

FABVLVS©. STUCCOES AND WALL PAINTINGS OF THE GRAECO-ROMAN WORLD

(Taf. CCVIII, Abb. 1)

Abstract

FABVLVS© est un ensemble logiciel constitué d'un site Web et d'une base de données dédiée aux peintures et stucs du monde gréco-romain (III^e s. av. J.-C. – VII^e s. ap. J.-C.). Chaque décor, stuc ou peinture, est identifié par son support architectural (façade, paroi, plafond, voûte...). Un décor dispersé entre plusieurs lieux de conservation (*in situ*, musée, dépôt, etc.) retrouve ainsi son intégrité d'origine. Le système de description permet de rendre compte d'un motif isolé comme d'une composition complexe. FABVLVS intègre géolocalisation des sites, visualisation et agrandissement des images et est interrogeable par moteur de recherche.

FABVLVS est fondé sur le principe des contributions: il est ouvert aux chercheurs, archéologues, institutions et associations spécialistes du domaine, qui souhaitent y diffuser leur documentation. FABVLVS a vocation à recueillir données et archives publiées, mais aussi du matériel inédit. A ce titre, FABVLVS peut fournir un mode alternatif de publication, par la «signature» des enregistrements et leur validation par un comité scientifique.

1. Why Fabvlvs?

The corpus of Graeco-Roman ornamental plasters is both rich and complex. Stuccoes and wall paintings were often used to decorate both the inside and the outside of public and private buildings, and in some cases they are the only architectural evidence remaining. Sometimes completely preserved like at Rome or Pompeii, but often reduced to small fragments, they provide invaluable information about the myths and cults, aspirations and tastes of specific social classes, regions and periods. The palimpsest of layers, repairs and graffiti enables us to read the history of a building as well as the evolution of techniques and skills. Together they acquire meaning and form a common language born in the Hellenistic *koiné* and lasting up until late antiquity.

The amount of existing data and its heteroclite nature make it particularly difficult to study and raise a number of major problems which can be summarised as follows: How can the relationship between architectural and archaeological context be indicated? How can the iconographic complexity and the details of a specific ornamental plaster be described? How can fragments preserved in different places be reunited? How can high quality graphical illustrations and photographs be stored?

Once these questions have been solved, it is necessary to ensure an optimal use of this dataset and in particular to ensure that the scientific community can easily access it.

Finally it is fundamental to bring together all the specialists of this field of research so that they contribute their data and take part in this common venture.

FABVLVS aims to answer these questions.

2. The Actors

CNRS (Centre national de la recherche scientifique) and ENS (École normale supérieure) have played a key role in the field of ornamental plasters since the 1970ies, in close collaboration with the APPA-CEPMR

(Association pro Pictura Antiqua – Centre d'Études des Peintures Murales Romaines) and its laboratory in Soissons, specialised in the study and restoration of antique painted decors. Various research teams as well as scientific and heritage institutions have entrusted us with a large dataset, much of which derives from our collaboration with field archaeologists and research and higher education institutions both in France and abroad. As part of this ongoing process, our group is currently working on the project «*In situ* Wall Paintings» led by C. VIBERT-GUIGUE.

In the course of our work we are thus constantly faced with the problems caused by the multiplication of small scale, difficult to use databases and the technical limits of software currently available to archaeologists. Furthermore, the growing need to provide online access to the general public and specialists of other domains requires a powerful technical tool, capable of offering the same ease of access and consultation as the professional sites to which we are now accustomed.

This is why we decided to collaborate with database and network specialists of the Institute Galilée (University of Paris 13), in order to develop a new adapted software package.

3. Data Structure: definition and choice of the recording unit

The first question when one creates a file, be it digital or not, is to define the object of the file. The answer seems simple in our case: a wall painting, a stucco. However, how should it be understood and within which limits? What is the core element to which metadata (literally “data about data”, in our case the different descriptive categories) will be linked?

The easiest choice is to select the «photo» as object of the file, thus turning the database into a digital picture library. This library will primarily serve purposes of inventory and management, even if it can help answer scientific questions when the photos are completed by information on the object reproduced (description, dating, bibliography). This is, for example, the structure chosen by MédiHAL (<http://medihal.archives-ouvertes.fr>) an open archive of photos and scientific images, which regroups the iconographic data gathered by scholars in different disciplinary fields. The major problem for archaeologists is that the data thus recorded is the photograph or illustration, defined by its field of vision, and not the original artefact.

Therefore archaeological databases are usually files of «decors», characterised by metadata (location, description, dating, bibliography and illustration often including various images) and identified as such by a specialist. This choice is more satisfying from a scientific perspective, however it does not enable the creation of a coherent catalogue because the notion of «decor» can refer to a site as a whole, to a small fragment, to a panel in a museum or to a whole room in a building. This makes it impossible to propose a homogeneous system of description and causes unavoidable redundancies and lacunae, which make the decorative unit difficult to discern.

The difficulty of defining a homogeneous descriptive entity is of course logical considering the variety of objects that we wish to describe and include within FABVLVS: *in situ* decors, such as the vaults of *hypogea* or the fully preserved painted walls of Pompeii; fragments of a few square centimetres found in a backfill; or isolated painted fragments, such as figures and figurative scenes exposed in a Museum.

In order to define the base unit, we have therefore chosen the common denominator of all these decors: they are all architectural plasters, even when they have been removed from their original support. We study wall paintings and not paintings on vases, stuccos and not sculptures in the round. The conclusions of the seminar «Decors and architecture in Gaul»¹, held in Toulouse in 2008, confirmed that this choice was the most coherent one for a database whose purpose and perspective is first and foremost archaeological.

If the chosen unit of reference is the architectural support, then what is recorded is the wall (or ceiling, fronton, cornice, etc.) and the metadata is related to this support: provenance, place of conservation, archaeological data, geolocalisation, structural works, technique of decor (painting, stucco, incrustations, gold, ...), detailed iconographic description, graffiti, dating, bibliography and illustration.

¹ Balmelle *et al.* 2011.

To summarise, and without detailing them further, all the information from the excavation and the study are related to this support and interrelated by links. The complexity of these links requires the development of specific software because the standard tools available on the market are currently unsatisfactory.

4. Data structure: description and querying

Choosing the architectural support of the ornamental decor as unit of recording has major methodological and scientific consequences.

First of all, this choice means that the material included must have undergone at least a preliminary study and therefore that raw data cannot be included². This is logical since FABVLVS is not an inventory of finds, but aims to provide validated and useful information to the scholarly community and the general public and not only to the specialists of the field. This also means that FABVLVS is in no way a substitute for field databases, regional projects or inventories of museums, warehouses or collections. It is a scientific tool of research, similar to a traditional publication, which integrates both previously recorded data and new unpublished data. However, unlike printed publications, it can include an unlimited amount of data, texts and images and most importantly it enables quantitative approaches to the study of the material.

Another problem often encountered when recording an architectural support is that the decor, which originally covered it, can be kept in different places. For example, a painted wall may have been destroyed or preserved *in situ* and its decor may have been moved to two or more places: typically paintings with a single colour background or seriously damaged ones will remain *in situ*, figurative scenes will be exposed in a museum after restoration, whereas fragments discovered at the foot of the wall will be stored in a box in a warehouse, whilst awaiting study, restoration and exhibition. By regrouping all the elements, which originally belonged to a single architectural support, FABVLVS both recreates the decorative unit and allows a better management of the remains; this is a considerable advantage both for the scholar who wishes to access data and for the curator who is responsible for their preservation.

The complexity of the decors being studied adds another difficulty. Indeed, the system must be coherent enough to make it possible to integrate in the same file an isolated motif and a complex composition, a simple palmette and a fully preserved Pompeian wall. Furthermore, it must be useful both to a scholar from another field as well as to a specialist who is interested in a very specific detail.

To solve this problem, FABVLVS has four fields, which enable a structured description by breaking down the information in a simple fashion (composition, ornamental motifs, scene, figures) and a fifth field, for the general description, with enough space (4000 characters) to cover most cases. However a wall sometimes includes various distinct panels, which are difficult to articulate together, and specific motifs can require very detailed descriptions. This is the reason for which it is possible to divide a single ornamental decor in any number of sub-units (called “elements” in FABVLVS). The user can then zoom in on a specific part of the decor, selected because it forms an independent iconographic unit or because of its intrinsic interest. Of course, each sub-unit can be linked directly to a bibliography or a specific illustration, something particularly necessary for elucidating details. The same is true of the inscriptions and graffiti, which give the user direct access to highly specialised information.

The textual content of FABVLVS is essential since it was first and foremost created as a research tool, however, in a field such as ours, images play a role at least as important. These images include, alongside photos, graphic illustrations such as old engravings, watercolours, plans, drawings, whose importance is sometimes as great as that of the photos but whose quality varies greatly. The user can zoom in on any image (the only limit being the quality of the image).

An integrated search engine enables the user to find any information within FABVLVS, either directly or by field.

² The study of the mortar of fragments found out of context (back-fill, old collection) often makes it impossible to determine the type of architectural support. When only the plaster is preserved, a specific option «unknown support» nonetheless ensures that a fragment or a coherent series of fragments can be classified.

FABVLVS: contribution and new data

FABVLVS was created to integrate published data and archives. It was initially conceived to gather the documentation assembled by members and collaborators of the UMR 8546 (ENS-CNRS), as well as those of the CEPMR of Soissons (currently APPA), who have been working for over 40 years both in France and within the Graeco-Roman world as a whole. However, much information is contained in the so-called «grey literature» that is internal, but also official files and reports that have not been published.

Part of their content can be included as such in the existing fields of FABVLVS but it will also be possible to include direct links to digital versions of these documents (protected .pdf files). FABVLVS will enable links towards published documents, describing for example the excavation or the results of chemical analyses, which are too complex to synthesise but which the user may wish to consult.

However, besides being a databank, FABVLVS is first and foremost a research tool. Its originality and strength are based on the principle of encouraging contributions. FABVLVS is open to scholars, archaeologists, institutions and associations specialised in the domain who wish to enter their data. The site is currently in French, but will soon be available at least in English and Italian.

A signed convention fixes the conditions of data contribution. Each author is responsible for the scientific content of his contribution and guarantees its quality. This scientific responsibility is guaranteed by a two tier system of signature.

The field “data editor” is signed by the author of the file, who is responsible for the content only to the extent that his work involved rewriting and synthesising published data. Logically, when possible it is better if this person is the original author of the study or publication from which the data have been extracted so as to guarantee data quality.

Alongside its function of diffusion and enhancement of the documentation, FABVLVS also aims to allow an alternative mode of publication of new data. Indeed, the scientific field of wall decors suffers from an excessive fragmentation of its documentation. Without time to prepare a traditional publication many archaeologists, especially those not specialised in this field, do not publish these remains, thus causing a considerable loss of information.

The possibility of recording their data in FABVLVS would provide a temporary or definitive alternative to a traditional publication. This is the reason for which a field «author» has also been included in FABVLVS. Its validation must still be organised, but we plan to create an international scientific committee, which will function along the same principles as classical reading committees of scientific reviews and will grant a status of publication to the new material included in FABVLVS. Logically, the AIPMA, with its network of specialists and APÉLLES correspondents will play this role.

Bibliographie

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Abbildungen

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