

WALL DECORATION OF THE *VIMINACIUM* AMPHITHEATRE

(Taf. CLXIII–CLIV, Abb. 1–6)

Abstract

Im Folgenden werden Fragmente einer Wandmalerei analysiert, die 2008 nördlich des östlichen Eingangs des Amphitheaters in *Viminacium* entdeckt wurden. Aufgrund archäologischer Funde konnte der Anfang der Bauarbeiten an diesem Amphitheater in die erste Hälfte des 2. Jh. n. Chr. datiert werden. Die analysierten Fragmente sind nicht nur wegen ihrer Ikonographie bemerkenswert, sondern auch aufgrund der Tatsache, dass die Malerei zweischichtig ist bzw. sekundär übermalt wurde. Den Motiven nach konnten die Reste der Wanddekoration in folgende Gruppen gegliedert werden: pflanzliche Motive mit Girlanden aus der jüngeren Phase, pflanzliche Motive mit Girlanden aus der älteren Phase und eine Imitation von Marmorverkleidung.

Das jüngere florale Schema mit Girlanden wurde in rot und grün auf weißem Hintergrund gemalt, es finden sich stilisierte Blumen wie Blüten mit grünen Stielen und Blättern um Girlanden. Analogien können in der Wandmalerei in Grabkammern und Wohnbauten aus den Provinzen *Asia Minor*, *Judaea*, *Syria*, *Baetica*, *Italia* und *Dacia Mediterannea*, in der Zeit zwischen dem 2. und dem 5. Jh., gefunden werden. Aus der älteren Malphase des Amphitheaters blieb nur ein kleiner Teil der Wandmalerei erhalten, sie zeigt ein ähnliches ikonographisches Schema mit einer roten Girlande. Ein figürliches Motiv vielleicht mit Stierkopf kann unter den Wandmalereien der älteren Bemalungsphase erkannt werden. Über dem Kopf dieses Tieres erschien ein rotes Band, ähnlich wie auf den anderen Fragmenten, vielleicht alternierend mit grünen Blättern und Girlanden. Falls das Tiermotiv einen Stier darstellt, könnte das gesamte Bild eine Opferszene zeigen oder hypothetisch auch das Symbol der *Legio VII Claudia Pia Fidelis*. Auf einem dieser Fragmente ist zudem ein Teil einer Inschrift mit den Buchstaben B und A sichtbar. Weitere Fragmente stammen von einer Imitation von Marmorverkleidung, in der Art einer rot-gelben Breccie. Ähnliche Beispiele von Marmorimitation finden sich auf Wanddekorationen in *Asia Minor*, *Italia*, *Moesia Superior*, *Pannonia Valeria* und *Pannonia Secunda*.

Dem dekorativen Schema nach mit Girlanden und eventuell Stierköpfen sowie Marmorimitation werden diese Malereifragmente zu einem repräsentativen Gebäudeteil gehört haben.

Archaeological research of the *Viminacium*¹ amphitheatre started in 2007. The remains of the amphitheatre show that it was of elliptical shape, built of stone blocks and pieces of stone bound with mortar. During three years of excavation, the area around the arena was defined, with passages on the eastern and western sides and auxiliary rooms next to the northern wall.

According to the obtained results, the amphitheatre measured approximately 75 x 85 m, the arena 45 x 55 m, while the height of the northern wall (which is the highest preserved part of the building) measures 3,25 m. Remains of the wall which used to separate the arena from the auditorium were discovered first. In the northern part of the amphitheatre holes of circular or rectangular cross-section were observed in various

¹ The ancient city of *Viminacium*, the former capital city of the Roman province Upper Moesia or *Moesia Prima* in late antiquity was the military camp of the *legio VII Claudia* (Mano-Zisi 1964, 93–113). It is situated in eastern Serbia near Stari Kostolac, at the mouth of the river Mlava into the Danube. In the first half of the 2nd century, during the reign of Hadrian, it became a municipal status and in the 3rd century (in 239 AD), during the reign of Emperor Gordian III, the status of a *colonia* and the right to mint coins. The city was destroyed in the middle of the 5th century, during a Hunnic invasion. *Viminacium* possessed all the elements of a Roman city, of which testify remains of the *thermae insulae*, amphitheatre, aqueduct, *mausoleum* and *memoriae* (buildings within the cemeteries). Archaeological research on this site has continued for more than a century.

depths during the research, first noted by the first excavator of *Viminacium*, M. VALTROVIĆ. He believed that they were wooden pillars.

According to small archaeological finds, the beginning of the building activities for the amphitheatre can be dated to the Traianic or Hadrianic period, while during the end of the 3rd century the amphitheatre lost its function and was then used for burial purposes².

In this paper, the fragments of wall paintings, which were found to the north of the eastern entrance in 2008, are analysed. The finds come from a layer of debris, soot and burned earth. According to the painted motifs, it is possible to divide these remains of wall-decoration into floral schemes with garlands, zoomorphic motifs and imitations of marble plastering. An interesting fact is that a similar iconographical scheme was repeated while renewing the wall decoration of the amphitheatre, which can be seen on the garlands.

About the paintings from the *Viminacium* amphitheatre

The fragments of wall-paintings found to the north of the eastern amphitheatre entrance are specific, not only because of their iconography, but also because these paintings possess two layers of paintings (Abb. 1) stemming from two different periods. According to the painted motifs, it is possible to divide these remains of wall-decoration into a floral scheme with garlands (from the younger phase), a repeated iconographical scheme (from the older phase), a zoomorphic motif and imitations of marble plastering.

An interesting fact is that a similar iconographical scheme was repeated while renewing the wall decoration of the amphitheatre, which can be seen on the garlands.

Floral decorative scheme with garlands

The fragments with the partially preserved wall decoration were found close to the eastern entrance of the arena. They are of special importance, not only because of the painted motifs depicted on them (Abb. 1, 2a, 3), but also because of the fact that below this decoration another layer with painted motifs from an older phase was observed (Abb. 2b). First, the floral decoration (Abb. 2a) was recognized, which shows a swaying atmosphere and cheerfulness (44 x 46,5 cm). Red and green colours were used on a white mortar background. Stylized red flowers and blossoms are depicted, with green stalks with leaves; it is possible that they represent roses.

This depicted motif is separated by decorative, luxurious garlands. Some ribbons are vertical, while there are also fragments on which semi-spherical ribbons, combined with vertical ones are depicted (Abb. 3). The ribbons are 3,5 to 5 cm wide and on their outer sides, they bear a wavy motif which reminds of petals, while the insides of the ribbons are filled with zigzag lines. On the semi-spherical garlands carvings in the mortar, which follow their semi-spherical shape, were observed; this indicates that the artist first carved the auxiliary lines and painted the pattern afterwards. The carvings are lying in two rows and they indicate the outer ribbon in which the zigzag lines are.

During antiquity, wreaths or ribbons were a popular way of decorating the walls. It is assumed that they symbolize dedication and honour depending on the motif depicted, but also life after death³. Vegetation can be connected to birth, death and resurrection⁴, but also to revival⁵. The rose motif is often connected to after-life, in which it symbolizes one's soul⁶. During the *dies rosationis* celebration (May/June), the relatives of the deceased used to decorate the graves with roses, expressing the wish for the deceased to spend the shortest time possible in the grave. It was thought that one cannot find a resting place in the underworld in a period of time shorter than a hundred years⁷.

² The dating is not precise, because the archaeological research is still in progress.

³ Đurić 1985, 5–8.

⁴ Marijanski-Manojlović 1987, 30.

⁵ Chevalier – Gherbrant 1983, 63 f.

⁶ Milovanović 2001, 113.

⁷ Zotović 1986, 41. 50. 57.

During the first half of the 3rd century gladiator games were introduced as a part of the funerary celebrations. As a rite of sacrificing human lives to the shadows of the deceased,⁸ it is possible that the floral motif from the *Viminacium* amphitheatre does not only possess a decorative function, but has a deeper meaning.

Very similar pictures regarding iconography and colour were also made on the tomb-walls in *Caesarea Maritima* (Israel)⁹ and Burj esh Shemal (Lebanon, 2nd century), as well as in the Cuma *mausoleum*.¹⁰ In Ephesus, motifs of scattered flowers, garlands and birds were found on the walls of the tombs no. 14686 and 43427 (2nd century), of the Upper City Necropolis, as well as in the Grotto of the Seven Sleepers¹¹. Apart from the examples mentioned, certain parallels with the floral decoration from the *Viminacium* amphitheatre can be found in the picture of the Garden of Eden from tomb no. 8 in ancient *Serdica* (4th century). On the upper zones of this tomb, as well as on its ceiling, scattered red flowers are depicted, with green branches and leaves on a white background¹².

Floral motifs shown on the walls of the Anonima catacomb (Via Anapo, Rome)¹³, which is dated to the end of the 4th or the beginning of the 5th century, can be compared to the floral motifs on the fresco of the amphitheatre. On the white catacomb walls, almost identical scattered blooming flowers and blossoms with semi-spherical and vertical garlands were depicted. Even the valeric solution of the red colour is similar (the outer part is dark, while the inner part is dyed with a lighter nuance of the red colour).

Apart from funerary painting, similar pictures of flowers and garlands can be found in several houses in Ephesus¹⁴ and at a *domus* in Córdoba¹⁵.

Not many preserved paintings from amphitheatres exist. There are fragments of wall paintings from the arena walls of the amphitheatre in *Augusta Raurica* (2nd century), with a geometrical scheme with floral elements on a white background. The lower wall zones were depicted with marble imitation motifs¹⁶. It is possible that a part of the wall decoration from *Viminacium* (Abb. 2a, 3) belonged to the upper wall zone and that the lower zone was depicted in a different manner (Abb. 6), judging by the fragments found nearby in the same layer.

Among the floral motifs from *Viminacium* are: trees, bushes, grape-wine, ivy, laurel leaves, flowers, wreaths etc. In most of the cases the floral motifs were combined with figural, zoomorphic or geometrical pictures¹⁷. The floral motifs mentioned were depicted on the walls of tombs, *thermae*, houses and the amphitheatre in *Viminacium*.

The repeated iconographical scheme

A very small part of the painted decoration (Abb. 4) from an earlier phase of the amphitheatre remained preserved; the iconographical scheme repeats the pictures from the later phase (Abb. 3). One has a red ribbon¹⁸ with wavy outer sides, while the inside is filled with a zigzag line and green leaves depicted around it. In both cases, the painted motif was red and green on a white lime background.

The zoomorphic motif

The zoomorphic motif can be recognized on one part of the wall decoration belonging to the earlier painting phase (reminiscent of bovides, Abb. 2b). Unfortunately, only a small part of this picture is preserved. A head, turned to the right as well as part of the body, one leg and a shadow below it can be recog-

⁸ Elliot 2005, 64–73.

⁹ Michaeli 2010, 523 f.

¹⁰ Brun – Munci 505 f.

¹¹ Zimmermann – Ladstätter 2010, 155 f.

¹² Миятевъ 1925, 68. 79. 84.

¹³ Nicolai *et al.* 2002, 71.

¹⁴ Terrace houses 1 and 2.

¹⁵ Cànovas 2010, fig. 3. 829 f.

¹⁶ Hufschmid 2009, 110.

¹⁷ Korać 2007, 16 f.

¹⁸ Ribbon-garland.

nized. The motif is depicted in dark colour, violet-brownish, but on the head a lighter part in pink nuances can be recognized. Parts of a red bordure surround the zoomorphic motif in its lower zone and on the right side, while a red ribbon is in the upper right corner, which can also be observed on another fragment. Green leaves are also depicted on this fragment, telling us that maybe the ribbons shown here were connecting the garlands depicted above the zoomorphic motif. If the zoomorphic motif was showing a bull, it is possible that it was a sacrificing scene¹⁹ or it could also symbolize the *Legio VII Claudia Pia Fidelis*²⁰. Of course, this is just a hypothesis, since the picture has not been completely preserved.

On one of the fragments belonging to the paintings of the older phase and standing in connection with the fragment with the zoomorphic motif part of an inscription can be recognized, with the carved letters B and A (Abb. 5). The carvings are shallow, made with a sharp tool. The letter B (1,7 cm) was made with three strikes, of which the vertical line is uneven and diagonal, while the other two bowed lines connect with each other, but not with the vertical line. The upper bowed line is shorter and narrower compared to the lower one. The letter A (1,3 cm) was also made with three strikes, with two diagonal lines, which are connected and approximately of the same size, while the horizontal line was placed in the upper letter half and it is placed diagonally upwards. Graffiti carved in wall mortar are not uncommon and their contents are various. Whether this carving contained a private, love or insulting message, or even a name, cannot be concluded.

The described examples of wall decoration (Abb. 2b, 4, 5) were covered with paintings from a younger phase, namely the above described floral scheme with garlands (Abb. 2a, 3).

The mortar of the first layer was deliberately destroyed, in order to get a better positioning of the mortar for the paintings of the later phase. This mortar was finished in two layers. The first layer was made of sand and lime, 1 to 3 cm thick, while the second one is composed of marble powder and lime, 0,1 to 0,8 cm thick. The mortar thickness from the younger phase is 1 to 3 cm. Here, the first layer was made of sand and lime and the intonacco was 1 to 3 mm thick, composed of a mixture of marble powder and lime.

Imitation of marble plastering

43 fragments, which can be connected to this complex, were found all together (Abb. 6). Most of the colours used are yellow and red on a white background. The red painted decoration was done with free strokes in wavy lines which connected the yellow ellipsoid fields with each other. The fragments are of different sizes, from 1 to 17 cm. The mortar is thick and three layers can be recognized. The first one is composed of brick fragments and lime. The second mortar layer is composed of lime and sand, although fragmented bricks are partially visible; this layer is 1,7–4 cm thick. The intonacco consists of a mixture of marble powder and lime and is about 3 mm thick. Mortar consisting of broken bricks and lime as the first layer of a wall painting can also be seen on some other archaeological sites in Serbia, e.g. *Sirmium* and *Singidunum*²¹.

Decorating walls with imitations of marble plastering was very popular during antiquity²², as well as in late antiquity. On the basis of very similar examples of marbelization on the lower zone of the wall painting of the house of *Octavius Quarcus* in Pompeii (1st century BC)²³, *Singidunum* (end of the 2nd and beginning of the 3rd century)²⁴, at the tomb in Beška (first half of the 4th century AD)²⁵, at the *mausoleum* in *Sopianae* (the first half of the 4th century)²⁶, at the Acropolis-House in Ephesus (4th–5th century AD)²⁷, it can be concluded that the fragments from the amphitheatre represent an imitation of marble plastering.

¹⁹ Pliny 1967, 127–128.

²⁰ The bull is the symbol of the *Legio VII Claudia Pia Fidelis*.

²¹ Vujović 1997, 176.

²² Zimmermann – Ladstätter 2010, 170.

²³ Baldassarre *et al.* 2002, 208 f.

²⁴ Vujović 1997, 177.

²⁵ Marijanski-Manojlović 1987, 17–20.

²⁶ Fülep *et al.* 1988, 22.

²⁷ Zimmermann – Ladstätter 2010, 170.

Conclusion

In this paper, a closer look is taken on fragments which were found to the north of the eastern entrance of the amphitheatre in 2008. It is unfortunately not possible to estimate the surface covered with these wall paintings. Still, we are lucky to be able to recognize, at least partially, its content, and we hope that during the forthcoming archaeological excavation, more fragments will be found, which would offer an even better picture of the wall paintings from this part of the amphitheatre. Some fragments from the older phase bear a decorative scheme very similar to the one from the later wall painting phase, which can be especially clearly recognized on garland motifs. Iconographical pictures include floral schemes with garlands, zoomorphic motifs and imitations of marble plastering.

By analyzing the fragments of the wall paintings, we were able to find out that the painted decoration of the *Viminacium* amphitheatre was done in two layers *i.e.* that the first layer was painted over at a certain point of time. The amphitheatre was built during the first half of the 2nd century and it cannot be estimated in which period the over-painting took place.

If we consider the floral decorative scheme with garlands, whose attributes can be brought in connection with glorification and the triumph of life over death, as well as the scene of a bull combined with garlands, we can presume that those fragments of wall-paintings belonged to a representative part of the building, even though the fresco fragments were found outside the arena walls.

The greatest number of stylistic and chronological parallels with the floral scheme from the *Viminacium* amphitheatre can be found on the frescoes from the provinces *Asia Minor*, *Judaea*, *Syria*, *Baetica* and from a later period in *Dacia Mediteranea* and *Italia*. Similar examples of imitations of marble plastering can be seen on wall paintings from *Asia Minor*, *Italia*, *Moesia Superior*, *Pannonia Valeria* and *Pannonia Secunda*.

Bibliographie

Ancient sources

Pliny 1967 Pliny, *NH* III libri VIII–XI, translated by H. Rackham, book VII, 1967, 127–128.

References

- | | |
|--------------------------------|--|
| Baldassarre <i>et al.</i> 2002 | I. Baldassarre – A. Pontrandolfo – A. Rouveret – M. Salvadori, <i>Römische Malerei</i> (Mailand 2002). |
| Brun – Munzi 2010 | J.-P. Brun – P. Munzi, La decorazione pittorica di un mausoleo di età severiana nella necropoli settentrionale di Cuma, in: I. Bragantini (ed.), <i>Atti del X Congresso Internazionale dell'AIPMA</i> , Napoli 17–21 settembre 2007, <i>AIONArch Quad</i> 18 (Napoli 2010) 499–510. |
| Cănovas 2010 | A. Cănovas, La casa del parque infantil de tráfico de Córdoba. Primeros resultados, in: I. Bragantini (ed.), <i>Atti del X Congresso Internazionale dell'AIPMA</i> , Napoli 17–21 settembre 2007, <i>AIONArch Quad</i> 18 (Napoli 2010) 828–831. |
| Chevalier – Gherbrant 1983 | J. Chevalier – A. Gherbrant, <i>Riječnik Simbola</i> (Zagreb 1983). |
| Elliot 2005 | J. Elliot, Gladiadores. La muerte como espectáculo, <i>Historia y Vida</i> 452, 2005, 64–73. |
| Fülep <i>et al.</i> 1988 | F. Fülep – Z. Bachman – A. Pintér, <i>Sopianae–Pécs, Ókeresztény emlékei</i> (Budapest 1988). |
| Hufschmid 2009 | T. Hufschmid, Theatres and Amphitheatres in Augusta Raurica. Roman Amphitheatres and Spectacula, a 21 st–Century Perspective, <i>BARIntSer</i> 1946 (Oxford 2009). |
| Korać 2007 | M. Korać, <i>Slikarstvo Viminacijuma</i> (Beograd 2007). |
| Mano-Zisi 1964 | Đ. Mano-Zisi, Pogled na pitanje urbanizacije i urbanizma u Ilirikumu, <i>Zbornik Narodnog muzeja</i> IV, 1964, 93–113. |
| Marijanski-Manojlović 1987 | M. Marijanski-Manojlović, <i>Rimska nekropola kod Beške u Sremu</i> (Novi Sad 1987). |
| Michaeli 2010 | T. Michaeli, The iconography of a Roman tomb at Caesarea Maritima, Israel, in: I. Bragantini (ed.), <i>Atti del X Congresso Internazionale dell'AIPMA</i> , Napoli 17–21 settembre 2007, <i>AIONArch Quad</i> 18 (Napoli 2010) 521–530. |
| Миятевь 1925 | К. Миятевь, Декоративната живопись на софийския некрополь (София 1925). |
| Milovanović 2001 | B. Milovanović, <i>Viminacium 12, Vegetabilni motivi na nadgrobnim spomenicima iz Viminacijuma</i> (Požarevac 2001) 109–125. |
| Nicolai <i>et al.</i> 2002 | V. Fiocchi Nicolai – F. Bisconti – D. Mazzoleni, <i>The Christian Catacombs of Rome</i> , (Regensbourg 2002). |

- Vujović 1997 M. Vujović, Prilog proučavanju antičkog zidnog slikarstva i štuko dekoracije na tlu Singidunuma, Singidvnm 1, 1997, 169–178.
- Zimmermann – Ladstätter 2010 N. Zimmermann – S. Ladstätter, Wandmalerei in Ephesos. Von hellenistischer bis in byzantinische Zeit (Wien 2010).
- Zotović 1986 Lj. Zotović, Južne nekropole Viminacija i pogrebni obredi, Viminacium 1, 1986, 41–60.

Abbildungen

Abb. 1: *Viminacium*, Amphitheatre, two layers of the wall decoration from two different periods, arrow 1. shows the layer of painted decoration from the older period, while arrow 2. shows the layer from a younger period

Abb.2: *Viminacium*, Amphitheatre, a. Floral decorative scheme with garlands. This painting belongs to the younger period. b. The zoomorphic motif, painted decoration from the older phase

Abb.3: *Viminacium*, Amphitheatre, floral decorative scheme with garlands

Abb.4: *Viminacium*, Amphitheatre, the repeated iconographical scheme, painted decoration from the older phase

Abb.5: *Viminacium*, Amphitheatre, the carved B-A letters on the older painting layer

Abb.6: *Viminacium*, Amphitheatre, marbelization

Dragana Rogić
Institute of Archaeology
Serbian Academy of Sciences and Arts
Knez Mihailova 35/IV
Belgrade, Serbia