

ARCHITECTURAL ELEMENTS IN SIRMIUM WALL PAINTINGS¹

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Introduction

In the wall paintings of the Roman period, architectural elements performed as a stonemason's work, stucco decoration, marbling or incrustation, as well as whole spatial-architectural entities were often imitated. This paper deals with architectural elements presented in the wall paintings of *Sirmium*, the centre of the Roman province of *Pannonia*, a colony and an imperial residence, whose remains are situated in the present-day Sremska Mitrovica in Serbia (figure 1). It was founded in the second half of the 1st century BC and lasted until the Avarian attacks at the end of the 6th century AD.²

Stone imitation

The mimicking of architectural elements in wall paintings was often used in the Hellenistic period.³ Wall decoration from the dining room of "The House of the Plasterworks", dated to the 3rd century BC⁴, can be seen in the wall entity exhibited in the Archaeological museum in Pella, Greece. On a wall 5 meters high, pilasters and cornices were modeled, and the stone block joints were incised. The first imitations of marble in Roman art can probably be assigned to The First Pompeian style (masonry or incrustation style), which was actually inspired by Hellenistic houses and palaces.

Besides the imitation of marble paneling, the simulation of beams, pilasters and cornices was also executed in The First Pompeian Style. One of the examples is the wall decoration from "The Samnite House" in *Herculaneum*, dated to the 2nd century BC.⁵ In the mature phase of The First Pompeian Style, the most diverse colors and textures that no natural stone could possess

¹ This article is the result of a project called "Working on the Fragments of Ancient Wall Paintings from the Archaeological Site of Sirmium". The project was led by Institute of Archaeology, Belgrade (Dragana Rogić) and Museum of Srem, Sremska Mitrovica (Miroslav Jesretić). It was funded by Provincial Secretariat for Culture, Public Information and Relations with Religious Communities (Vojvodina, Republic of Serbia) in 2010 and Ministry of Culture and Information (Republic of Serbia) in 2012. Sirmium wall painting was researched in the PhD thesis written by Dragana Rogić and defended in 2014, called *Technology of Ancient Wall Painting in the Territory of Serbia*.

² Popović 2013, 102.

³ Rogić, Anđelković Grašar 2015, 206.

⁴ Baldassarre et al. 2002, 68–69.

⁵ Ling 1992, 16.

were used. That is the main reason why the type of the stone presented in the decoration often cannot be defined. Marble imitation by painting was an economic way of obtaining interior decoration, because it was cheaper than the marble decoration itself, and it could present marbles which originated from distant lands and could not have been delivered easily. In this way, artists tried to associate marble imitating with the idea of luxury. In The Second Pompeian Style, marble imitating can be seen on socles. In late ancient painting, this was present in tombs, but also in public and private buildings. Wall painting mimicking *opus sectile*, which resembles here *opus alexandrinum*, can be seen in the “The House of Leukaktios”, dated to the 3rd century AD, excavated at the ancient city of *Ptolemais* in present-day Lybia where, on the socle, blue marble was depicted, while in the upper areas, marble panels with inlaid rhomboids, discs and triangles of different colors were presented.⁶

A lot of fragmented wall decorations with imitation marble plates were found in *Sirmium*. The imitation of green marble plates with curving black marble veins is presented in figure 1a, where the fragments of a wall painting from a building named *villa urbana*, (archaeological site 1)⁷, dated to the period from the 3rd to the 4th century are shown. In figure 1b, with fragments originating from the *Sirmium* imperial palace (archaeological site 1a),⁸ dating from 4th century, imitation of marbles presented on a light grey and blue back ground and executed by spraying red, green, ochre and black colour. A vertical line simulates the point where two marble plates join. One more type of marble plate imitation made with different circular and egg-shaped motifs, pebbles, can be seen in figure 1c, in which fragments of painting from the *Sirmium* imperial palace are presented.

An imitation of stone block joints can be seen in the example from a *Sirmium* forum building dated to the period from the 2nd to the 4th century (archaeological site 59)⁹, where white surfaces of mortar with recesses are shown. A similar decoration with gutters was found in a house from ancient *Emona*, present-day Ljubljana, Slovenia, dated to the middle to the second half of the 2nd century.¹⁰

Bands, friezes and medallions

Motifs inspired by stucco or stone decoration for obtaining the luxurious appearance of a building were also executed in wall paintings, again due to the big expense this decoration required. In Roman paintings, medallions with astragals and egg-and-dart were depicted with different scenes within. In *Sirmium* paintings, stucco details with egg-and-dart motifs and astragals¹¹ were imitated in different variations, as bands, friezes, medallions, etc.¹²

The scheme of the bands with astragals was mostly formed showing an alternation of ellipses and two pearls. Here, two examples of the bands with white astragals divided with two differently colored surfaces will be described. They originate from two villas (named *villa urbana*). Particularly visible is the difference in the size of the astragals. In the first example (archaeological site4), dated

⁶ Żelazowski 2010, 565–568.

⁷ Милошевић 1994, 11.

⁸ Милошевић 1994, 11.

⁹ Милошевић, 1994, 42.

¹⁰ Plesničar – Gec, 1997, 58–59.

¹¹ The egg-and-dart motif is one of the most widely used motifs in the architectural decoration of ancient Greece and ancient Rome. Often, along with “the egg”, a smaller motif is presented, executed in three different shapes – as an arrow, anchor or dart. The egg motif originates from Egyptian art and the lotus flower. (Goodyear 1891). It was developed in the shape we know today from ancient Greece. Later, it was transferred to Roman art and architecture, almost unaltered. See in: Rogić, Nikolić, Jesretić, 2011, 210.

¹² Rogić, Nikolić, Jesretić, 2011.

to the 4th century,¹³ as shown in figure 3a, the bead-and-reel motif has elongated ellipses and precisely painted pearls. In the second example (archaeological site 72), dated to the period from the 3rd to the 4th century,¹⁴ shown in figure 3b, the astragals are big and round, with the lower side accentuated in dark brown, with the aim of dividing the white from the yellow background.

The frieze with egg-and-dart motif, originating from a public building dated to the 2nd century (archaeological site 21), shown in figure 4, decorated the highest portion of a wall composition in “The Room with Muses”.¹⁵ The frieze is painted with dark ochre lines on a white ochre background, which gives the impression of gold plated stucco. This example has egg shaped elements formed with three semicircular lines, with darts in between, and dentils depicted above. In a Roman settlement in present-day Schwangau, Germany, an egg-and-dart motif was depicted on a wall of a house from the 1st century AD. The egg motifs are painted with human faces inside and presented in a narrow band. Beside this band, in the lower section, a narrower band with astragals is also depicted.¹⁶

In addition to the bands, the medallions were also decorated with egg motifs and astragals. Inside these medallions, different representations were shown. In the example of a semicircular band with egg motif originating from *Sirmium horreum* and dated to the period from the 2nd to the 4th century, shown in figure 5, the ovals decoration was executed in a brownish red color on an ochre and orange background, while the inside of the egg motif was accentuated with white brushstrokes.¹⁷

In figures 6a, 6b and 6c, parts of three medallions with astragals are shown, painted in one or two rows. A circular motif with a row of astragals formed from an alternation of an ellipse and two disks is presented on a painting with a semicircular band executed in a red-violet color. The painting originates from a *Sirmium* public building dated to the 2nd century (archaeological site no.21) and is shown in the figure 6a. In figure 6b, originating from a *horreum* (probably the economic part of the imperial palace of the archaeological site 1a) and dating to the period from the 2nd to the 4th century,¹⁸ we can see two fragments with recognizable semicircular bands, together with astragals formed from repeated ellipses and discs. Usually, ochre tones were used to mimic gold plated stuccos. A motif with two rows of astragals, found on fragments originating from a building named *villa urbana* and dated to the 3rd to the 4th century (archaeological site no.38)¹⁹, formed from an alternation of an ellipse and a pearl in the form of one circle inside another, is shown in figure 6c. An analogous example with double-rowed astragals with a figural representation inside can be seen on fragments found in a *villa urbana* from *Carnuntum*, dated to the 4th century.²⁰ Medallions with muses, originate from the already mentioned “Room with the Muses”. The muse Melpomeneis presented in figure 6d, where the medallion is surrounded with astragals formed of one or two pearls. Analogous examples can be seen on wall painting from “The Red Dining Room” in Baláca, today’s Nemesvámos, Hungary, dated to the period from the second half of the 1st century to the beginning of the 2nd century.²¹

¹³ Here, a *villa urbana* with *aperistylum* and little baths was built (according to Милошевић, 1994, 13).

¹⁴ Милошевић, 1994, 49.

¹⁵ Book in press. D. Rogić, B. Popović, I. Popović, M. Jesretić. *Wall Paintings from Sirmium, I Residential structures next to the north town wall (site 21)/ Zidno slikarstvo Sirmijuma, I Stambena četvrt uz severni gradski bedem (lokalitet 21)*.

¹⁶ Krahe/Zahlhaas 1984, 46–48.

¹⁷ Rogić, Nikolić, Jesretić 2011, fig.16.

¹⁸ Милошевић, 1994, 28.

¹⁹ Милошевић 1994, 32.

²⁰ Behling 2009, 404.

²¹ Kirschhof 2008, fig.18 and fig. 19.

Geometric ceiling schemes

An imitation of ceiling stucco decoration was done in a wall painting found in *Sirmium horreum* (or part of a public building),²² dated to the period from the 2nd to the 4th century (archaeological site no. 30), and can be seen in figure 7. Conservation of these wall painting fragments has not yet been undertaken, but they were arranged in a logical unit. It is clear that the scheme contained geometric forms – rhomboids, but it is also possible that they were combined with rectangular forms. The rhomboids consist of a darkened and an illuminated side. Within each rhomboid there is another, smaller, one with a floral motif in the form of lilies. Between the rhomboids, astragal bands were represented, consisting of alternating forms of an ellipse and two small circles. The astragals were painted in ochre, and a shadow is formed using a reddish color. On the back of the fragments, imprints of straw in plaster can be observed, which could suggest that the fragments were part of the ceiling. The most similar example to the previous one is the ceiling painting from the *thermae* at *Aquae Iasae*, today's Varaždinske Toplice, in Croatia, dated to the 4th century.²³ A fragment with a scheme of rhomboids and rectangles was found within the Roman shrine in Santa Eulalia de Bóveda, Spain, and is dated to the late 3rd century.²⁴

The example of a ceiling coffer is shown in figure 8 and originates from a public building (archaeological site no.21), dated to the 2nd century. The decorative scheme comprises a motif consisting of three squares, one inside another. The smallest square in the middle is without any decoration. The outline of the biggest square is the thickest while the middle square is decorated with three astragals on each side. The corners of the middle square are decorated with stylized lilies and are connected to the corners of the largest square with dotted lines. An example of stucco mimicking is the painting of the coffered ceiling from the 4th century *Carnuntum villa (villa urbana)*, where an egg motifs combined with astragal and dentil motifs in the form of an octagon.²⁵

Architectural scene

The most impressive example of *Sirmium* wall paintings presenting architectural elements is the set of fragments in which one can recognize an architectural scene (figure 1). The fragments were found in a public building from a residential quarter by the city wall (archaeological site no. 21). The wall painting represents a very significant discovery, because in the area of *Sirmium*, as well as in the area of present-day Serbia, no other architectural scenes have yet been found.

Unfortunately, the painting is missing its central section. However, by joining the fragments, a roof cornice with acroteria became visible, as well as a frieze and a construction made of wooden columns and beams. The acroteria have a floral form, which is often the case in Roman painting. Sometimes they can appear stylized animals with an ail in form of vine. This is visible in wall painting fragments from a *domus* at *Nemausus*, present-day Nîmes, dated to the 2nd century, where a feline figure on the edge of a cornice is presented.²⁶ In the *Sirmium* scene, very stylized decoration was used for the cornice, with a repeating motif executed in light ochre. The frieze is depicted as a green field between the beams. In the lower section, on the left side, there is part of a blue “frame” with a hanging kantharos.

²² Милошевић 1994, 27.

²³ Gorenc, Vikić 1979, 41, Abb. 6.

²⁴ Montenegro Rúa 2005, photo 13.

²⁵ Behling 2009, 402.

²⁶ Sabrić, Sabrić 1985, 305–306; Capus, Dardenay 2014, 176.

Similar presentations of porticos were represented in The Second Pompeian Style, but also occurred in The Third and The Fourth Pompeian Style. The specificity of The Second Pompeian Style, which is also called the illusionistic or architectural style, is that in the lower sections stone blocks were presented, while in the upper sections different scenes framed with architectural elements were combined, giving the impression of a stage. This style was created at the beginning of the 1st century BC in *Pompeii* and lasted until the mid-Augustan age.²⁷ Among the most skillfully executed and artistically conceived examples is the wall decoration in *Aula Isiaca*²⁸, a vaulted hall found under the basilica,²⁹ as well as the wall decoration in “The Room of the Masks” belonging to the “The House of Augustus.”³⁰ Both buildings are situated on the Palatine Hill and dated to the 1st century BC.

The most frequent examples analogous to that at *Sirmium* are the presentations of architectural decor without expressed plasticity. One such example, with thin architectural elements and representations of hanging vessels can be seen in the wall paintings of *Domus Aurea* in Rome, dated to the 1st century AD.³¹

A territorially close example to the *Sirmium* architectural scene is the wall painting from a Roman villa found in the area of the present-day village of Panik in Bosnia and Herzegovina, dated to the 3rd century, where rows of peristyle columns can be identified, as well as a facade with arcades and domes.³²

Conclusion

In Roman villas and houses, different types of stone were mimicked, with the aim of giving an illusion of luxury. When talking of marble plate imitating, the examples are various, from the mimicking of marble venations and pebbles, to marble depicted by spraying colors and forming small dots.

The stucco technique enabled the serial execution of decorations that were of an exquisite level of craftsmanship and gave luxury to a facility, just like those carved in stone. In the Hellenistic period and in the Pompeian styles, stucco decoration mimicking was done very plastically and realistically, while later it was simplified, losing its three-dimensional appearance, and executed in the form of a drawing on a white background, using red, brown or black colors. In *Sirmium* paintings, the examples inspired by stucco decoration were made as bands, friezes, medallions and ceiling coffers.

The most complex example of the architectural elements depicted in *Sirmium* paintings found to date is the architectural scene presenting a composition with a portico and a kantharos. Although it was probably inspired by The Second Style, it actually represents a mix and reminiscence of different Pompeian styles.

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²⁷ Mielsch 2001, 29–65

²⁸ A hall with wall paintings depicting the Egyptian deities Isis and Serapis (Boatwright 2012, 109–110).

²⁹ Lancaster 2005, 187

³⁰ Mielsch 2001, 35.

³¹ Baldassarre et al., 2002, 225

³² Čremošnik, 1984, 155.

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ELEMENTE DE ARHITECTURA DIN PICTURILE MURALE LA SIRMIUM *(Abstract)*

Among the fragments of Sirmium wall paintings from the Museum of Srem in Sremska Mitrovica, Serbia, there are those on which elements of architectural structures, otherwise performed in stone and stucco as differently shaped decorations, as well as whole building entities, are depicted. They originate from private and public buildings dated to the period from the 2nd to the 4th century AD. The most interesting one is the architectural scene with a kantharos, which has not been fully restored yet. Its importance lies in the fact that no Roman wall paintings with architectural scenes have been found in the territory of Serbia, or at least have not been published until now.

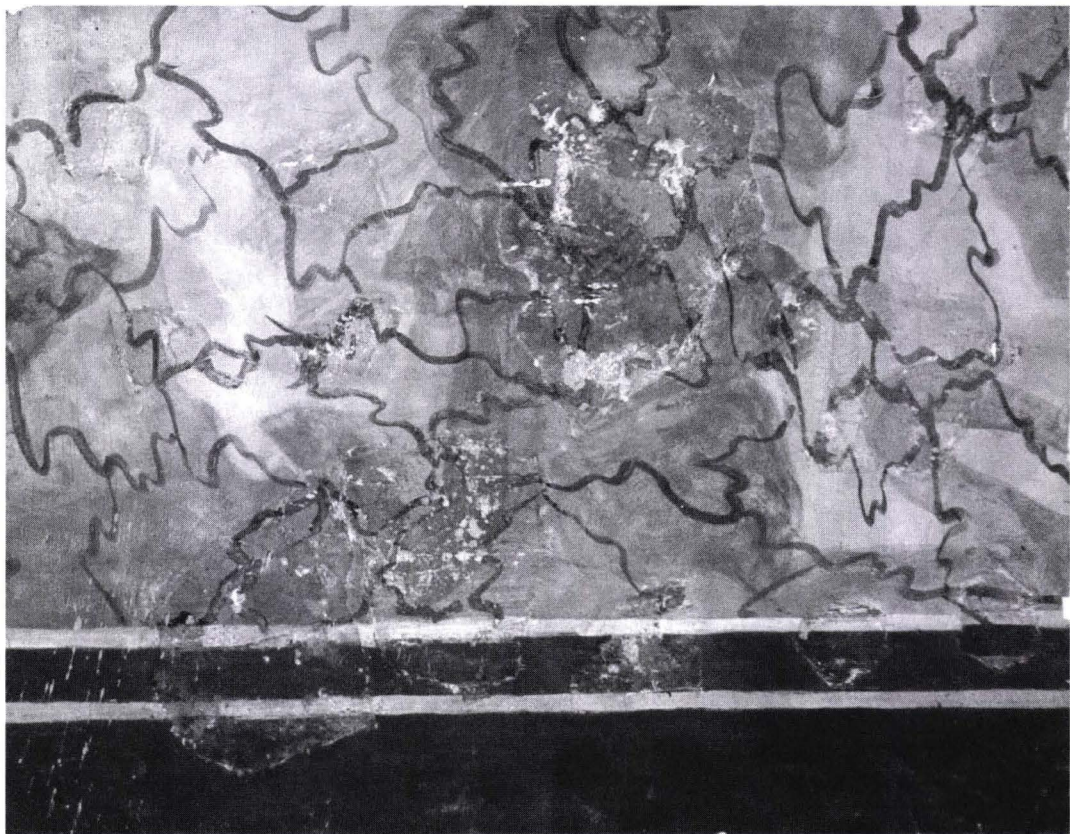


Figure 1a. Unpublished. Photo by D. Rogić.

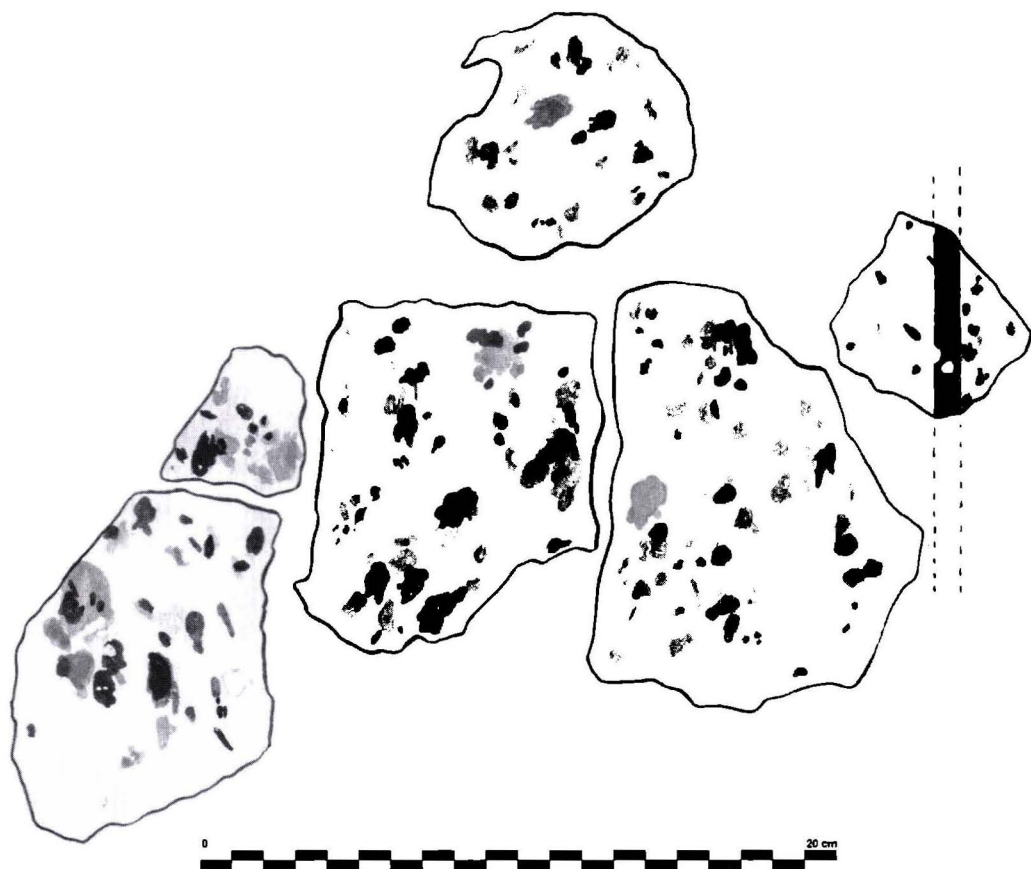


Figure 2. Unpublished. Painting by D. Rogić created on the basis of original fragments.

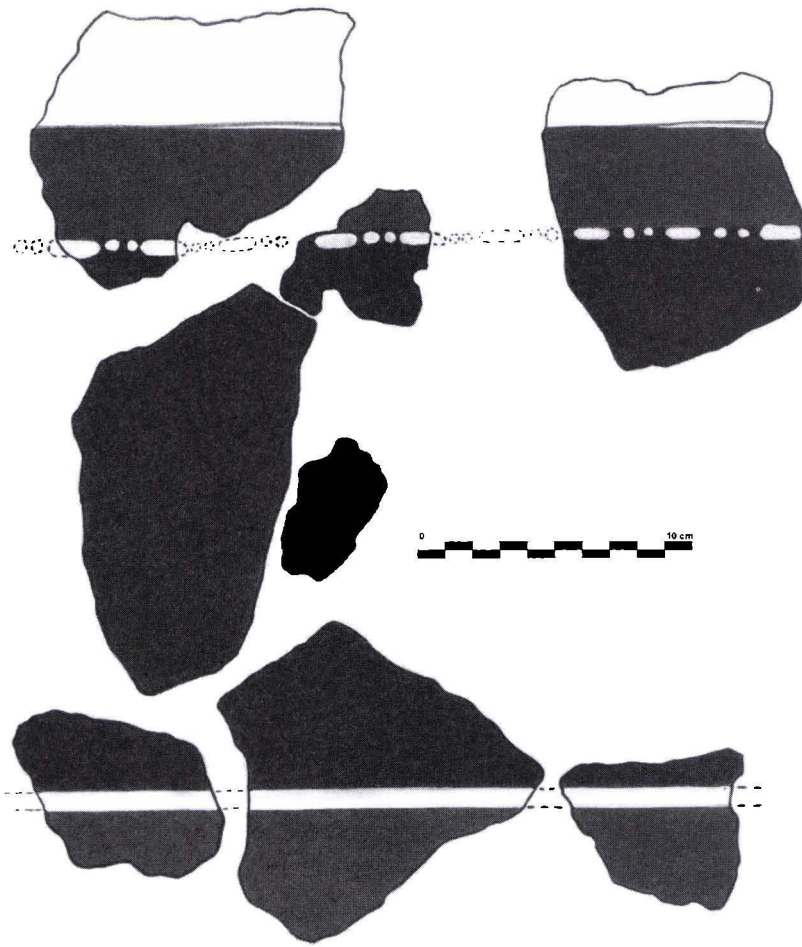


Figure 3a. Painting by D.Rogić created on the basis of original fragments. From: Rogić/Nikolić/Jesretić 2011, Abb.13.

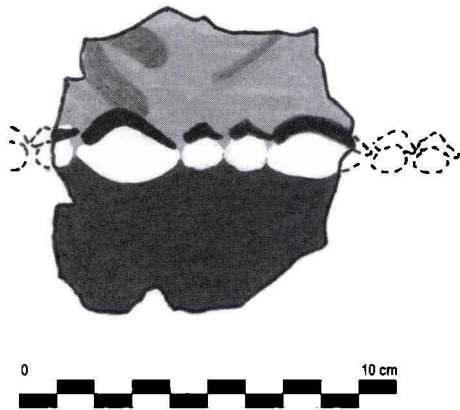


Figure 3b. Unpublished. Painting by D.Rogić created on the basis of original fragments.

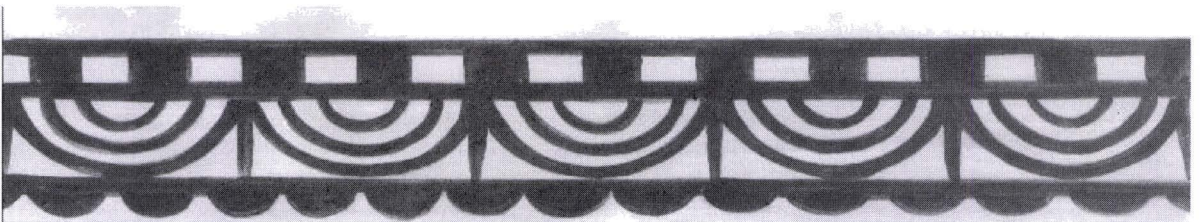


Figure 4. Unpublished. Painting by D.Rogić created on the basis of original fragments.

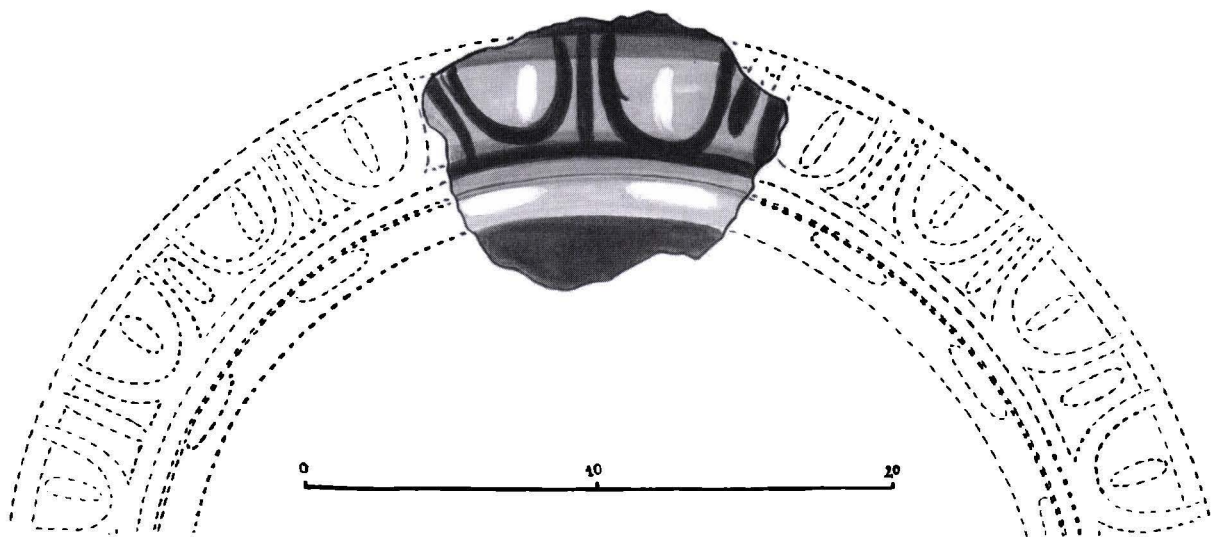


Figure 5. Painting by D.Rogić created on the basis of original fragments.
From: Rogić/Nikolić/Jesretić 2011, Abb.16.

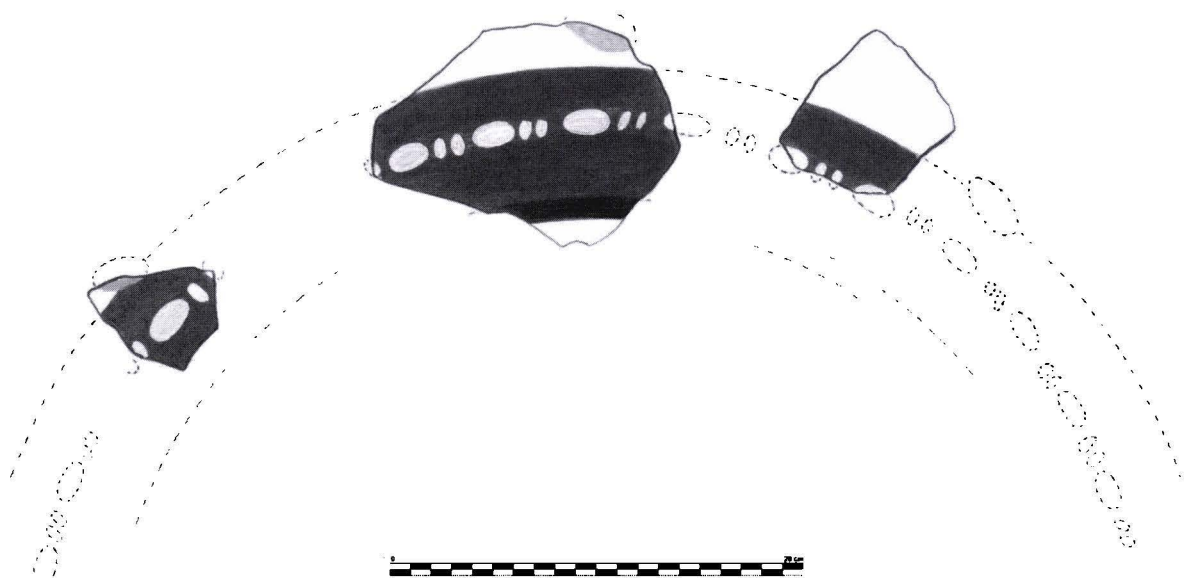


Figure 6a. Painting by D.Rogić created on the basis of original fragments.
From: Rogić/Nikolić/Jesretić 2011, Abb.9.



Figure 6b. Unpublished. Photo by D. Rogić.

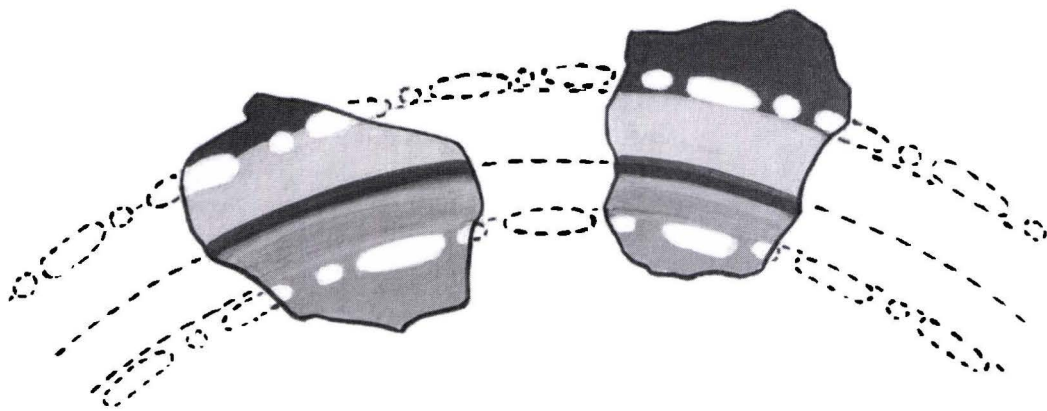


Figure 6c. Painting by D. Rogić created on the basis of original fragments. From: Rogić/Nikolić/Jesretić 2011, Abb.11.



Figure 6d. Unpublished. Painting by D. Rogić created on the basis of original fragments.

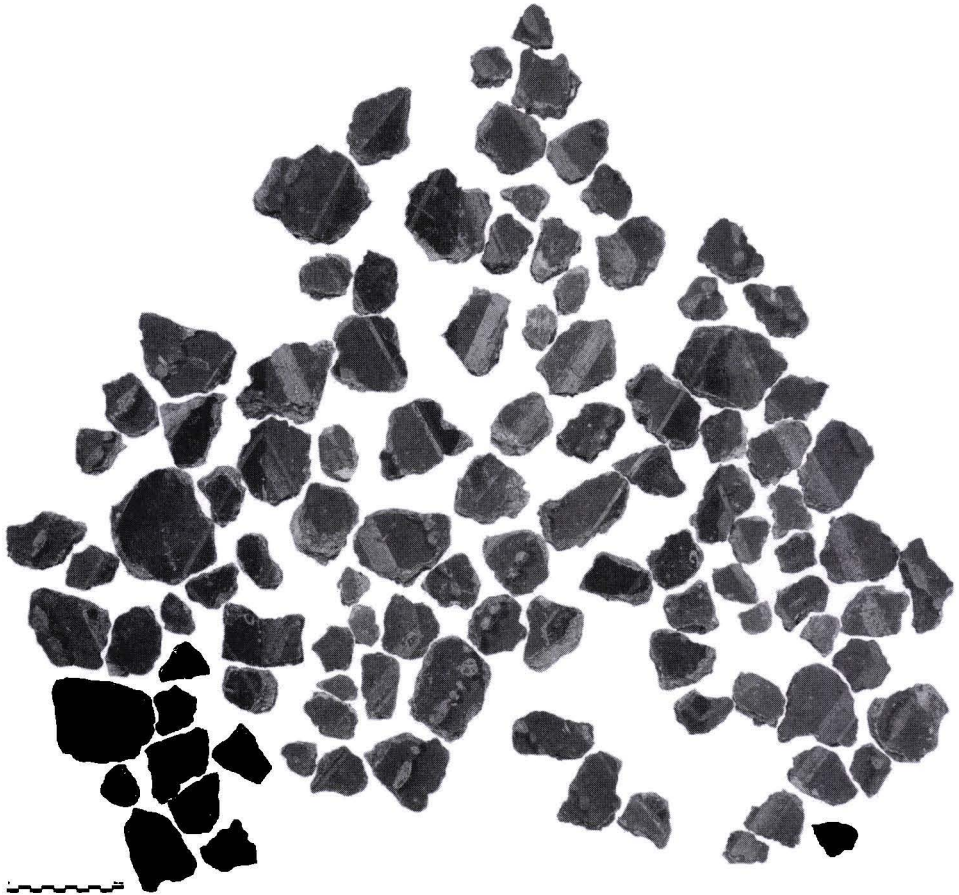


Figure 7. Unpublished. Photo by D. Rogić.

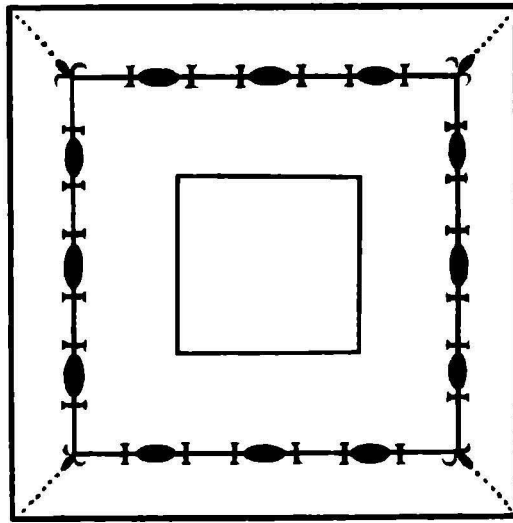


Figure 8. Unpublished. Painting by D. Rogić created on the basis of original fragments.

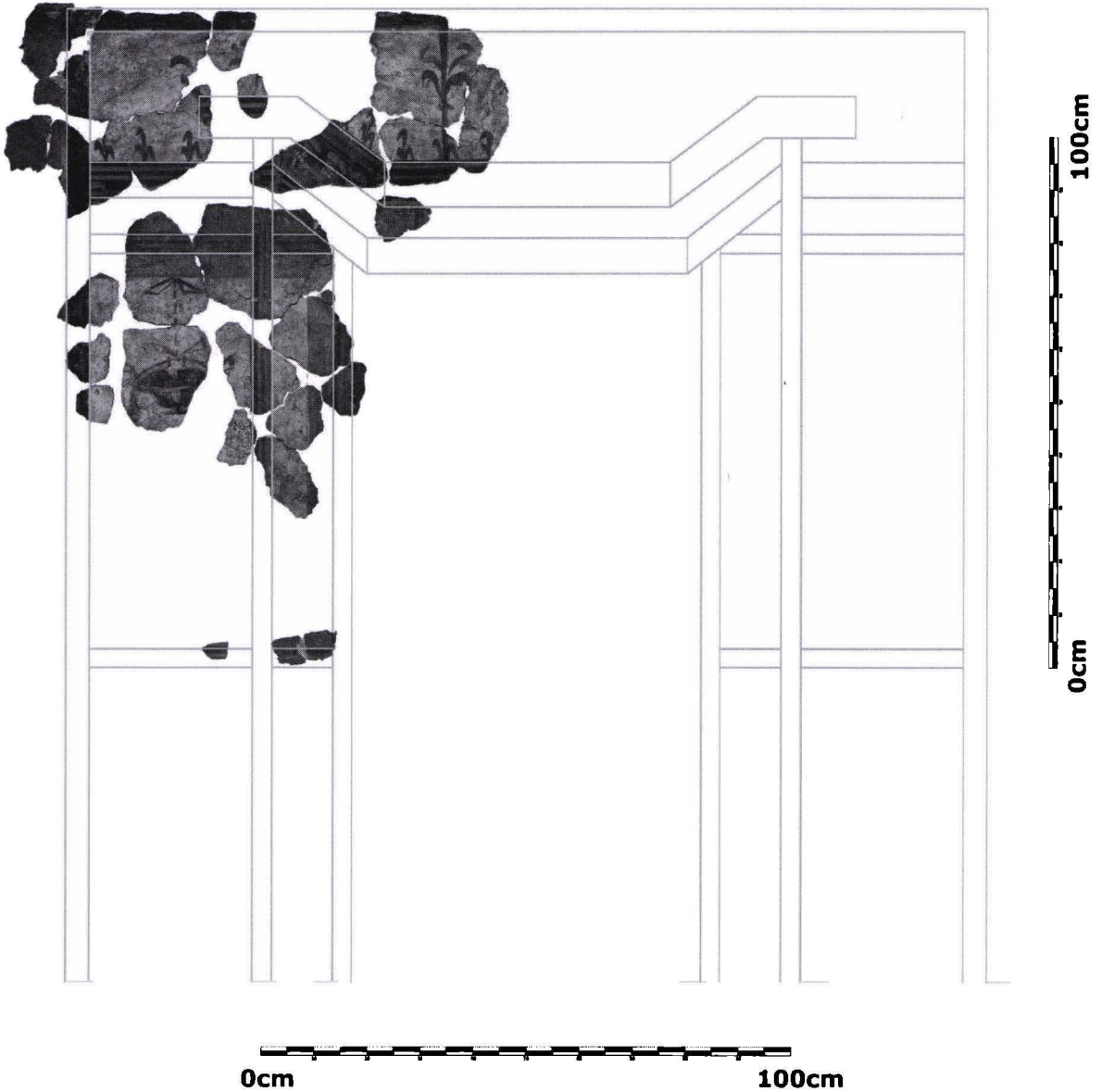


Figure 9. Unpublished. Drawing by D. Rogić and E. Nikolić created after arranging original fragments.