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THE FUNERARY PAINTINGS AT EPHEBUS

(Taf. CCII, Abb. 1–4)

Abstract

In der jüngsten Zeit haben die Nekropolen von Ephesos besonderes Interesse auf sich gezogen. Im Folgenden sei daher ein kurzer Überblick über die Grabmalereien aus Ephesos geboten. Bislang wurden keine hellenistischen Grabmalereien gefunden, das Material stammt aus der mittleren Kaiserzeit bis in die spätantik-frühbyzantinische Periode. Vorwiegend handelt es sich um einfache tonnengewölbte Grabhäuser mit Streublütenmalerei, figürliche Malerei ist selten. Das Zömeterium der Sieben Schläfer kann als christliche Gemeinschafts-Nekropole des 3. Jhs. identifiziert werden, was das Fehlen christlicher Bilder erklärt. Dagegen kann unter den neu entdeckten Gräbern der Hafen-Nekropole die erste christliche Grabmalerei mit Kreuzen, Vögeln und einem Zitat von Psalm 90 bestimmt werden.

The recently increasing interest in the cemeteries of Ephesus¹ offers a good opportunity to present a brief survey of all funerary paintings which have been discovered at Ephesus so far². Surprisingly, no paintings have yet come to light from Hellenistic times, the entire material dates from the Roman – probably mostly from the mid and late Imperial times – to the early Byzantine period³. With the exception of the very simple funeral chamber of the proconsul *T. I. Kelsos Polemaianos* beneath his so-called Celsus-library⁴, dated to around 115 AD, all painted graves lay outside the city walls⁵. Since most of the painted tombs were discovered by chance or at least not during regular excavations and in a poor state of preservation, their dating is generally difficult. Usually one uses, with all caution, stylistic comparisons mostly from Ephesus or Asia Minor. The prevalent type of funeral architecture is an indigenous type, generally consisting of simple, rectangular mausolea made of local stone with semi-circular barrel vaults. The foundations and the actual burial places, which have the form of sarcophagi, are frequently hewn out of the *in situ* rock. The mausolea often seem to have been covered with a terrace, which was maybe used for cult meals.

The presumably oldest painted tomb is part of the extended Upper City Necropolis. This burial area lay on a northern spur of the Bülbüldağ, a few hundred metres outside of the city beyond the Magnesian Gate, and was arranged over a number of terraces, which were densely built up with tomb buildings. The main wall of the above mentioned tomb shows a red-grounded architectural scheme consisting of a large, central gable, a balustrade and columns placed underneath. In the covering vault are the remains of an unusual polychrome decorative ornament, consisting of squares divided into triangles⁶. This tomb has by far the highest

¹ See the FWF Project No. P22083 „Die Hafen-Nekropole von Ephesos“, project leader M. STESKAL; see Steskal 2013.

² For a complete bibliography on the cemeteries of Ephesus, see Steskal *et al.* 2011, 305 f.

³ A first overview on the Roman material was given in Zimmermann – Ladstätter 2010, 143–159. Funerary paintings from late antiquity and Byzantine times have been collected in Zimmermann 2010, and Steskal *et al.* 2011, see also Zimmermann – Ladstätter 2010, 203–205.

⁴ The room for the sarcophagus is painted white with red frames in the corners. The chamber and the sarcophagus were completed before the library, see Zimmermann – Ladstätter 2010, 158 f.

⁵ From the early Byzantine period onwards, tombs were situated in or near the churches, sometimes even inside the city walls. A grave chapel was built to the south of the church of Saint Mary in the 7th century and was painted with colorful marble imitations on the walls and a cross with gems in the apse. The ceiling showed a geometric and floral motive, see Zimmermann – Ladstätter 2010, 186–188.

⁶ Zimmermann – Ladstätter 2010, 147 f. Abb. 304–307.

quality painting, reminiscent of 2nd Style wall painting in its decorative forms. A dating to the 2nd century AD is probable, but a final statement on the chronology would require additional evidence.

A neighbouring tomb chamber was entirely painted in white, while the edges of the chamber were prepared with a thin red band⁷. A stucco *sima* with a scalloped profile, which ran around the frieze zone, was articulated with stucco capitals or with foliate ornament at the corners, but these have been destroyed. The tomb is from the Roman period, probably dating to the 2nd or 3rd century AD.

Another vicinal tomb chamber offers finds of great interest, since here the remains of an extensive decorative scheme with figural painting have been preserved⁸. The tomb chamber covered with barrel vault has a semi-circular niche in the main wall, in which a female figure is depicted. She is standing upright and to the front, her garment is covering her feet and her mantle falls in broad folds. Maybe the figure represents a personification, perhaps a season, a month or even a Muse, but probably not the deceased. In her left hand she is holding a platter made of blue glass or silver, upon which a red object, which can no longer be identified – probably fruit or flowers – was lying hanging over the rim at the right. On the right and left, the side walls are each decorated with a broadly disposed field with figural decoration, unfortunately only parts of it are preserved. On the left side, near the main wall, the hand of a figure is preserved, whose posture suggests that an orant figure was depicted here. Opposite, on the right side wall, is a bearded man at the left of the pictorial space. All around his portrait are traces of hacking, showing preparations for robbery. Further scant remains do not enable a more precise classification of the pictorial content. A large pictorial field originally occupied the vault of the ceiling; this painting is only preserved near the main wall. Above each of the fields of the side walls are the remains of a large-scale winged figure, which is turned towards the centre of the pictorial area. These are most probably the representations of winged *Nikai*/Angels. In the better preserved area on the right hand side of the vault one can clearly see a leg bent in flight, with red, folded drapery floating around it. As indicated by traces of painted drapery on the right side, additional winged figures were once represented, seen mirror-symmetrically from the entrance. The winged figures which turn towards each other may once have carried a wreath, in the manner of representations on sarcophagi.

Even though no more precise identification of the pictorial contents can be made due to the poor state of preservation, the tomb stands out from all the other tombs found so far at Ephesus based on its design. The rustic figural style, in particular the large eyes and face outlined with heavy contour lines of the female figure in the niche indicate a relatively late date, probably still in the 3rd century but perhaps even in the 4th century AD. The pose of the orant and the winged creature do not permit a decision as to whether the pictorial program was of pagan or Christian character.

The next tomb is also a chamber tomb with barrel vault and figural wall painting⁹. In spite of much damage and accretion of sinter, the pictorial theme with scattered flowers, birds, peacocks, song-birds and red floral garlands can be easily recognized. On the main wall in the lower area were two peacocks standing opposite each other in a mirror-symmetrical manner. Above them, a red floral garland arched up into a flat surface in which scattered flowers create a type of floral carpet. On this garland, two song-birds were turned to face each other. Another peacock, turned to the left, can be seen on the left side wall near the border to the main wall. His tail feathers are closed. Scattered flowers and red garlands are depicted over the entire preserved surface. On the ceiling, which is particularly heavily blackened and covered with sinter, traces of red pigment indicate that the painting of scattered flowers and garlands existed up here as well. In accordance with the similar paintings of scattered flowers with birds, garlands and peacocks from Terrace House 2 or from the Cemetery of the Seven Sleepers (see below), a dating to the 2nd or 3rd century is probable¹⁰. Principally, similarities exist with the “Tomb of the Peacock” in Sardis and with the comparable tomb in İznik, but again, here no evidence for a Christian pictorial theme can be noted¹¹.

⁷ Zimmermann – Ladstätter 2010, 145 f. Abb. 298–299.

⁸ Zimmermann – Ladstätter 2010, 143–145 Abb. 292–303.

⁹ Zimmermann – Ladstätter 2010, 146 f. Abb. 300–303.

¹⁰ For the first time in Ephesus, the motive of scattered flowers appears in the paintings of room 16a of *dwelling unit 5* (Terrace house 2) in early Hadrianic times. It finds its largest diffusion in the second quarter of the 3rd century, see Zimmermann 2005, 119.

¹¹ For the tombs at Sardis and İznik, see V. ROUSSEAU and also A. BARBET, in this volume.

The last tomb is a chamber tomb with barrel vault and a simple decoration of scattered flowers, which are preserved on the left hand side wall¹². The edges of the room are, as far as can be made out, bordered with red, while individual flowers with stems (roses, carnations) and red garlands are strewn in the open areas.

Altogether it is noteworthy that no tomb from this Upper City necropolis is of a distinct Christian character. According to the evidence of the painting, one tomb might have already been painted in the late 1st or 2nd century, three chambers were (re?) decorated in the 2nd/3rd century and the tomb with the figural program might have been reused in Late Antiquity.

Recently, more news came from funeral paintings in graves from the Panayırdağ, the northernmost of the two Ephesian city hills. A new study undertaken in the so-called Cemetery of the Seven Sleepers resulted that the complex, formerly thought to be erected as a funeral church in the mid-5th century, was already built in the 3rd century AD as a community cemetery¹³. The burial complex was integrated into an uneven rock gully on the eastern slope of the Panayırdağ. Two long burial halls overlap each other and are somewhat offset from each other; they were placed on two levels in an east-west direction into a rocky couloir, the lower complex is referred to as the “Crypt Complex” and the upper one as the “Church Complex”. This church is traditionally identified with the Church of the Seven Sleepers. According to legend, seven young men were walled up in a cave due to their religious beliefs during the period of persecution of Christians under Decius (249–251 AD); they first woke up about 200 years later, in 446, in order to affirm to Theodosius II (408–450 AD) the secret of bodily resurrection. Above the cave, in which they were buried shortly thereafter, the Emperor caused a church to be erected out of reverence. Since the excavations that F. MILTNER carried out between 1926 and 1929, the “Church Complex” is believed to be the one Theodosius II had erected¹⁴. The new analysis shows however that the church was only secondarily constructed in the upper cemetery hall and that the nucleus of the entire complex with its paintings, stuccoes, mosaics and inscriptions dates to the 3rd century, maybe the second quarter. In the original building the painted décor had a very homogeneous character, consisting of a socle zone with meander frieze, above imitations of marble revetments and a décor of scattered flowers on the walls and ceilings. The scattered flowers are sometimes enriched with birds, peacocks or even erotes. They covered single tombs, grave chambers, arcossols, as well as the ceiling of the Crypt Complex¹⁵. Due to the inscriptions, the Christian character is verified from the first burials onwards. The newly established early dating finally explains the complete lack of any Christian symbols or elements in the wall paintings, a circumstance which would be hardly comprehensible for a complex formerly thought to be a church of the 5th century. Now, the décor of scattered flowers is right in line with the paintings of the other tombs seen so far.

During the course of excavations in the area directly in front of the Hellenistic city wall on the Panayırdağ, the remains of a single Roman chamber tomb with barrel vault were discovered. The structure had been cleared away down to the foundation walls, but nevertheless fragments of the painted decoration came to light, revealing yet again scattered flowers on a white ground¹⁶. Once again the tomb dates to the 2nd or 3rd century AD. The frequency with which chamber tombs were decorated with scattered flowers indicates the great popularity of this decorative form at Ephesus.

During recent excavations at the Harbour Necropolis, a large group of red-grounded painted fragments were found in a tomb next to the harbour canal¹⁷. These originate from a red-grounded main wall zone with open fields and lisenés. The lisenés could have been painted on a light or a red background, while their motif consists of a fine, blue or yellow foliate staff. The fields had external frames with repetitive patterns: attested is a frieze of ogees and floral patterns, each alternating in yellow and blue. Unfortunately not enough fragments with figural painting from *emblemata* or from motifs with recognizable content could be found. A very few fragments with white painted background and floral, green elements might have originated from a painting scheme of scattered flowers; due to the scant number of fragments, it is more likely that they derive

¹² Zimmermann – Ladstätter 2010, 148 Abb. 308.

¹³ See the detailed discussion of the architecture and the décor in Zimmermann 2011.

¹⁴ Miltner 1937. Anyway, the complex with its mosaics and paintings was later thought to date to the time of Theodosius I, see Restle 1971 and Jobst 1972–75.

¹⁵ Zimmermann – Ladstätter 2010, 149–158 Abb. 312–332.

¹⁶ Zimmermann – Ladstätter 2010, 149 Abb. 311.

¹⁷ Zimmermann – Ladstätter 2010, 148 f. Abb. 309–319.

from a small niche. Via comparisons with, above all, Terrace House 2, these paintings could date to the late 2nd or the 3rd century AD¹⁸.

Finally, more new tombs with paintings were found in the Harbour Necropolis as well, but within the large group of *mausolea* on the south slope of the hill above the harbour canal. Only in two of them parts of their paintings have been preserved; one of them is particularly interesting. Its vault was covered with huge red crosses and the main wall with three niches combined the cross, flanked by flowers and birds, and a biblical inscription¹⁹ (Abb. 1, 2). A part of psalm 90, written in red Greek letters, covers the main wall and the niches, creating a visual balance between the painted and the written paradisiacal content. The form of the crosses and the writing suggest a dating to the late 5th or 6th century. It is the first Christian funerary painting that has been discovered at Ephesus so far. The architectural structure of the tomb probably dates, like most of the *mausolea* here, at least to mid-Imperial times and the Christian painting confirms a continuity of use with a new décor until the early Byzantine period. The second tomb, of the same vaulted type, shows an originally and – so far – unique décor on the main wall and the vault (Abb. 3). On a white ground, a grid of broad red lines forms a system of rectangles, whose inner fields were filled with stylized flowers (Abb. 4). The motif evokes the idea of a paradisiacal garden that surrounds the tombs inside the grave on all sides. The painted plaster respects a secondarily constructed tomb at the main wall and is therefore part of a secondary furnishing. The rough brush stroke and the broad and static character indicate, with all caution, a dating from the 4th century AD onwards. In this case, it is impossible to know whether the painted garden surrounding the deceased was meant to express a common peaceful atmosphere or the Christian paradise.

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¹⁸ The closest parallels are the lisenens from the staircase in Room SR 2 of dwelling unit 1 (second quarter of the 3rd century).

¹⁹ See Steskal *et al.* 2011.

Abbildungen

Abb. 1: Ephesus, Harbor-Necropolis, Tomb with psalm 90, drawing of the main wall. Drawing by E. AGIRMAN © ÖAW

Abb. 2: Ephesus, Harbor-Necropolis, Tomb with psalm 90, reconstruction of the main wall. Drawing by E. AGIRMAN © ÖAW

Abb. 3: Ephesus, Harbor-Necropolis, Tomb with stylized paradise garden, general view, Photo N. ZIMMERMANN © ÖAW

Abb. 4: Ephesus, Harbor-Necropolis, Tomb with stylized paradise garden, detail of flowers. Photo N. ZIMMERMANN © ÖAW

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