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**PAINTINGS FROM *SIRMIUM* BETWEEN POMPEIAN TRADITION AND LOCAL PANNONIAN
TENDENCIES OF FRESCO DECORATION**

(Taf. CXXIV–CXXXVII, Abb. 1–10)

Abstract

In *Sirmium* wurde eine interessante Gruppe von Fresken mit figürlichen Darstellungen vom Anfang des 2. Jhs. n. Chr. entdeckt. Obwohl sie in einem provinziellen pannonischen Zentrum gefertigt wurden, zeigen diese Malereien stilistisch die Tradition pompeianischer Malerei. Dies bezieht sich vor allem auf mit Schmuck verzierte *Harpokrates*-, *Dionysos*- und *Venus*darstellungen in der Art der barocken Tendenzen des IV pompeianischen Stils, auf ausdrucksvolle Medusen- und Dioskurendarstellungen, sowie ebenso auf sorgfältig ausgeführte Ornamente oder Attribute. Paneele mit Musendarstellungen in Medaillons stellen Beispiele des so genannten „zonaren“ Stils dar, die seit der Zeit Hadrians in pannonischen Zentren auftreten. Die Paneele aus *Sirmium* mit Medaillons auf rotem Hintergrund, die durch schmälere Felder mit pflanzlichen Kandelabern auf schwarzem Hintergrund getrennt wurden, finden ihre Analogien in einigen dekorativen Lösungen, die auch an Villenwänden in *Carnuntum*, *Brigetio*, *Aquincum* und Balácapuszta vorkommen. Auf dem Paneelensockel mit Musen wurden Wasservögel auf gelbem Hintergrund dargestellt, genauso wie auf einem Sockel aus *Poetovio*. Zu den Charakteristiken der Paneele aus pannonischen Villen gehört die Einfassung der Medaillons mit Bändern aus einem Astragalmotiv, was neben den sirmischen Medaillons mit Musen auch auf Paneelen mit Tondi in den Villen von Balácapuszta und *Carnuntum* beobachtet wurde. Die genannten Beispiele der Wandmalerei in pannonischen Villen zeigen, dass lokale Maler schon am Anfang des 2. Jh. das pompeianische System der Wandgliederung in Paneele, die mit Kandelabern getrennt wurden, aufnahmen und diesen Stil in lokalen Zentren weiter entwickelten.

Die größte Freskenzahl mit figürlichen Darstellungen in *Sirmium* wurde in einem Wohnbau an der nördlichen Stadtmauer (Fundstelle 21) gefunden. Aufgrund der Fundsituation ist es leider nicht möglich, größere Wandbereiche zu rekonstruieren. Aufgrund der stilistischen Merkmale kann man davon ausgehen, dass sie zu Beginn des 2. Jhs. oder kurze Zeit später entstanden.

Sirmium, the Roman town at the location of modern Sremska Mitrovica, was founded on an exceptionally important strategic point, so already in the 80ies AD it became a colony and later also the administrative center of the Lower Pannonia province. Finally, it developed into one of the four official residences of the Roman Empire at the beginning of the 4th century¹. In the course of fifty years of systematic investigations of this Pannonian metropolis², many hundreds of larger or smaller fragments of frescoes have been discovered

¹ For historic circumstances related to the origin, development and history of Roman *Sirmium* cf. Mirković 1971, 5–94; Mirković 2006.

² Systematic archaeological excavations in *Sirmium* started in 1957, a year after discovering the remains of a monumental residential structure at locality Ia, identified as an imperial palace. Until 1962 the excavations were carried out under the management of the Regional Office for the Protection of Cultural Monuments in Novi Sad. After that year, the management of the project passed on to the Institute of Archaeology in Belgrade. When Dr. V. POPOVIĆ, an erudite French graduate, was appointed as head of the excavation team, the investigations of *Sirmium* became an international project. Joint Yugoslav-American excavations with the participation of the Institute of Archaeology in Belgrade, the Smithsonian Institution in Washington, the Denison University in Ohio and the City University of New York in Albany, were carried out between 1968 and 1972. From 1972/73 to 1977 the investigations continued as a joint project of the Institute of Archaeology in Belgrade, the French School in Rome and the University of Paris IV-Sorbonne. The project of publishing joint publications of these institutions is still in progress.

at many excavated localities. Unfortunately, they have been mostly discovered in a secondary position, so it was impossible to reconstruct the wall decoration precisely. Most fragments come from public or private residential structures (imperial palace, *villae urbanae*), built or reconstructed at the end of the 3rd and during the 4th century. The registered fragments have geometric and floral decoration in vivid colours and their analysis will be the topic of a distinct study³. So far, it has been noted that most of the fragments are depicted in the illusionistic style of Late Roman fresco painting, while figural motifs have not been encountered. On the other hand, recently published frescoes with anthropomorphic and zoomorphic motifs⁴ were registered in the residential structures dating to the earliest building phase of the structures built of solid material in *Sirmium*, which is generally dated to the 2nd century. Because of the subsequent reconstructions, rebuilding and restorations, this phase is the least known today. The relatively affluent repertoire of the figural motifs in the frescoes from the residential quarter next to the north town wall – locality 21 – from the structures in the wider surrounding of the forum (the earlier structure at locality 30, the structure to the west of the granary at the locality 30 – trench 40/II) and from somewhat later layers of the residential structure in the south town zone – locality 72 (Abb. 1), offer some elements for understanding the style of the decoration of the early buildings in *Sirmium*, as well as for following the cultural trends at the beginning of urban life in this town. A more complete, but because of the poor state of preservation of the frescoes still incomplete, picture of the early wall painting repertoire of this town can be acquired only after the analysis of many hundreds of fragments with linear and vegetal decoration. From these fragments certain larger decorative compositions could be reconstructed. At this moment, we are concentrating on an attempt to stylistically and chronologically analyze the frescoes with figural motifs and, when possible, to determine their position within the ornamental scheme of the wall surface.

The dwelling units within the residential quarter in the northwestern section of the town zone adjacent to the north town wall (locality 21) have been partially investigated (Abb. 1). The archaeological investigations of this locality, which have not been properly published yet⁵, were conducted between 1959 and 1964. The archaeological excavations encompassed four individual dwelling units from the first half of the 2nd century, although archaeological material under the floors indicates earlier structures on that terrain⁶. Four independent structural entities situated along the street running in the north-south direction were constructed in the initial phase of development of this complex. The buildings A, C and D lay on the west side of the street, while structure B was on the east side. Despite many adaptations in the 3rd and 4th centuries the general outline of this complex remained the same, although three building phases could be distinguished. In the preliminary first phase (first half of the 1st century), two rooms with hypocausts had been constructed, while the rest of all four structures was built in the second phase (2nd–3rd centuries).

Most of the fragmented frescoes were found in structure B, and were registered in rooms 12, 13 and 14 of this structure. The frescoes were found in a secondary position, piled up underneath the floors of architectural remains from a partially explored structure from a later construction phase.

These frescoes belong to different parts of wall surfaces from various rooms of the building. They stem from relatively short, but diverse periods of time and were painted by different artists. Most of the fragmentary preserved segments of the wall painting from this locality come from room 13 in structure B and they offer certain elements for the comprehension of the chronological sequence of the wall decoration. Nevertheless, since all preserved frescoes date from the period after the destruction of Pompeii, they have the characteristics of the so-called post-Pompeian style. One of the basic traits of that style is heterogeneity, particular-

After the death of the academic V. POPOVIĆ in 1999, I. POPOVIĆ and M. JEREMIĆ, research directors at the Institute of Archaeology in Belgrade, became the co-directors of the *Sirmium* excavation project and they continued the investigations with the periodical assistance of scholars from France, Slovenia and Austria.

³ Considering that a large amount of the fresco fragments were discovered at many localities in *Sirmium* in the 1960s, it was planned that A. MILOŠEVIĆ, archaeologist and librarian in the Department of Archaeology of the Faculty of Philosophy in Belgrade, would carry out the analysis. Working devotedly on this subject, she finished the manuscript of the study of the *Sirmium* frescoes. However, due to the circumstances, it was not published, but her conclusions are quoted by P. MILOŠEVIĆ, keeper in the Museum of Srem in Sremska Mitrovica, in his monograph on *Sirmium* (Милошевић 2001, 136–138). Unfortunately, both these authors died sometime ago.

⁴ Popović 2008.

⁵ Milošević 1962, 119–122; Popović 1963, 69 f.; Simovljević 1964, 80–83; Milojević 1975; Милошевић 2001, 48–49.

⁶ Simovljević 1964, 81.

ly conspicuous in provincial art, so this makes the establishment of a chronological framework for the origin of certain paintings difficult⁷. The second aggravating circumstance regarding the stylistic-chronological analysis of these frescoes is the fact that they are preserved in fragments, so the complete compositions, except for the panels with representations of Muses, cannot be grasped.

The most interesting preserved frescoes from locality 21 in *Sirmium* are the impressive representations of Muses (*Melpomene*, *Terpsichore*, *Thaleia?*, *Clio?*) depicted in medallions on a red background (Abb. 2). Although the representations of Muses and philosophers are a rather common motif in the Roman fresco painting, known already from the paintings of the Fourth Pompeian Style in the Casa dei *Vettii*⁸ and also from the Terrace House 2 in Ephesus⁹, the style of interpretation and the picture concept distinguish these frescoes from those in *Sirmium*. In other words, the frescoes with images of Muses from locality 21 were painted within circular fields on large panels of red colour in such a way that just the bust and the attribute of the depicted figure are visible. The painting of a figure *in tondo* is an adaptation of the portraits painted in shield-like fields, *imagines clipeatae*, which was an aristocratic tradition flourishing in the Neronian-Flavian period. Portraits *in tondi* are known from Pompeii, e.g. the poetess Sappho in the house in region VI and an elderly man, perhaps a philosopher, in the Casa del Citaredo¹⁰. On the other hand, the depiction of figures in an upper segment of the monochrome red or yellow panels is characteristic of the works from the Hadrianic period. The same iconographic scheme, executed in purple, dark blue, brown and white, which was usually characteristic for the painting of the Hadrianic period¹¹, was also used for the *Sirmium* frescoes depicting Muses. Therefore, with high probability, they can be dated to the time of Hadrian, although a similar artistic style was still popular a few decades later as well, in the period of the Antonines. The frescoes from the building in the south section of *Aquincum* are also dated to the time of Hadrian. These frescoes with figural representations of mythological character were painted in rectangular fields enclosed within a frame shaped like white-coloured fence on the red painted panels. According to the original interpretation, the representations in the emblems were identified as a portrait of *Orpheus*, a hunting scene and three warriors¹², while after the new reconstruction of the entire wall surface the paintings are thought to be scenes from the myth of the Argonauts¹³. Between the red panels with figural representations are narrower fields with vegetal candelabra in red and yellow on a black background. On the *dado* a vegetal ornament is painted in white on a black background¹⁴. The identical iconographic scheme is also repeated in the frescoes of *Brigetio*, showing mythological scenes in rectangular panels surrounded by black fence-like stick frames on the red-painted panels¹⁵. All these decorative schemes also appear in frescoes from the so-called red dining-room of a *villa* at the site Balácapuszta to the north of the Balaton in present-day Hungary. In these frescoes with red background the central scene was painted in a circular medallion framed by a white band with astragal motifs. The image *in tondo* is, however, not of mythological character, but favourite Roman dishes, i.e. poached egg, quails and mushrooms are depicted in the three medallions. The red panels with the medallions are separated by narrower black fields with vegetal candelabra, while on the *dado* water birds and plants are painted on a black background. These frescoes are classified as examples of the Fourth Pompeian Style and date to the period between 60 and 100–120 AD¹⁶. Therefore, even though the iconographic contents of the frescoes from *Sirmium* and Balácapuszta are different, the main concept of the wall decoration at these sites reveals a certain stylistic resemblance. However, the inner picture frame in the frescoes from Balácapuszta consists of stylized vegetal ornaments shaped as a white band¹⁷, while on the *Sirmium* panels the picture frame consists of joined semicircular fields with vegetal ornaments (Abb. 3 d). This concept can also be associated with the

⁷ Ling 1992, 175.

⁸ Mielsch 2001, 89 f. Abb. 101.

⁹ Bingöl 1997, 119 Abb. 85; Baldassarre *et al.* 2002, 266. 268.

¹⁰ Baldassarre *et al.* 2002, 244. 246 f.

¹¹ Mielsch 2001, 97.

¹² Németh 1973, 118. 120.

¹³ On the Borders of East and West 2002, 110–112.

¹⁴ Németh 1973, 115–120.

¹⁵ Baldassarre *et al.* 2002, 340–343.

¹⁶ Thomas 1964, 99 f. Taf.48–57.

¹⁷ Thomas 1964, Taf. 50–55.

painting traditions of the Fourth Pompeian Style. Namely, the well-preserved paintings from the *cryptoporticus* of Nero's *Domus Aurea* in Rome¹⁸ reveal that same inner picture border framing the central image. In some instances it consists of vegetal motifs within joined semicircular fields, encircling the outer frame. These examples suggest that the so-called zonal style, developed during the reign of Hadrian based on the traditions of the Fourth Pompeian Style, was fostered in the fresco painting at the Pannonian sites. The panels from *Sirmium* with figures of Muses in medallions and with the vegetal candelabra in the narrower fields (Abb. 3 a, b) also inherited these traditions, as well as the artistic concepts of the Neronian-Flavian period, such as images *in tondo*, bordered not by a simple frame as the emblems of *Aquincum*, but by a band with the astragal motif (Abb. 3 c). The same concept can be seen on some early examples from Pompeii and *Herculaneum*¹⁹ and also, apart from the frames of tondi from the villa in Balácapuszta, on the frames of two medallions painted on the walls of the *villa urbana* in *Carnuntum* in the 2nd century AD²⁰.

The largest preserved panels of this composition are those of the *dado* with white water birds and green shrubbery, painted on a yellow background (Abb. 4). The fresco with these motifs has analogies with wall paintings from the final phase of the Pompeian painting, dated to the third quarter of the 1st century. The *Sirmium* fresco on the *dado* is, in relation to the selected motifs, similar to the paintings from the Casa di Menandro in Pompeii²¹, from the peristyle of the Maison aux Echassiers on the site Vienne in *Gallia*²² and from the structure under the *palaestra* of the Imperial Baths in Trier²³. However, considering the colours used to paint the water birds and plants, the closest analogies for the fresco from *Sirmium* are the fresco from Ptuj (*Poetovio*)²⁴, dated to the middle of the 2nd century and the frescoes from the sites Vidy and Ferren in Switzerland²⁵. These parallels indicate that the examples from *Sirmium* date to the early building phase of this locality, i.e. from the beginning of the 2nd century.

The suggested reconstruction of the decorative scheme of the composition on the wall of room 13 in structure B of locality 21 in *Sirmium* (Abb. 5), made on the basis of the preserved fresco segments and of the existing analogies, is, still, just a theoretical conclusion. The suggested height of the *dado* is 39 cm and of the border above it 6 cm. We think that the total height of the yellow surface of the *dado* together with the red border should be 44,4 cm, i.e. 1½ feet. That would mean that the entire wall composition was executed in a strict observance to the standard proportions. The height of each reconstructed panel with picture and *dado* would have been 300,8 cm or 10½ feet.

The fresco wall decoration with representations of Muses in medallions also included, in all probability, narrow painted fields with vegetal *candelabra*. Rather small fragments of these paintings on the around 30 cm wide panels have been preserved. This measurement could not be established precisely on the basis of the preserved fragments, but we think that it should be 29,6 cm, i.e. 1 foot.

Among the frescoes with figural representations from locality 21 in *Sirmium*, one of the early examples, dating from the end of the 1st or the very beginning of the 2nd century, is a fragmentary preserved fresco showing one of the *Dioscuri* on a polished red background (Abb. 6). The chronological determination of this and other fragmentary preserved frescoes is highly debatable. The fresco with a portrait of *Venus* (Abb. 7) is a fragment of a larger composition whose contents we could not yet determine. According to its stylistic traits, including the charming, chubby face of small size, it can be compared with images of *Amor* or *Eros*, similar to a fresco from the peristyle of the Casa dei *Vettii* in Pompeii, dating to the final phase of the Pompeian painting²⁶. A representation of the head of *Medusa* (Abb. 8 a) is the most monumental and the most suggestive fresco from locality 21. Her pendant was probably a painting with the same motif, but less well preserved (Abb. 8 b). The Medusas in the frescoes from locality 21 were painted suggestively; they have a

¹⁸ Baldassarre *et al.* 2002, 225.

¹⁹ Baldassarre *et al.* 2002, 246 (*Herculaneum*, representation of *Dionysus* and *Ariadne in tondo*). 247 (Pompeii, Casa del Citaredo, portrait of an elderly man-philosopher *in tondo*).

²⁰ Behling 2009, 401–404 Abb. 5–6.

²¹ Maiuri 1932, 82 fig. 39–40.

²² Baldassarre *et al.* 2002, 268 f.

²³ Römer am Rhein 1967, Kat. B 8 Farbtaf. II bottom.

²⁴ Plesničar-Gec 1997–1998 (I), 23, fig. C.

²⁵ Drack 1950, 20–22.

²⁶ Mielsch 2001, 87 Abb. 95; Baldassarre *et al.* 2002, 232 f.

serene facial expression with dominant large eyes. The brush strokes are soft and the colours subdued. Images of Medusas wearing golden earrings have all the characteristics of portrait painting, which, because of the psychological approach to the image, have certain parallels in the Fayum portraits executed in the encaustic technique. These tendencies have already been encountered in some paintings of the Fourth Pompeian Style²⁷, thus suggesting that the *Sirmium* specimens could have been produced at the end of the 1st or at the very beginning of the 2nd century.

Only a small fragment of a fresco with the image of *Harpocrates* (Abb. 9) is preserved. According to the high quality of the execution and the suggestiveness, it is stylistically close to the frescoes with the heads of *Medusa*, while the attractiveness of the depicted face connects it with the image of *Venus*. Unfortunately we could not determine the context within which this Romanized Egyptian deity was depicted.

The stylistic and chronological determination of a fresco with the image of *Dionysus* (Abb. 10) also provokes dilemmas. This picture, painted in green nuances on a yellowish background, is framed by a green border along the lateral sides and a blue border within brown bands along the top edge; this indicates certain characteristics of the wall painting concept of the Antonine period²⁸.

The analyzed frescoes from room 13 of structure B in the residential quarter situated next to the north town wall (locality 21) confirm that this room was richly decorated with fresco paintings and that the initial wall decoration was perhaps replaced with a new one in a short period of time. One group of fresco paintings consists of red panels with representations of Muses in medallions that conceptually has certain parallels with wall paintings from Balácapusztá, *Aquincum*, *Brigetio* and *Carnuntum*²⁹, whereas in regard to the figural traits and the colouristic concept of the *dado* they are close to a fresco from *Poetovio*. These observations suggest that these frescoes were created by a painting atelier from which the leading artists were from Italy and whose traditions were over and further developed by local Pannonian-Noric artisans.

The second group of frescoes, which are painted in shades of green, white, yellow and brown on a light background, include the representations of *Dionysus*, *Venus* and *Harpocrates*. Their common features are the impressionistic style of the faces, relatively small dimensions and a certain charm of the depicted figures. They are in the tradition of the 'Baroque style' of the final phase of the Pompeian painting. Some of the figures are adorned with jewelry like the image of *Venus*, but also the head of *Medusa*; they are characterized by suggestiveness, beauty and serenity of the image and can also be ascribed to the same traditions. The painting of the *Dioscuri* from the same room is particularly outstanding, because of the character of the background and also because of the colours used as it was painted in two colours: the polished red background and the scene in white nuances of which the image of one of the *Dioscuri* of exceptional beauty and part of his white horse are fragmentarily preserved.

The present state of investigations of figural compositions from the early Imperial period in the Pannonian-Danubian provinces does not provide a sound basis for the analysis of the *Sirmium* examples, as their closest analogies could only be found in the paintings from distant centers, first of all from the territory of Italy. The results of these early contacts were the basis of the later works developed by the local Pannonian-Noric masters.

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²⁸ Mielsch 2001, 104–106.

²⁹ Thomas 1964, 99 f. Taf. 48–57; Németh 1973, 115–120; on the Borders of East and West 2002, 110–112; Behling 2009, 401–404 Abb. 5–6.

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Abbildungen

- Abb. 1: Residential quarter next to the town wall (loc. 21); in the corner, *Sirmium* in the 2nd – 3rd centuries, localities with figural frescoes (plan by M. JEREMIĆ)
- Abb. 2: Frescoes with representations of Muses in medallions, a) *Melpomene*; b) *Terpsichore*; c) *Thaleia* (?); d) *Clio* (?) (photo by S. MAKSIĆ)
- Abb. 3a: Parts of mural compositions with Muses in medallions; a) reconstructed panel; b) vegetal *candelabrum*; c) medallion frame, detail; d) picture frame, detail (photo by S. MAKSIĆ)
- Abb. 4: Socle with fresco painting of water birds (photo by S. MAKSIĆ)
- Abb. 5: Theoretical reconstruction of the composition on the wall of room 13 in structure B on locality 21 (drawing by A. PREMK)
- Abb. 6: Fresco with representation of one of the *Dioscuri* (photo by S. MAKSIĆ)
- Abb. 7: Fresco with representation of *Venus* (?) (photo by S. MAKSIĆ)
- Abb. 8 a, b: Frescoes with representations of Medusas (photo by S. MAKSIĆ)
- Abb. 9: Fresco with representation of *Harpocrates* (photo by S. MAKSIĆ)
- Abb. 10: Fresco with representation of *Dionysus/Bacchus* (photo by S. MAKSIĆ)

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