circles (Abb. 4). Owing to the perfect conditions, we come to the conclusion that the coffered-ceiling-imitation and its secondary layer were installed in room 81 from the last third of the 3rd until the middle of the 4th century AD²⁴, which corresponds to the Pannonian examples given before.

The larger amount of the finds from the hole belonged to a vaulted ceiling-decoration with picture fields of various dimensions. Circular, semi-circular and rectangular sections are arranged on a red surface and surrounded by blue garlands. Most of them are filled with ornamental motifs, some contain animals. Two water birds are swimming in light blue fields and horses are jumping over plants or agricultural implements. One can determine at least three persons, whereas two of them are definitely winged. Probably used as a middle-medallion was an Eros with a height of approximately 45 cm (Abb. 5). His body is barely covered by a pink cloak and two big brown, yellow and blue wings are growing out of his shoulders. He is flying from left to right, whereby his head is turned to look behind his right shoulder. The target of his view is unknown, but maybe it is one of the other two protagonists. The light blue picture field is framed by a combination of yellow and blue circles, separated by white astragals. The same black area between the light blue ground and the first frame circle can also be seen at Bruckneudorf²⁵, only a few kilometres away from *Carnuntum*. The Eros of this villa is also standing on a light blue sphere enclosed by a red and blue frame. G. KIEWEG-VETTERS dated this ceiling to the 3rd century AD²⁶, which corresponds with our results. The vaulted ceiling of *Carnuntum* is composed of mythological figures and many detailed ornaments using a wide range of colours. For this reason, only a highly representative room is worth considering for this decoration²⁷ that had been in existence before the earthquake at the middle of the 4th century AD. What immediately comes to mind is the big room 71, which had been remodelled in period V with an apse to make it more prestigious²⁸. The ceiling was possibly redecorated with a new painting at the same time, which would mean that our ceiling had adorned room 71 from the last third of the 3rd until the middle of the 4th century AD.

On account of the earthquake, two ceiling decorations stemming from two rooms of different style, rank and use could be compared in one building and in one period. Room 71 was a highly representative room with a complicated and elaborate ceiling with mythological figures, which invited guests to remain and to observe²⁹. Room 81 was a corridor where one walked through as quickly as possible from one room to another. The character of the room was expressed by its tessellated floor³⁰ and the geometric ceiling-pattern which is typical for a side room³¹. The seismological incident and the newest excavations have provided two key monuments, which are very interesting for other researchers and less secure contexts. Moreover, we now have a better idea of the Roman paintings from *Carnuntum* and the publications by H. BRANDENSTEIN could be corrected in some points. Furthermore, both ceilings offer close parallels to *Aquincum*, Baláca and Bruckneudorf and seem to represent some regional style, which has to be investigated in-depth. Also relevant for this analysis is a huge complex of wall paintings, found in 2007 in the private bath of the *villa urbana*. They show three-dimensional architectures and imitations of stucco friezes similar to stuccos and stucco imitations at Baláca³². These fragments will bring out more information about Roman pattern books, the circulation of artisans and the style preferred by Pannonian inhabitants.

²³ Cf. Ling 1991, 199 fig. 217; Tober 2003, 292; Kieweg-Vetters 2008b, 103.

²⁴ For the period-classifications cf.: Humer – Maschek 2007, 48 tab. 1; Maschek 2010, 270 tab. 1.

²⁵ Langmann 1979, 111 f. fig. 15; Kieweg-Vetters 2008a, 166; Kieweg-Vetters 2008b, 99 f. fig. 9.

²⁶ Special thanks to G. KIEWEG-VETTERS for this unpublished information.

²⁷ Goggräfe 1995, 223 f. 230–232; Muth 1998, 64–67; Goggräfe 1999, 173.

²⁸ Maschek – Humer 2007, 692; Maschek 2010, 267.

²⁹ Clarke 1991, 16; Zanker 1995, 23–26. 30–32; Allison 1997, 329. 335; Scott 1997; Muth 1998, 54–59; Goggräfe 1999, 173; Zelle 2002, 240. 243–245; Zimmermann 2002, 114 f. pl. 100, 46.

³⁰ Concerning floor mosaics: Muth 1998, 61 f.; Scheibelreiter 2001, 114–122; Scheibelreiter 2010, 501.

³¹ Strocka 1975, 101. 106; Zahlhaas 1978, 14; Wallace-Hadrill 1988, 88; Wallace-Hadrill 1994, 39–44; Zanker 1995, 17; Ellis 1997, 45; Muth 1998, 61 f.; Falzone – Tober 2010, 633. 637. 640; relativizing concerning wallpaper patterns: Laken 2001, 298 f.

³² Thomas 1964, 99 f. pls. 48–49; Palágyi 2004a, 272 f. fig. 5–6; Palágyi 2004b, 196. 209–214 fig. 12–17. 19–22; Kirchhof 2008, 45–59. 100–106 fig. 3–4. 6–17; 110 f. fig. 25–26.

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Abbildungen

Abb. 1: Red coffer of the coffered-ceiling-imitation with yellow-brownish rosette

Abb. 2: New reconstruction of the coffered-ceiling-imitation of room 81

Abb. 3: Secondary layer *in situ* at the primary ceiling painting of room 81

Abb. 4: Red and brown circles, secondary layer of room 81

Abb. 5: Vaulted ceiling medallion with flying Eros

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Claudia-Maria Behling

Wolfgang Schmälzgasse 4/29

A – 1020 Wien