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ART ON THE EDGE: THE LATE ROMAN WALL PAINTING OF AMHEIDA, EGYPT

(Taf. CXXV–CXXVII, Abb. 1–10)

Abstract

Da quando le indagini archeologiche a Amheida nell’Oasi di Dakhleh hanno avuto inizio nel 2001, il sito ha rivelato molti tesori dell’Egitto romano. Particolarmente degno di nota è il numero di superfici di intonaco dipinto, che si conservano in quantità eccezionale. Il sito è conosciuto anche come la “Pompei d’Egitto”, un soprannome che diventa sempre più appropriato dal momento che, durante ogni campagna, nuovi ambienti dipinti vengono identificati e aggiunti alla mappa via via aggiornata dal topografo del progetto. I soggetti presentati in questa sede sono le pitture di una casa tardo-romana (la cosiddetta “casa di Serenos”), che è stata scavata completamente tra il 2004 e il 2007; il sistema parietale è ricco di motivi, sia mitologici sia decorativi, talvolta senza precedenti non solo per il constesto dell’Egitto del IV secolo, ma anche per l’ambito dell’intero Impero romano. Le pitture di questa casa sono materiali estremamente importanti e di grande valore artistico e storico: lo studio di essi consentirà di avere un ulteriore elemento per affinare la nostra conoscenza della cultura della tarda antichità, non solo all’interno dell’Oasi di Dakhleh, ma anche al di là dei suoi confini.

The town of Amheida lies in the northwest sector of Egypt’s Dakhleh Oasis, an island of cultivation and civilization deep in the heart of the vast desert west of the Nile (Abb. 1). Though seemingly remote, the oasis is an archaeological goldmine, dotted with ancient remains dating to the very earliest moments of human habitation. Amheida, or *Trimithis*, as it was known in the Roman imperial period, has received particular attention of late from a multitude of scholarly perspectives because of its long occupation history. Investigations of the site have thus far revealed a temple dedicated to the Egyptian god Thoth, a necropolis filled with barrel vaulted tombs and a Roman era Pyramid, a church and last but not least, a late-antique house painted with a panoply of scenes drawn from Graeco-Roman mythology (Abb. 2)¹. This latter discovery is of particular note given the house’s 4th century date. Though not the first wall paintings to be discovered in Dakhleh², because of its unusual pagan iconography, as well as its unconventional formal design, Amheida’s painted house is unique vis-à-vis surviving examples of mural paintings from the same era, both in Egypt and the larger Roman Empire.

The house and its paintings were, in fact, discovered more than thirty years ago, in the course of test excavations at Amheida by the Dakhleh Oasis Project (DOP) in 1979. At that time, only the upper part of the east corner of one room of the house was cleared, and then reburied. The discovery was subsequently reported by A. J. MILLS and the paintings studied in more detail by L. MONTAGNO LEAHY, but despite these publications, the paintings remain relatively unknown in the wider field of Roman art³. This essay therefore repre-

¹ All of the Amheida project’s preliminary excavation reports from 2001 onwards can be accessed online at <http://www.amheida.org/index.php?content=reports>.

² In fact, the oasis has been referred to as the “Pompeii of Egypt” (Thurston 2004), a moniker that proves more apt with each passing season. Indeed, it is not just the site of Amheida that provides a rich corpus of mural remains. At the nearby town of Kellis for example, a house with a significant percentage of its painted decorations preserved was discovered in 2005, see Hope – Whitehouse 2006.

³ Mills 1980; Leahy 1980.

sents a prolegomenon to the more comprehensive study of the painted house from Amheida currently underway⁴.

Excavations at the site of Amheida resumed in 2004 under the auspices of Columbia University in collaboration with the DOP⁵. During this first season, the painted room, labelled room 1 and subsequently determined to be the central reception space of the “villa” (officially House B1, R1, Area 2.1), was cleared to the ground in six weeks⁶. In addition to revealing once more the paintings studied by the DOP in 1979 (on the north wall and northeast corner of the room), painted plaster was discovered still decorating the walls of the southwest corner, as well as the lower half of the west wall⁷. In total, perhaps fifty percent of the room’s plaster is still attached *in situ*, but unfortunately the collapse of the room’s mud-brick domed ceiling sometime after the house was abandoned in antiquity pulverized or knocked completely out of place the other fifty percent.

Originally executed on only a thin layer of straw-tempered plaster laid over mud-brick, with no effective substratum to anchor them to the walls, the paintings, even in antiquity, were not particularly durable, a fact that has complicated their conservation in the present⁸. A great deal of fragmented plaster, pieces both large and small, was recovered from the fill of the room in 2004, but reconstructing the original *loci* of these fragments as well as their conservation has since proved challenging. Approximately 135 trays of small pieces, 75 large fragments still attached to bricks and four large blocks of plaster attached to masses of brick masonry are currently in storage and under study. Notwithstanding the difficulties, since 2004 several important figural vignettes have been reconstructed from the fragments and a better understanding of the room’s overall figural program is beginning to emerge.

Subsequent field seasons at Amheida determined the precise plan of the villa (Abb. 3) and revealed other rooms painted with geometric and floral motifs (rooms 11, 13 and 14). Analyses of additional excavated material, such as several coins dating to the reign of *Constantius II* (337–355), provide a *terminus ante quem* for the execution of the paintings of approximately the middle of the century, and the last occupation level is apparently of the 360s. Furthermore, the discovery of several *ostraka* in the vestibule adjacent to the painted room has helped to formulate a working theory about the ancient owner of the villa. These reference an individual named *Serenos*, who was likely a town councillor of *Trimithis*⁹.

A wealth of additional information about the wider urban context of the villa’s paintings has also been brought to light. In 2006 a room abutting the north side of the villa was excavated (room 15, building 5) and is currently interpreted as a school of rhetoric, a fact that is proving integral to formulating a comprehensive theory about the meaning of Room 1’s iconographic program¹⁰. Even more recently, the 2010 season uncovered a room containing a “*sigma*” feature to the southeast of the villa, possibly a *stibadium* within a communal banqueting room, as well as a columned hall to the northwest that was likely a public meeting space of some sort (building 6)¹¹.

Although the villa is now buried once again so as to best preserve the *in situ* paintings, it should be noted that in 2009 a full-scale *replica* of the house was constructed on the edge of the modern archaeological site to foster tourism and facilitate further study. Painted facsimiles of the paintings from Rooms 11 and 13 were

⁴ The volume will be a collaborative effort, with contributions from multiple experts in several fields. This introduction could not have been written without the support of these experts, especially H. WHITEHOUSE and D. RENAULT. Thanks also to the project director R. BAGNALL and the excavation director P. DAVOLI for permission to present this material as a “work in progress” at the 2010 AIPMA colloquium.

⁵ The excavation’s primary sponsorship has since moved, along with its director R. BAGNALL, to the nascent Institute for the Study of the Ancient World at New York University, but Columbia remains an active partner.

⁶ The painted house was unofficially dubbed the “villa,” in early excavation seasons, and while somewhat of a misnomer in the urban context of *Trimithis*, the appellation has stuck, and proves useful in distinguishing the painted house from the other, non-elite household uncovered at the site.

⁷ As recorded in the 2004 report, the dimensions of Room 1 are 4,7 m (east-west) x 5,3 m (north-south). The maximum preserved height of the walls (southeast corner) is 2,95 m, and the minimum is 90 cm in the middle of the south wall.

⁸ Unfortunately the paintings’ condition has not fared well since their excavation. The *in situ* plaster started to deteriorate almost immediately upon exposure to the air in spite of conservation efforts. Due to unavoidable factors such as moisture and insect damage, in 2006 the decision was made to permanently backfill the house to prevent further damage.

⁹ P. Kell. I G. 27, Bagnall – Ruffini 2004, 147.

¹⁰ Cribiore *et al.* 2008; Davoli – Cribiore 2010.

¹¹ See 2010 excavation report, <http://www.amheida.org/index.php?content=reports>.

added to the *replica* in the 2010 field season, and work has now begun on reproducing the surviving geometric registers from Room 1¹². The figural registers will follow in future seasons. Needless to say, the continued success of this endeavor is inextricably linked to the ongoing analysis of the fragments.

While there are still many mysteries to be solved about Room 1's paintings, their program, antecedents, legacy and so forth, some preliminary observations about their decorative format and organization can at least be suggested. In the 4th century, Room 1 was a total painted environment, a veritable *horror vacui*. Almost every surface of the room was decorated, either with colourful geometric motifs or lively figural scenes, such that the experience of entering the space for the first time in antiquity must have been overwhelming. One can imagine the dramatic impact of such a riotous explosion of colour and kaleidoscopic patterns on the eyes of first time visitors, more used to the earthen shades of the desert and the plain, white-washed aesthetic of more functional interiors.

It is not unreasonable to presume that the space was, in fact, designed specifically for maximum visual impact. The process of decorating a house in order to awe, or to guide a visitor through a space in a programmatic manner using narrative clues as well as formal conventions (repeated colour, architectural frames etc.) was a time honoured practice of elite patrons in the Roman imperial period, often employing multiple media¹³. It is very rare however to find surviving examples of nearly complete mural programs in the late Roman world, most especially ones with such complex mythological content. In the context of a wider study of the relationship between art and late Roman social *mores*, the Amheida paintings are therefore, potentially groundbreaking.

But in spite of what appears to be a continuity of praxis with respect to the function of the images, the actual decorative system employed in the room is eclectic, and does not conform to any known formulae from earlier eras. From the remaining fragments *in situ*, one can deduce that the perimeter walls of Room 1 were divided unevenly into four horizontal registers of decoration, not including the four triangular pendentives at each corner architecturally anchoring the dome to the walls, and the concave surface of the domed ceiling. The plaster decorating these pendentives contained images of haloed putti with green wings floating on white ground, one in each corner of the room¹⁴. These putti held aloft a garland of pink, and in some sectors, green flowers, which probably decorated the lower part of the dome in a continuous band. The rest of the dome itself likely contained colourful geometric designs, but very little of the plaster from this part of the room survives making precise reconstructions difficult.

The compositional format of Room 1's walls is slightly easier to recreate because so much more is preserved *in situ*. The lowest register of decoration is the simplest, just a plain socle of a dark and as-yet undetermined hue that most likely circled the room at a uniform height of approximately 45 cm above floor level¹⁵. The second register, largest in terms of surface area (except in relation to the dome) reaches a height of a little less than two meters from the surface of the 4th century floor, which perhaps corresponds to eye level or just above eye level for a man of average height in the late antique oasis¹⁶. This register also circles the room and is divided into a series of panels filled with rhythmic and colourful geometric patterns, in some cases hypnotic in their Escher-like effect. Interestingly, two of these panels, one decorating the wall space between the two doorways in the middle of the west wall, and the other on the west side of the north wall, are layered with two phases of decoration. It is not clear yet whether these represent evidence of an ancient repair or simply a change of taste.

It is common to find geometric rather than figural motifs on equivalent sectors of wall space in late Roman houses, both in Egypt and beyond¹⁷. However, the designs at Amheida do not echo the conventions of

¹² The artist in charge of this endeavor has chronicled her progress in two recent publications, Schulz 2010; Schulz 2011.

¹³ Abundant literature addressing the function of images in Roman houses exists for the early empire and is mostly focused on the corpus of material from the Bay of Naples, see Clarke 1991; Wallace-Hadrill 1994; Zanker 1998; Stewart 2008. The methodologies employed in these volumes have been variously and usefully applied to post-Pompeian material as well as examples outside of Italy, but it should be noted that an equivalent comprehensive study addressing late antiquity has yet to be written.

¹⁴ Fragments of at least three putti from the northeast, northwest and southwest corners have been found, the southeast corner was too badly damaged to recover any plaster.

¹⁵ Report on the pigment analysis forthcoming in 2013.

¹⁶ At 1,65 m tall, this author's eye level corresponds to just below the uppermost border of the second register.

¹⁷ For an overview of late Roman wall systems see Joyce 1981; Liedtke 2003.

what can perhaps be considered an international painting style in late antiquity – the taste for decorating the lower zones of walls with fictive socles and orthostats, imitation marble encrustations, or *opus sectile* patterns¹⁸. Rather, the complexities of the patterns employed at Amheida may be compared with those more typically used in mosaic pavements¹⁹. Given that it is very rare to find actual mosaics in Egypt outside of Alexandria in the Graeco-Roman period, the employment of mosaic-like simulations at Amheida raises interesting questions about the relationship between the paintings and their prototypes, as well as the process of transmission. The surprising discovery of mosaic tesserae in building 6 during the 2012 excavation season further complicates matters.

While the lower registers of room 1's paintings seem to progress in uniform fashion, height-wise, around the room's perimeter, the upper zones of plaster containing the figural compositions are less regularized in their distribution in terms of height and overall surface area (the variations perhaps due to the type of the narrative pictured). On the east and west walls, several small-scale figural scenes extend horizontally, film-strip-like, in two bands of decoration contained within borders/ground lines of black pigment (Abb. 4)²⁰. These bands are not of uniform elevation; the best-preserved register on the east wall is 49 cm in height while the *in situ* register on the west wall is 39 cm high. Moreover the upper registers on both walls are so badly preserved it is difficult to determine their maximum vertical extension.

As for the compositions contained within, their formats are also irregular. On the east wall for example the artist has employed multiple formal conventions for suggesting the progression of the narrative. The technique of continuous narrative, where one scene flows into the next with little or no attempt to distinguish visually between the scenes, is used in at least one case²¹. But in other instances, both on the east and west walls, narrative scenes are unambiguously marked as distinct from each other by the employment of vertical dividing lines in the same black pigment as the horizontal borders. These may have developed in antiquity as discrete narrative vignettes contained within rectangular frames of varying width, simulating, in outline, the appearance of two courses of irregularly stacked bricks.

In general, the formats of the two figural registers on the east and west walls was by no means symmetrical, especially because the west wall is punctuated by two doorways leading into the subsidiary rooms 11 and 14, themselves both painted with colourful floral and geometric motifs (and which perhaps functioned as *cubicula*). Unfortunately, not enough of the upper portion of this wall survives to determine the height of the door lintels. It is not clear therefore whether there was an uninterrupted extension of the lower figural register across the surface of the west wall, or whether the height of the door precluded such continuity. It should be noted that the largest block of detached plaster recovered from the north end of the west wall, containing figural subjects of a much larger scale than the vignettes still *in situ*, suggests the latter, rather than the former²².

In contrast to the filmstrip-like registers on the east and west walls, a different format seems to have been employed for the figural decorations of the north and south walls. For example, on the north wall, narrative vignettes above the geometric register flank the main entrance to the room, filling spaces resembling half lunettes, the surface area of which likely stretched vertically to the springing of the dome (and therefore the figures themselves are much larger in scale than those on the east and west walls, about half life-sized [Abb. 6]). Furthermore, only the western side of the north wall is divided into two figural registers, which, content-wise seem to have little to do with each other. In fact, the lower of these two registers was repainted in antiquity with a composition that draws the viewer's eye horizontally, while the narrative action in the upper register is arrayed vertically.

¹⁸ Examples from other papers in this colloquium volume.

¹⁹ For general comparanda see Dunbabin 1999.

²⁰ Interestingly these borders on the east wall contain captions identifying the characters depicted. Such inscriptions might have been employed throughout the room; in fact some additional fragments of plaster containing lettering were recovered during the 2004 excavation, but not enough to aid further identification of figures or scenes.

²¹ On the third register of the east wall, the image of Polis is juxtaposed with the procession of gods witnessing the adultery of Aphrodite and Ares. There is no dividing line between the two scenes suggesting a decisive break in the narrative, the Polis is certainly looking at the gods assembled, but it is as yet unclear exactly how the vignettes are related.

²² This block contains the scene of Orpheus taming the animals with his lyre.

While very little of the south wall figural register(s?) survives, what does remain on the east edge of the south wall suggests a similar lunette-like composition to those on the north wall, one with a narrative composition that covers a much larger surface area than the figural episodes on the east and west walls. It is possible that these larger figural scenes are evidence of a different hand at work, or even a different phase of decoration. Or perhaps the size of these compositions is determined according to the kind of narrative construct employed. For example, the vignettes on the north wall can be construed as monoscenic, representing a dramatic moment rather than a story that progresses over time – a snapshot if you will rather than a film-strip – thus greater emphasis is placed on the vertical arrangement of figures within the scene²³.

Overall, the compositional format of Room 1's figural scenes can be characterized as asymmetrical, unevenly running along the perimeter of the upper zone of the room's walls in one or two registers. It is possible that this asymmetry was deliberate, designed in antiquity to prompt sequential viewing, the purposeful pairing of one narrative scene with another across the space of the room or in a particular order, but until more of the room's visual program can be reconstructed from the fragments, such speculations are difficult to support conclusively. Nor can the Amheida wall system be easily likened to trends in contemporary compositional formats known to exist outside of Egypt. Examples of late Roman painted domestic spaces from across the Mediterranean – favoring instead large expanses of imitation *opus sectile*, shallow architectural stages framing individual, megalographic figures, and linear architectonic wall systems – seem far more conservative in comparison to the anarchic asymmetry of Room 1's decorations²⁴.

While the complexities of the compositional format of Room 1's paintings are unexpected, the subject matter of the figural registers is even more intriguing. All four walls of Room 1 abound with scenes of mythology as well as social ritual clearly anchored in traditional Graeco-Roman visual culture, astonishing given the house's 4th century date. While such themes survive and are found in abundance in mosaics across the Mediterranean in late antiquity, mythological mosaic narratives are rarely collated into as complex a thematic constellation as the one that is emerging at Amheida²⁵. Nor do any other surviving examples of paintings from the same era contain such a profusion of characters from Greco-Roman mythology. The house is thus unprecedented in terms of medium and content, especially unusual at an art historical moment better known for its burgeoning Christian visual vocabulary.

The figural scenes identified thus far, many of which are described in greater detail and nuance than is possible here in L. MONTANO LEAHY's aforementioned publication, are dispersed around the room as follows²⁶.

Starting on the north wall, in the half-lunette west of the room's main entrance, one finds a depiction of Perseus rescuing Andromeda from a not-so-terrifying sea monster (Abb. 5)²⁷. Below Perseus and Andromeda, there is a more crudely painted register, divided into two scenes that are seemingly unrelated to the mythological snapshot above. The western scene shows a servant in a decorated tunic standing beside jars of wine stacked in a rack, and the eastern side illustrates a nude, winged child reclining on a bolster or perhaps a pillow. H. WHITEHOUSE has speculated that this may have been initially a depiction of Herakles/Herakliskos-Harpokrates. His wings are a later addition to the composition, and were painted over a depiction of snakes, recalling his association with the snake-strangling infant Hercules attested in bronze²⁸. If this identi-

²³ Specifically, the moments when *Perseus* swoops in with the head of Medusa to rescue Andromeda, and when Eurykleia recognizes Odysseus having returned to *Ithaca* after a twenty-year absence – see below.

²⁴ Multiple 3rd and early 4th century examples of such systems can be found in the Hanghäuser at Ephesus, Zimmermann – Ladstätter 2010; see also the paintings from the site of Zeugma, Barbet 2005; Piazza Armerina in Sicily, Carandini 1982; and the house underneath Ss. Giovanni e Paolo, Brenk 1995.

²⁵ Supra n. 19, also Bowersock 2006. Late antique mosaic mythological scenes, though also employed in the most important rooms of the house such as reception rooms or dining rooms, are more likely to be found in the singular; as lone panels surrounded by geometric designs, or a single vignette covering the entire surface of the room (as at Piazza Armerina for example). Narrative mosaic scenes are also, on occasion, grouped together in late antique contexts, but in these cases a unifying theme or literary source is not easily detected.

²⁶ Leahy 1980, *loc. cit.* (n. 2). This publication also provides comprehensive citations for visual comparanda.

²⁷ Cf. a similar painting both in composition and date (fourth century C.E.) from a *balneum* in Rome near the Capitoline hill, Mielsch 1978, pls. XXX–XXXII.

²⁸ Parlasca 1959, 71–74, esp. 72.

fictionation is correct, this image is the only nod to Egyptian subject matter, as opposed to canonically Greco-Roman themes identified in the room so far, and it is curious that this is one of the portions of the wall decoration that was significantly altered in antiquity²⁹. Notable also in this scene is the peculiar way Perseus' right foot intrudes into the visual field of the scene below. Is this simply a mistake on the part of the artist who misjudged the proportions of Perseus and then attempted to compensate? Or, was this intended as a more sophisticated conceptual interchange between the image and the viewer, one in which the figure of Perseus defies the boundaries between pictorial space and real space?

The lunette on the north wall east of the main entrance to room 1 contains a scene interpreted as a story related in Homer's *Odyssey* (Book XIX), in particular the moment in which, upon Odysseus' return to *Ithaka* after ten years at war and another ten at sea, his old nurse, Eurykleia, recognizes him (Abb. 6). Odysseus is pictured seated on a high dais, on a cross-legged stool covered in a fleecy animal skin, with one of his feet in a basin of water. Eurykleia crouches below him, her hands in the basin washing Odysseus' foot. At the same time she looks upwards towards Odysseus, who reaches out with his hand to touch her face, a gesture meant to signal the exact moment of recognition. A third figure to their left (the viewer's right), seated in three quarter profile at the same ground level as Eurykleia, is interpreted as Penelope. She does not engage with the other figures in the scene though her body is turned towards them. Rather, her right hand is lifted towards her face in a gesture of contemplation, and her gaze is directed at neither Odysseus nor Eurykleia. She is staring dreamily off into space, still in the dark as to Odysseus' identity.

Moving on to the east wall and the lower filmstrip-like figural register, one finds a personification of Polis seated next to a stylized gate or temple, and a procession of Olympian gods striding away from her (Abb. 7). The figure of Polis may be a key symbol for understanding the overarching agenda of the house's owner in commissioning these images. A papyrus from nearby Kellis records that *Trimithis* had in fact achieved the status of Polis by 304 AD, so it has been suggested that this honour is directly referenced in the paintings here³⁰. If this is indeed the case, then the figure of Polis conveniently provides a *terminus post quem* for the execution of the paintings. Indeed, this image of civic pride is coupled conceptually with an image representing familial pride catty-corner to Polis on the west wall, a *convivium*, to be discussed in a moment, lending credence to the notion that the house belonged to an important town councillor – one who especially wished to promote an identity tied to Graeco-Roman *paideia*.

The procession of Olympian gods to Polis' left, conveniently identified by inscriptions in the black line framing the upper edge of this first register as Poseidon, Dionysos, Apollo, Herakles, Hephaistos and Helios, are part of an episode identified as the adultery of Aphrodite and Ares. These standing male figures direct their gaze southwards towards an image of a reclining (?) Aphrodite (with the exception of Helios who gestures towards Aphrodite but looks back at the assembled gods as if to say, "I told you so"). Aphrodite resides in an interior space of some sort, flanked by schematic columns or bedposts. She raises her arms in surprise, and is surrounded by a billowing swath of drapery further emphasizing her centrality in the overall composition. Ares, however, has already fled the scene, and is depicted in the southernmost edge of the narrative frame, his face and body turned away from Aphrodite.

Like the image of Odysseus and Eurykleia, the story of the adultery of Aphrodite and Ares is told in Homer's *Odyssey* (Book VIII), and it has been speculated since the paintings first came to light in 1979 that there is a particular emphasis on Homeric themes in the program of the room, though other scenes have yet to be concretely identified³¹. The iconographic content of the figural register directly above this sector of the wall for example, also hints at Homeric tropes. Though barely legible in 2004, in 1979 the lower half of this narrative register was preserved enough to identify at least four enthroned figures, a rearing horse (or bull?) and a standing heroically nude figure with a billowing red cape in a pose reminiscent of images of Hermes, the messenger of the gods³². Did this section of plaster depict an assembly of the Gods on Mt. Olympus, dictating the epic adventures of heroes pictured in other registers of the room? At the moment one can only

²⁹ The image of the winged child was placed directly above a scene illustrating some kind of architectural vista that was, in a later phase of decoration, covered by geometric mosaic-like designs similar to those in other sectors of the room's second register.

³⁰ P. Kell. I G. 49. 1–2; Bagnall – Ruffini 2004, 144.

³¹ Leahy 1980, 346.

³² *Ibid.*, 368.

guess about the meaning of this scene, but the search for further iconographical as well as textual comparanda is ongoing, and will hopefully provide illumination in the near future.

Returning to the east wall's lower register, after the adultery of Aphrodite and Ares the narrative shifts, as signalled by the vertical black line directly to the proper left of Ares. Unfortunately what followed in terms of programmatic content is guesswork. Still *in situ* are two figures of men in eastern dress, wearing the characteristic Phrygian cap, but beyond them, to the south, the wall has almost completely collapsed. What remains of the plaster from this sector of the room is in fragments. Thus far, team-members have succeeded in piecing together several additional narrative vignettes including a scene depicting a satyr chasing a nymph (Abb. 8), Zeus (as an eagle) and Ganymede, Zeus (as a bull) and Europa, and an image that may be Daphne transforming into a tree. One can certainly hazard a guess as to the generic, thematic relationship between the latter three – mortals transformed/beloved by Gods. And one can also hypothesize a connection to the other narrative scenes like Odysseus and Eurykleia, and the adultery of Aphrodite and Ares if one views them all as moments of revelation. It may even be possible to connect these scenes with specific 4th century literary references, beyond the Homeric echoes that are currently understood. For now though, it seems clear at least that the image program of the room was conceived with multiple interpretive layers intended. In previous eras, Greek and Roman homeowners decorated their houses with carefully chosen stories from literature that reflected virtues directly relatable to them³³. But to what extent we can read in the Amheida images the desires and ambitions of Serenos, the presumed owner of the villa, remains to be determined.

Turning to the south wall, unfortunately very little of its plaster survives and in fact, most of the upper portion of the wall has collapsed (though about a third of the wall's geometrically decorated lower register is preserved). *In situ*, the only remaining figural scene is from the westernmost corner of the south wall. There one finds, in a half-lunette-like space, an image of a turbaned woman reclining (or perhaps cross legged?) and making a gesture of submission (or dancing? or sleeping?). Above her is preserved the head of a horse, though the exact relationship between it and the female figure remains to be determined, and the disparity in scale between the small horse's head and the larger female is striking. It has been noted that this is reminiscent of scenes where emperors ride horses above captive barbarians, but very few additional fragments can be associated with this wall a fact that makes concrete identification difficult³⁴.

The only other portion of figured plaster from the south wall that survives, though not *in situ*, is a badly damaged piece of the apron of a niche that was cut into the middle of the south wall, decorated with erotes. This niche and its apron lay on the central entry axis of the room and possibly functioned as a *lararium*, or as a shrine of some importance. Other than the fact of its central location in the main reception room of the house, we have no direct evidence of its purpose, but it could be compared with the niche, presumably for cult image, in the mammisi of the temple of Tutu at Kellis and the painted divinities within a niche in House H10 at Marina el-Alamein³⁵. The presence of such axially aligned shrines in Roman domestic contexts is frequently attested outside Egypt as well³⁶.

As for the west wall, its figural registers are only slightly better preserved *in situ* than the south's, but many large fragments that once decorated its surface were recovered during excavations which will eventually allow for a more comprehensive reconstruction of the narrative scenes.

The first narrative panel of the lower filmstrip register remained attached to the wall, and illustrates a banquet (Abb. 9). On the proper right side of the composition a seated musician plays a double flute. To his (or her?) left is a second, and much smaller standing figure, either another (child?) entertainer or a servant (it is difficult to tell what the figure is holding because of damage to the plaster). Both of these figures direct their gaze southwards towards four individuals, three men and one woman, holding goblets and arrayed behind, or perhaps reclining on (only their upper torsos are pictured so their exact positions are indeterminate), a banqueting couch (*stibadium*).

³³ Bergmann 1994; Ellis 1991.

³⁴ Whitehouse 2005 Wall Paintings Report, <http://www.amheida.org/index.php?content=reports>.

³⁵ Kiss 2006, 163–170. Thanks to H. WHITEHOUSE for these references.

³⁶ Clarke 1991, 6–9; Clarke 2006, 75–81; Note also D. ORR's comprehensive study in ANRW 16/2 (Berlin 1978), 1557–1591. For a late antique example at Piazza Armerina see Carandini 1982.

None of the individuals depicted are easily recognizable as characters from Graeco-Roman literature or myth, so instead, this scene is interpreted as the owner of the house and his family at a formal meal (the *convivium*), one of the most important social rituals performed by elites in the classical world³⁷. So far, this is the only image in Room 1 that can be conclusively understood as taking place in real time as opposed to mythological time. But directly above the banquet, in the very badly preserved upper filmstrip register, is perhaps another. The remaining *in situ* fragments can be read as two seated figures flanking a table (?) etched with crosshatches, perhaps a game board of some sort. One can speculate that this is the owner of the house engaged in prosaic social activity, paired visually with the more formal banquet below. Unfortunately too little of the scene survives to confirm this theory.

Returning to the lower register, to the proper left of the family banquet, another vertical black line signals the shift from one narrative scene to another. What follows this demarcation is only preserved in part; one can discern the foot and a small portion of another couch. This second couch is draped with a lumpy purple cloth, perhaps covering the lower body of a reclining figure. Furthermore, multiple vessels that could be interpreted as wineskins hang along the lower edge of the couch. Is this an image of a reclining *Dionysos* engaged in his own banquet, the mythological counterpart to the family's social ritual? If one presumes an overarching program to Room 1's figural imagery, such thematic congruencies are possible. But it must be stated that any further speculations about the programmatic unity of the west wall are made more difficult when one considers the *in situ* fragments alongside the subject matter of the large detached fragments recovered during the excavation, the exact placement and subject of which are currently unknown.

These blocks of plaster include a scene with two figures in a chariot preserved from the neck down. In this image, the figure driving the chariot is dressed in a Roman cuirass, while the other figure behind the soldier is likely female, dressed in a clinging white robe with a purple undergarment. The lower haunches of at least two horses pulling the chariot also survive, and the direction of the action possibly proceeds towards a scene preserved in a separate block, a schematic gate hung with what looks to be heads and limbs, or perhaps theatrical masks and fillets. The scale of the figures in these fragments is similar to the figures in the *convivium*, suggesting they belong to one of the filmstrip registers. As for what this scene might depict, at first glance, it is similar to images illustrating the abduction of Persephone, but the female figure does not seem in any way reluctant and she is barefoot, a sign of divinity, so her position could also be likened to Nike figures depicted in Roman triumphal processions³⁸. And what can we make of the gate? Was this procession intended as a celebratory scene or a gruesome display? Adding to the mystery is yet another large fragment associated with the west wall containing an as-yet unidentified vignette illustrating a woman with a sword attacking a man on a throne (or couch).

The only securely identifiable scene among the west wall's detached fragments is a rather large block that depicts Orpheus taming the animals with his lyre. This is a very common, iconic motif in late antiquity signaling elite culture all over the Empire³⁹, but curiously a second figure holding a lyre was also found nearby, as well as a female figure of comparable size to Orpheus, suggesting the presence of a more complex anecdote. And interestingly, these figures, likely from the southern end of the west wall are much larger in comparison to the smaller scale characters depicted in the *convivium* and chariot scenes, confusing any attempts to reconstruct a uniform compositional format, as noted above. Who might these figures surrounding Orpheus represent? Is this a depiction of another famous lyre player from classical mythology such as Apollo and a muse? Such scenes resonate strongly with contemporary mosaic as well as painting traditions across the Empire, but here among the other cryptic images on the west wall, they become part of a larger story we have yet to translate.

And the question remains, is the story, in fact, translatable? Were these various narrative vignettes chosen at random from a pattern book provided by traveling artisans, or did a patron well steeped in Graeco-Roman education carefully select them? The abundant scholarly discourse on the meaning of Hellenism in late

³⁷ For an overview of the importance of the *convivium* in the Roman period, see Dunbabin 2003.

³⁸ For example the best-known historical relief panels from Rome: the Triumph of Titus and Vespasian on the Arch of Trajan and the Triumph of Marcus Aurelius from an unknown Aurelian monument, now in the Capitoline Museum.

³⁹ Also popular in early Christian contexts, especially the catacombs of Rome where Orpheus is likened to Christ, eg., the painted *arcosolium* from the Catacombs of Peter and Marcellinus, Deckers 1987, vol. 2 Taf. 66 nr. 79.

antiquity tends to argue the former, but there is evidence at Amheida to suggest, surprisingly, the latter⁴⁰. In a room originally built adjacent to the house and at some time in the 4th century connected to it (Room 15, Building 5), a dipinto was found in 2006 which conclusively affirms the high level of literacy presence in the oasis at the time the paintings were executed⁴¹. This text, arrayed in columns translates as Greek elegiac couplets, has been interpreted (because of the extensive lectional signs provided) as a teacher's whiteboard; there is evidence that parts of the plaster had been wiped clean in antiquity and re-written. The poems themselves are addressed by the teacher to his students and reference the Muses, Hercules and Hermes etc., and are not, in fact, the only poetry found at Dakhleh⁴². In spite of the remoteness of the oasis, it therefore seems that Graeco-Roman *paideia* was still alive and well there in the 4th century, which further suggests that the complex scenes of myth and Graeco-Roman civic life decorating Room 1 are by no means devoid of substantial literary references. Instead, they served for the patron of the house as a means of fashioning a well-calculated public identity centred on the ideals of wealth and Hellenism.

From this brief description of the format and programmatic content of Room 1's paintings, it is clear that Amheida's painted villa represents a rich repository of information about life and culture in the late-antique oasis. The approaches one can utilize to interpret these images are manifold, though a full accounting of these methods is beyond the scope of this paper. But in conclusion let me at least offer just a few summary remarks about the paintings in relation to the themes of this colloquium volume. In truth, it is not easy to situate the paintings from Amheida in the context of a local or a period style. Whereas, as noted above, functionally these paintings are evidence of diachronic as well as synchronic continuities in terms of practice among wealthy elites throughout the Empire, compositionally and stylistically they are more exceptional.

The unconventional wall system has already been described above, but a few words must also be said about the style of the figural imagery. At first glance the figures look canonically Graeco-Roman, in that certain artistic conventions have been employed in rendering the bodies naturalistically. For example colour is used to create the illusion of volume through modulation of value and hue. Furthermore the figures exhibit lively facial expressions and gestures, and their poses convey dynamic movement rather than controlled action or hieratic majesty (as is more common with Egyptian or Early Christian conventions). However, in the execution of the paintings, an idiosyncratic hand can be identified, one more concerned with the expressive and vigorous application of paint, than with producing symmetrical and proportional figures. Indeed, the artist(s?) of Room 1's figural scenes seems intent on cramming as much information into the visual frame as possible, with little attention to compositional *equilibrium*. Most of the narrative action takes place within unbalanced stylized landscapes and stage-like architectural settings rather than illusionistically rendered spaces. The sheer variety of figures found within a single room, several dozen at least, is also very unusual. The overall effect of the Amheida paintings' style is therefore whimsical, unusual and ultimately pleasing to the eye, but it is a style that lacks immediately recognizable contemporary and/or local parallels⁴³.

On the other hand, some of the geometric motifs, especially those in the auxiliary Rooms 11 and 14 resemble paintings from a house in Amheida's neighbour in the oasis, Kellis, which may suggest a local workshop (Abb. 10), although it should be noted that the Kellis paintings have been dated, on present evidence, to the 2nd century AD rather than the 4th⁴⁴. Can we legitimately suggest that a local workshop specializing in colourful mosaic carpet-like motifs survived for more than a century based on two houses? The resemblance between decorative motifs found at both towns may simply mean that people's tastes didn't change that much over time. In reality the patterns found at Amheida and Kellis are rather ubiquitous, both diachronically as well as synchronically⁴⁵. One finds similar patterns in mosaics as well as textiles all over the Empire after the 2nd century AD. Therefore, it is not perhaps productive to ascribe much meaning to this

⁴⁰ For an overview of the issue see Bowersock 1990.

⁴¹ Cribiore *et al.* 2008; Davoli – Cribiore 2010.

⁴² Bagnall *et al.* 2006, 26.

⁴³ Compare perhaps the fluid style of some painted fragments from Alexandria cited in Hanfmann 1992, 242–255; Whitehouse 2010, 1024.

⁴⁴ Hope – Whitehouse 2006, 324, color pl. 4; 326 color pl. 9.

⁴⁵ Mols – Moormann 2010.

wide dissemination of geometric forms other than to say that any formal resemblances between mosaic patterns and wall-painting patterns from Kellis and Amheida indicate that the oasis of Dakhleh was less isolated than its location suggests, and that the vast trade networks of the Roman Empire were still alive and functioning in the 4th century.

How then do we understand the less common figural scenes in relation to the mosaic-like geometric motifs of Room 1's lower registers? The most logical scenario for the execution of these paintings is that there was a division of labour between pattern-painters and figure-painters and the decorators were itinerant, moving from population centre to population centre, and maybe even working in between media. But there is simply not enough evidence to map this process at the moment.

Future investigations of the Amheida paintings will certainly delve more deeply into comparative studies than the space of this paper allows. Non-domestic contexts like the painted tombs of the western oases will likely provide a corpus of useful material, since there is currently very little other evidence in Egypt for figural painting outside of the funerary realm⁴⁶. It will also be fruitful to survey other media when looking for specific stylistic and iconographical trends at Amheida. In addition to mosaic parallels already noted, similar mythological scenes can be found on late antique textiles and painted glass⁴⁷. Moreover, the lively but quite summary narrative formats of Room 1's figural registers recall more the style of illustrated manuscripts, several of which survive from Egypt⁴⁸. Though such comparative evidence is itself fragmentary, considered together, these media indicate a sophisticated and complex visual culture at play in the 4th century oasis.

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⁴⁶ For example, Whitehouse 1998.

⁴⁷ Hope – Whitehouse 2003, 302–304; Hill – Nenna 2003, 88–92.

⁴⁸ Surveyed in Weitzmann 1977.

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Abbildungen

Abb. 1: Plan of Dakhleh Oasis (after R. BAGNALL and D. RATHBONE)

Abb. 2: Axonometric drawing of B1, Area 2.1 (after N. WARNER)

Abb. 3: Plan and section of House B1, Area 2.1 (after N. WARNER)

Abb. 4: B1, R1, northeast corner

Abb. 5: R1, north wall, west side, Perseus and Andromeda, circa 1979. Note the lower figural register of this section of wall has yet to be fully unearthed (Photo by P. SHELDRIK)

Abb. 6: R1, north wall, east side, Odysseus, Eurykleia and Penelope

Abb. 7: R1, east wall, detail of Polis and procession of Gods

Abb. 8: Fragments from R1, east wall, Satyr and Nymph

Abb. 9: R1, west wall, south end, *convivium* scene

Abb. 10: B1, R11, detail of interlocking circle motif also found at Kellis

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