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D.9. FRAGMENTS OF WALL PAINTING FROM “HORACE’S VILLA”

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D.9.1. BACKGROUND

During the 1998 and 1999 campaigns of the recent excavations at Horace’s Villa in Licenza, many fragments of wall painting were found. With one notable exception, all of them were found in destruction contexts and not in their original location. The purpose of this chapter is to publish the new fragments and to relate them to the fragments found in the excavations undertaken from 1911 to 1914 by Angelo Pasqui. As will be seen, the importance of the new excavations is that they throw much needed light on the material discovered earlier in the twentieth century.

D.9.2. FRESCO FRAGMENTS FOUND FROM 1911 TO 1914

The Pasqui excavations of 1911-14 brought to light a large number of fresco fragments, which were subsequently mounted on 38 square panels and put into the Antiquarium in the Orsini Palace in Licenza. In the early 1990s, these were divided into two groups: a larger group of twenty-eight panels was installed in the new museum in Licenza (fig. 1); a smaller group of the remaining panels was put in the storehouse of the Archaeological Superintendency for Lazio at the Santuario di Ercole Vincitore, in Tivoli (fig. 2).

The scholarship on the frescoes found in 1911-14 is not extensive. In his publication of Pasqui’s results, Lugli’s treatment is purely descriptive. He assigns the fragments to the same period on the basis of style, but he does not assign a date, probably in no small measure owing to the alleged lack of documentation on find-spots, which made it impossible to associate the fragments with an architectural context. But, as Frischer shows (see E.4 and G.1.12), Pasqui’s unpublished catalogues of the finds securely locates the find-spot to the “grande Calidario” (i.e., room 33). Room 33 is dated by De Simone to her Period III (D.1.3.7) and by Frischer to his corresponding Period IIA of ca. 75/110 A.D.

M. Borda, in his brief comments on this material, agreed with Lugli but assigned a date in the late first century or early second century A.D. In equally brief statements reported by B. Frischer, V. Strocka and I. Bragantini agreed with Borda. In the most detailed study of the Pasqui fragments to date, R. Cappelli divided them into two groups: a smaller group datable to the early Augustan period; and a larger group assignable to the period of the Fourth Pompeian Style. It is our contention, however, that Lugli, Borda, Strocka, and Bragantini were correct: the fragments are stylistically and chronologically homogeneous and belong to the period of ca. 60-110 A.D. Since, as Frischer notes (E.4 and F), we know nothing about the context in which the fragments were found in room 33, we cannot securely narrow down this potential time frame to a specific moment. If, as Cappelli has rightly noted, two groups can be distinguished, it is indicative not of a difference in date but of craftsmanship; the fragments in Cappelli’s

2. SAL Inv. nos. 75-233 through 75-254 and 75-295 through 75-300.
4. On the find spots, Lugli could only write vaguely: “[the fragments] appartengono a più ambienti” (col. 568); cf. also col. 461: “mi duole di non poter pubblicare alcuna nota personale del Pasqui sulla villa. Non resta infatti che il Giornale degli Scavi, compilato più per uso amministrativo che scientifico e con varie lacune, dovute al fatto che il Pasqui prese molti appunti per suo conto, i quali alla sua morte non si sono più ritrovati, né in ufficio, né in famiglia. Certamente è questa una grave perdita, che rende mutila la storia dello scavo e che mi ha lasciato più volte perplesso se condurre a termine, o meno, il lavoro.”
5. M. Borda, La pittura romana (Milan 1958) 90, 266.
6. Frischer, 83.
7. Cappelli, 117-162.
first group are of higher quality. Many details in both groups are comparable.

The two paintings (or perhaps parts of one painting) that Cappelli attributes to the Augustan period are the aediculae with acroteria, one with griffins and the other with seated grotesque, partly female, partly monstrous or floral figures. She rightly states that griffins appear in Roman paintings of the Second Style. As acroteria they are not very common in Second and Third Style paintings, but they do occur much more frequently during the Fourth Style. The Licenza griffins (fig. 3) differ from the late Second Style griffins in that they are very slender and have long legs. They are much more closely related to Fourth Style examples. Moreover, in the blue triclinium or oecus of the Casa dell’Atrio a Mosaico in Herculaneum they appear as acroteria, together with acroteria in the form of half naked and half monstrous grotesque figures, variants of the grotesque figures in the Licenza paintings. In their high quality, these paintings from Herculaneum are also comparable to the Licenza examples. As Cappelli states, it is true that grotesque figures do appear in Second Style paintings. However, they rarely occur as acroteria, but are mostly seen in separate frames, as in the Casa di Livia in Rome. As acroteria they appear frequently in Fourth Style paintings, and it is therefore in this period of Roman wall painting that we must place the Licenza examples.

To the helpful comparisons Cappelli gives for the paintings from Licenza that she dates in the Flavian period, we can add recently published and sometimes strikingly similar examples from the Villa San Marco at Castellammare. As for the dating of the Licenza examples in the light of these comparanda (and, especially, in view of the examples from Castellammare), two hypotheses are possible: either (1) the Licenza paintings date to roughly the same period (i.e., the 70s-80s of the Flavian age); or else (2) the Licenza paintings are earlier, dating to the period 60-69, in which case they could be cited as further examples of the way in which Campania lagged behind the Rome area in the development of the Fourth Style.


The new excavations are interesting to scholars of Roman wall painting for several reasons. For the first time we have information about find contexts for fresco fragments from Horace’s Villa. The motifs in the newly discovered fragments are in many cases the same as those found earlier, so the new finds can suggest something about the context of the 1911-14 fragments. Moreover, the fact that the new fragments were found through stratigraphic excavation has given us information that helps to resolve the debate about periodization of the frescoes from Horace’s Villa. The new fragments are discussed in order of the area in which they were found.

D.9.3.1. Area 23

In 1998, three pieces of wall painting still in situ were found very close to each other in Area 23 (Sector IV.1) not far from the foot of the western
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staircase leading from the western corridor of the quadriporticus to the residence (fig. 4). These three fragments are exceptional in that they are the only bits of wall painting still in their original location in the villa. The surface of the three fragments is painted with red ground without any design. The find spot is interesting: they are on a wall in opus incertum (SU 4015; for details see De Simone et al., C.4.3). This drain runs from the residential fountain of Area 8 to the main drain of the villa, which runs north-south just to the west of the quadriporticus. These fresco fragments were preserved because they were tightly packed by the material brought in to raise the surface for the new floor above the drain. The fragments thus belong to the first phase of the wall in Area 23, a phase the excavators date to no later than the first century B.C.

Also found in Area 23, farther south along the corridor, were eleven groups of fragments that fitted together. They come from a single context (Sector IV.2, SU 4208; see figs. 5 and 6) and were found face down, broken into fragments that can easily be joined. There is, however, almost no sign of any decoration left, probably because of the acidity of the soil. The fragments have a creamy white ground color and are all remarkably thin. They lack the preparatory layer, which makes it impossible to determine whether they come from the ceiling or the walls of the corridor in which they were found. A precise dating, too, is difficult, but the thinness of the plaster points to a date in the second or even third century A.D.

D.9.3.2. Areas 37-40

Areas 37-40 (Sector I.3-6) are architecturally related and thus will be treated together here. The fresco fragments can be divided into two groups: a large collection of mostly monochrome fragments reused as fill to raise the floor level in Area 38; and some randomly found fragments with decorative patterns.

Group I. Five cassettes full of fresco fragments were collected from Area 38 (SU 860). The fragments are small; most have a monochrome red surface, but some are in monochrome yellow. The few decorated pieces are seen in fig. 7. Some have chord lines, impressed in the chalk while it was still wet. Curls and vegetal elements in white and cream are also seen, some of which have white lines. The pieces with both red and yellow have a white dividing line. One fragment shows the depiction of a ceiling coffer.

The wear seen on the surface indicates that the fragments were reused in antiquity, and the excavators indeed interpret SU 860 as a fill layer designed to raise the level of the floor in area 38 (see Camaiani et al., C.5.2.1, activity 5, dated to the late first or early second century A.D.). This gives us a terminus ante quem for the fresco of ca. 70/110 A.D. On grounds of style, we would assign these fragments to a somewhat earlier date than the other Fourth Style paintings from Horace’s Villa. Most probable is a date in the period 60-75 A.D., although it should be emphasized that we still have no definite original context. Possibly the frescoes may have decorated the walls of Areas 38-40, which before activity 5 was a single atrium-like space (see Camaiani et al., C.5.1). Certainly, the raising of the level of the floor of the room and its repurposing as the frigidarium of a bath complex would have necessitated a new treatment of the walls, and the earlier plaster may have been stripped off both to make way for new plaster on the walls and for use as floor fill in the same room.

Group II. A second group consists of random fresco fragments with decorations that were found throughout Areas 37-40. From Area 37 (SU 411) come two fragments of a garland in red, black, and
cream on a white surface (fig. 8). The black flowers were painted quickly as a point above a V-form with curved sides; they resemble similar ones found in the 1911-14 excavations. Another fragment with white ground, from the same location, shows a stylized flower in dark red, ochre, and cream, which originates at the point of a wavy band (fig. 9). Three examples of a similar motif from the 1911-14 excavations have been published by Cappelli. Other examples are to be found on a panel in the storehouse in the Santuario di Ercole Vincitore in Tivoli.

In Area 38, two fragments from the same decorative program were found. They show very worn remains of green, yellow, and red paint. One of the pieces is slightly angled, not flat, which may indicate that it joined with the projecting stucco molding on the wall.

Sixteen pieces come from Area 39. They have yellow and violet plant motifs on a red surface, a palmette, and part of a garland (fig. 10). Nothing similar was found from 1911 to 1914, but in concept and design they clearly belong to the same period as the fragments found in Pasqui’s excavations.

Not strictly speaking fresco fragments, but of interest to students of Roman wall painting nonetheless, are two color balls, one in blue and one in brown, from Areas 38 and 40 (fig. 11). They are probably unused pigments used in painting frescoes.

D.9.3.3. Area 35

Most of the fragments with painted decoration found in 1998-99 came from Area 35 (Sector I.7), the colonnade running north-south to the west of the baths. Seven fragments of painted stucco relief (SU 1242), with alternating volutes and palmettes colored in red and black, come from the same decorative program as a group of fragments published by Cappelli. From the same deposit come two fragments with a yellow background and traces of white stucco, as well as a piece with flesh-pink that probably belonged to the representation of the nude legs of a person (fig. 12). These almost certainly belong to the decorative program present in many finds of the 1911-14 excavations in which we see the figures of poets and philosophers in the center of yellow panels. Finally, there are three fragments with parallel lines in red, black, and yellow, black and white.

SU 1242 is a rich context that also contains fragments of marbles and of decorative terracotta plaques. The excavators interpret it as a fill connected with raising and leveling of the surface (see Camaiani et al., C.5.2.1, activity 18) immediately prior to the construction of the colonnade in Area 35 (activity 21). The fragments from Area 35, found in a floor fill, were no longer in their original context. Nevertheless, the new information gleaned from the campaigns of 1998 and 1999 offers useful confirmation of the find spot of a number of Pasqui fragments, including fragments on panels 75-234, 75-235, 75-237, 75-238, 75-249, 75-250, and 75-297. As noted above, these (along with all the other fragments, for which the 1998-1999 excavations did not happen to bring to light any parallels) were reportedly found in room 33 of the baths (see Frischer, E.4).

SU 1239, which the excavators link closely in date and function to SU 1242, yielded three fragments decorated with a red line and a parallel band. Also found here was a fragment (fig. 13) with the same embroidery pattern as is seen on a piece published by Cappelli; the only difference is that the new fragment is a mirror image of the old one.

SU 1220 produced five white-ground fragments. One shows a column in yellow. The other four show floral motifs and lines. One fragment may have a wing decoration. A comparable wing is seen on a piece from SU 1225. This SU (also associated with

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15. Cf. Cappelli, fig. 24 O.
16. Cappelli, fig. 29, top row; SAL inv. no. 75-239 in the Licenza museum. Note that the flowers are not peacock feathers, as Cappelli describes them (145).
17. Cappelli, fig. 24 R; Licenza museum, SAL inv. no. 75-297.

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18. Cappelli, 124-133, figs. 5-9 and 12. Cf. Licenza museum, SAL inv. nos. 75-234, 75-235, 75-237, 75-238, 75-249, and 75-250.
19. Cappelli, 147 and n38; fig. 24 P. Other finds by Pasqui, embedded on panel, SAL inv. no. 75-300 in the Licenza museum, as well as two panels in the storehouse in Tivoli show the motif running in both directions.
the construction phase of the colonnade in Area 35) includes other fragments with floral motifs on a yellow ground (fig. 14).

Fragments from SU 1213 have architectonic elements on a white surface within parallel lines and small bands. The sequence of colors is as follows: white, dark red line, yellow band with protrusions, green line, red band, dark red line, and white. A few pieces join and show a roughly painted aedicula. An architectonic motif, not easily recognizable given the poor state of preservation, is also seen on a fragment from SU 1200. The same layer has yielded a fragment with a white plant on a black surface. It has traces of pink, red, yellow, and blue.

D.9.4. Conclusion

Most of the fresco fragments found at Horace’s Villa in the excavations of 1911-14 and of 1998-99 have their best parallels in Fourth Style paintings of the early Flavian period (i.e., before A.D. 79). This includes the fragments dated to the Augustan period by Cappelli.20 The material from SU 860 (Area 38) also exemplifies the Fourth Style but is somewhat older than the rest of the material studied. It is possible that the fragments found in the quadriporticus were part of a redecoration of the walls in the second or third century A.D.

The new finds help us to understand the provenance in the villa of the fresco fragments brought to light in 1911-14. As noted, no record of their exact find-spot appears in Lugli’s publication of 1926. Frischer discovered in an unpublished document of the 1911-14 excavations that they had been found in room 33. At least, now we know that several motifs found on fragments from the 1911-14 excavations are similar to those coming from definite find-spots in the 1998-99 group (table 1). As this table shows, the bulk of the finds of 1998-1999 that are similar to those found in 1911-1914 come from Area 35, which is just to the west of room 33.

This data can be interpreted in one of two ways: either the 1911-14 finds were from the same location as the corresponding finds of 1998-99; or (since the 1998-99 material is all found in secondary contexts) some, if not all, of the 1911-14 material may have come from the primary ancient context. Unfortunately, it is impossible to decide this matter without new documentation about the 1911-14 excavations.

Thus far the villa has not yielded any fragment of decorated wall or ceiling fresco painting dating to the period in which Horace lived. But as already noted, not everything at the Licenza site postdates Horace: in area 23 were found three fragments of simple red ground fresco on an opus incertum wall that the excavators report is datable to the first century B.C.

20. Cappelli, 152.
**BIBLIOGRAPHY**


