LA PEINTURE MURALE ROMAINE
DANS LES PROVINCES DU NORD

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During excavations in 1986 and 1987 the State Service for Archaeological Investigations discovered several dumps of Roman wall-paintings on the bank of the river Waal in the centre of present-day Nijmegen. The paintings once decorated one or more large building, of which substantial remains were uncovered. One piece of dado decoration was even found in situ, a unique event in the Netherlands so far.

The recovery of mural paintings in Nijmegen, however, is by no means a new phenomenon. Previously, fragments of wall-decorations were found in the Roman Legionary Fortress, in the surrounding camp village or Canabae Legionis, and in the civilian settlement of Ulpi Noviomagus (fig. 1).

The Castra fragments (Peters, 1965-66 ; 1969 ; 1979) that came to light in one of the officers' dwellings show that by Dutch standards, the decoration were quite sophisticated. First of all, there was a panel decoration combined with a dado showing imitation marble (Peters, 1965-66 : 115-129). The dado consists of a low black socle on top of which an imitation of various kinds of marble can be seen, such as giallo antico and green porphyry. In the main zone there are red fields, divided by black pilaster strips carrying representations of candelabra. This type of painting reminds us of decorations known from temple II at Elst (Bogaers, 1955 : 91-137) and the villa of Cologne-Münstersdorf (Klinkenber, 1933 ; Schleiermacher, 1982 : 89-100). Secondly, garden prospectas are represented in an architectonic frame (Peters, 1965-66 : 130-136 ; 1979 : 373-376). Apart from floral motifs, some fragments also show parts of human or animal representations. Thirdly there is a relatively large group of fragments covering together some 10 m² on which an all-over floral pattern has been painted (Peters, 1965-66 : 136-142).

The decorations in the officers' dwelling can be closely dated to the end of the first century A.D. The paintings in the surrounding military village date from the same period, but they are much simpler. Here we are concerned with white walls with or without a red dado, a type of decoration which might well have been applied the inner as well as on the outer walls. Furthermore we see a sober panel decoration combined with a white socle marked with red dots in order to give an imitation marble effect (Peters, 1979 : 388-391).

Recently a considerable number of fragments of a panel decoration was recovered during excavations by the Department of Roman Provincial Archaeology of the Catholic University of Nijmegen, carried out in the Canabae Legionis (Bogaers, 1988 : 33).

In the civilian settlement of Ulpi Noviomagus only minor quantities of wall-paintings have been found up to now. Besides fragments with a totally white surface there are pieces that formed part of a panel decoration on which a yellow thyrsus constituted the division between two fields. Moreover, fragments of a dado were found that show the imitation of different kinds of marble (Moormann, 1984-85 : 61-64). It is to be expected that future excavations in this civilian settlement will reveal other remains of wall-decorations.

To sum up: apart from the sumptuous decorations in the officers' dwelling of the legionary fortress and a few pieces of rich painting found in the civilian settlement of Ulpi Noviomagus, generally simple panel decorations, mainly on a white ground, predominate.

The finds from the bank of the river Waal, that will now be discussed, comprise sober panel decorations, both on white and red grounds, imitation of marbled dados and a number of so-called repetitive or wall-paper patterns on a white ground.

In a rubbish pit a small quantity of mural painting fragments was found, showing the imitation of different kinds of marble. This group, that must be associated with a dado, presumably representing giallo antico and green porphyry. The central zone of the wall has been soberly executed and consists of white panels bordered by red bands.

Apart from fragments originating from the wall there are also numerous pieces that, on the basis of their decoration, might have formed part of a ceiling. Two repetitive decorations on a white ground can be distinguished:

At one group consists of circles surrounded by green garlands to which fruits are attached. A similar decoration has been found at Aquincum, Budapest (Frizs, 1981 : fig. 10).
Three decoration schemes can be discerned in the group of fragments lying underneath the large slabs. First of all a repetitive pattern can be reconstructed, possibly originating from a ceiling (fig. 3). This consisted of concerned with intersecting red circles on a greyish-white background. These circles were plotted on the basis of parallel, scratched lines and were made with the help of a pair of compasses. On several fragments the impression of the compass leg in the centre of a circle can still be seen. The circles were filled with floral motifs, which were composed of four tortuous lines running from the centre and ending in stylized calycers. A similar decoration scheme is known from a villa at Anthea, Belgium (Delplace, 1983: fig. 6.2). The wall paintings from a cryptoportico at Bösingen, Switzerland (Drack, 1985: 58-60), however, show a more elaborate version of this pattern.

Apart from the fragments that can be ascribed to a ceiling, we are also concerned with red pieces of mural painting on which dark red lines were painted. Like in the case of the fragments with a totally white surface, which were also recovered underneath the large slabs, for the time being their position on the wall has not been ascertained.

The large slabs of wall-painting which covered the fragments described earlier, form part of a sober panel decoration that consists of alternating black and red planes. They seem to be a simple derivative from the decoration system found at Elst and Cologne.

A final word must be said about the relation between the mural decorations and the architectural remains, and also about the dating of the wall-paintings. The two major dumps were found inside the remains of a building. A basement made of opus caementicum and some walls made of tuff, were uncovered. Some of these structures even showed the remains of a very simple decoration on the joints between the stones. This type of decoration, which was meant to imitate regular masonry, is a phenomenon of frequent occurrence in all the western provinces of the Roman Empire. The wall-painting fragments found on the bank of the river Waal, can be dated to the middle-Roman period, that is between 70 A.D. and 270 A.D. (Noviomagus, 1989: 37-33). At the present state of research however, the paintings cannot be dated.

About the character of the building only guesses can be made so far. The site is located between the military fortress and the civilian settlement of Ulpi Noviomagus (fig. 1). Perhaps it was a sort of villa situated on a slope near the river. This would imply

Fig. 1: Nijmegen, find spots of Roman wall-paintings. 1 - Bank of the river Waal; 2 - Legionary Fortress; 3 - Presumed location of the eastern and western Candaean Legions; 4 - Ulpi Noviomagus. (Map: Dept. of Roman Provincial Archaeology, Catholic University of Nijmegen.)

Fig. 2: Nijmegen, Bank of the river Waal: part of a dado decoration in situ. (Drawing: E.J. Pooten.)

Fig. 3: Nijmegen, Bank of the river Waal: reconstruction of a repetitive pattern. (Drawing: E.J. Pooten.)
that the villa was terraced. The architectural remains that were found speak in favour of this theory.

To conclude: one can say that the wall-paintings found on the bank of the river Waal, fit into the picture we already had of wall-paintings found previously at Nijmegen. They underline the relatively humble character of the civilian settlement at Nijmegen as compared to the provincial capital of Cologne.

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