

LA PEINTURE MURALE ROMAINE DANS LES PROVINCES DU NORD

Actes du XI^{ème} Séminaire de l'A.F.P.M.A.

REIMS (30 avril - 1^{er} mai 1988)



REVUE ARCHEOLOGIQUE
DE PICARDIE

N° 1-2 1990 - 160 Frs

RECENT FINDS OF ROMAN WALL-PAINTINGS ON THE BANK OF THE RIVER WAAL AT NIJMEGEN (THE NETHERLANDS)

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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 buildings, 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 *Ulpia 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 was 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-Müngersdorf (Klinkenber, 1933 ; Schleiermacher, 1982 : 98-100). Secondly, garden prospects 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 combi-

ned 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 *Ulpia Noviomagus* only minor quantities of wall-paintings have been found up to now. Beside fragments with a totally white surface there are pieces that formed part of a panel decoration on which a yellow thyrsos 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 *Ulpia 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 :

A) one group consists of circles surrounded by green garlands to which fruits are attached. A similar decoration has been found at Aquincum, Budapest (Frizot, 1981 : fig. 10) ;

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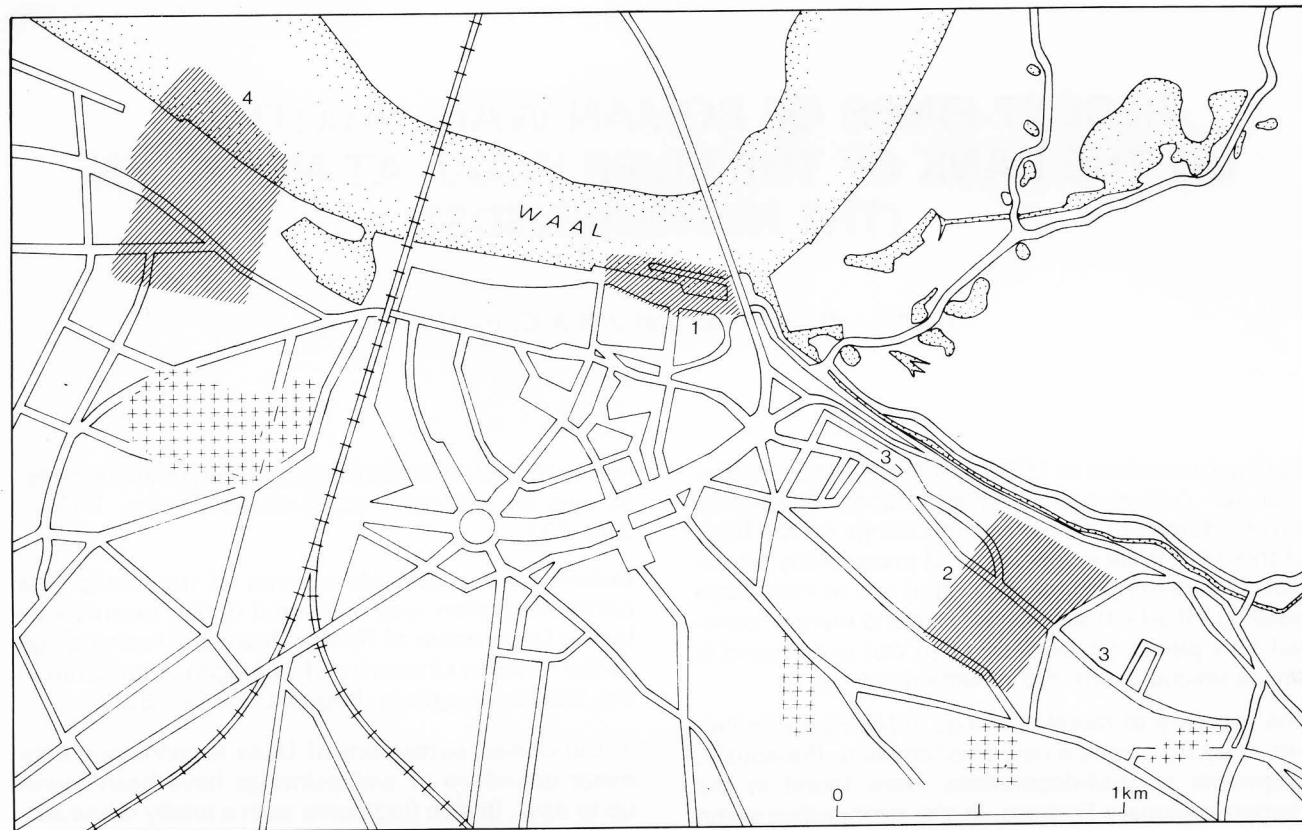


Fig. 1 : Nijmegen, find spots of Roman wall-paintings. 1 - Bank of the river Waal ; 2 - Legionary Fortress ; 3 - Presumable location of the eastern and western Canabae Legionis ; 4 - Ulpia Noviomagus. (Map : Dept. of Roman Provincial Archaeology, Catholic University of Nijmegen).

B) another group comprises double circles touching each other. These circles are filled with floral motifs and are set in a linear frame.

Large quantities of murals were recovered in two huge dumps, closely connected with the remains of a large building. Each deposit contained fragments of several decorations. The following decoration systems can be reconstructed in the first dump. First of all a system in which a red field, framed by a green band borders on a black surface. This decoration goes with a dado decoration on which a yellow marble imitation is to be seen, the so-called giallo antico. Secondly, many fragments were recovered that show red bands on a white background. These fragments probably come from a middle zone with white, red bordered, fields.

Close to this first dump, part of a dado survived *in situ* to a height of one meter, being 66 cm wide (fig. 2). The surface of the piece *in situ* shows a low red socle over which a red disc on a white background can be seen. This tondo is dotted with black splashes and apparently imitates red porphyry. A black band separates the dado from the white central zone.

The second dump was found inside the structures of a building and consisted of a large quantity of mural painting fragments put on a clay floor. The deposit was built up in the following way. Firstly the floor

was covered with little fragments mingled with burnt wattle and daub, and pieces of slate, which formed the roof of the building. On top of these fragments there were large slabs of wall-painting that appeared to have tumbled down like dominoes.

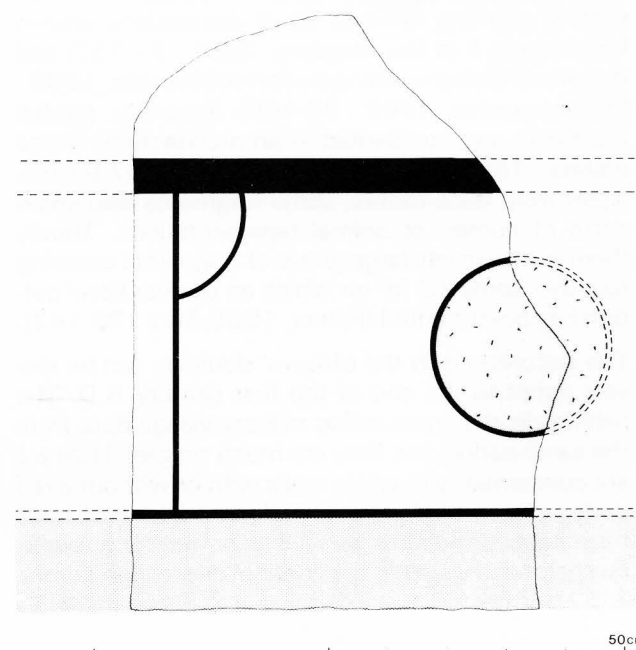


Fig. 2 : Nijmegen, Bank of the river Waal : part of a dado decoration *in situ*. (Drawing : E.J. Ponten).

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 calyces. A similar decoration scheme is known from a villa at Anthée, Belgium (Delplace, 1983 : fig. 6.2). The wall paintings from a cryptoportico at Börsingen, Switzerland (Drack, 1986 : 59-60), 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 caementicium* 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, 1988 : 37-63). 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 Ulpia Noviomagus (fig. 1). Perhaps it was a sort of villa situated on a slope near the river. This would imply

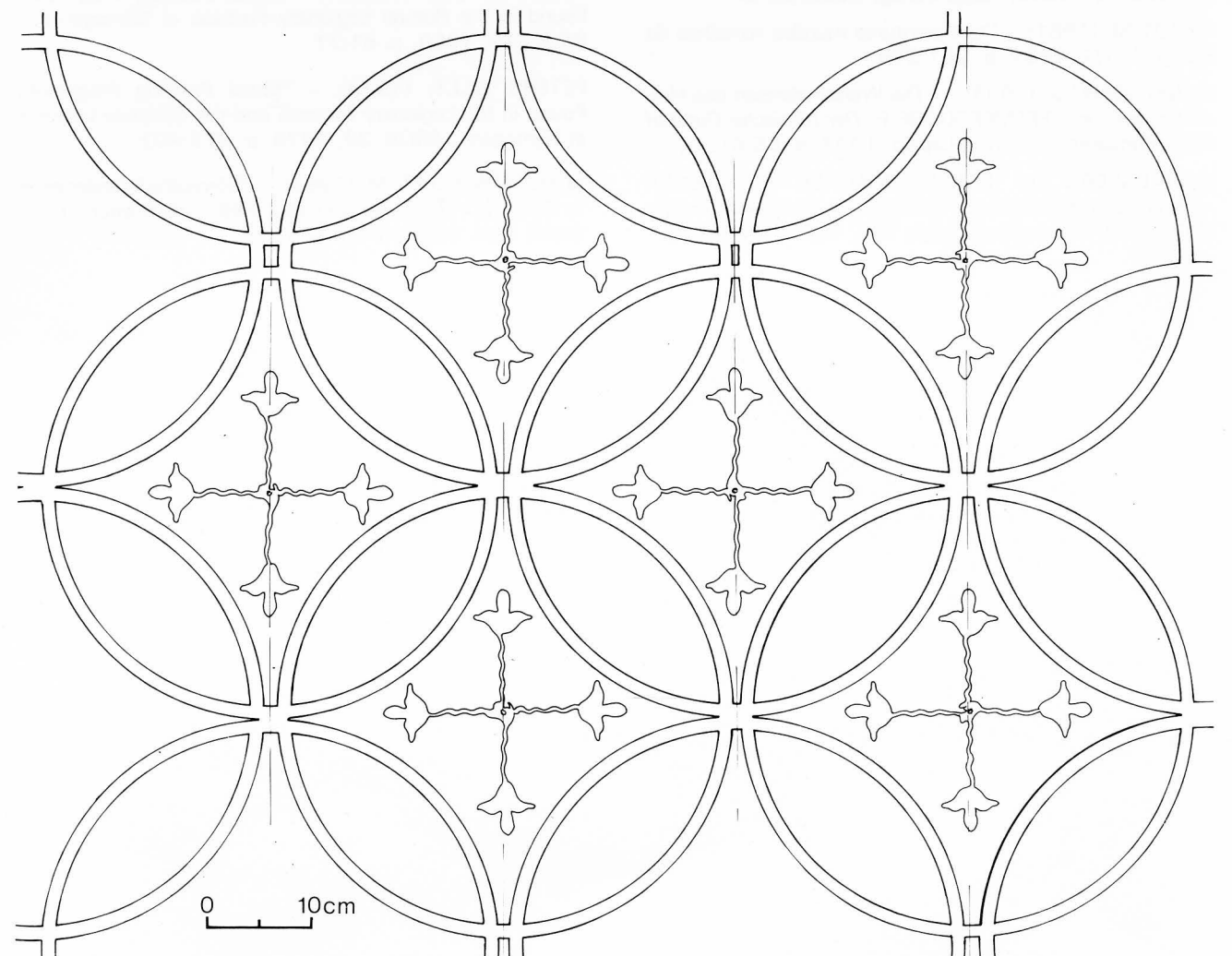


Fig. 3 : Nijmegen, Bank of the river Waal : reconstruction of a repetitive pattern. (Drawing : E.J. Ponten).

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.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Special thanks are due to drs. L.J.F. Swinkels and drs. R.M. van Dierendonck for their assistance, infectious enthusiasm and help in clarifying many of the issues dealt with. We are also grateful for the help given by drs. H. Sarfatij and G. Tak of the State Service for Archaeological Investigations (R.O.B.) and to several students of the Catholic University of Nijmegen. We are also happy to express our gratitude to E.J. Ponten for his drawings and to Ms. H.E.M. Nieuwhof for her translation.

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