

WALL PAINTINGS FROM A BATHING COMPLEX IN ROME (PIETRAPAPA)

(Taf. XXXIII–XXXV, Abb. 1–11)

Abstract

Die pompejanische Malerei wird oft mit der römischen gleichgesetzt. Daraus muss man folgern, dass das Studium der Wandgemälde aus anderen Teilen des römischen Reiches und aus anderen Zeiten zu stark davon beeinflusst ist. Anhand eines stadtrömischen Beispiels möchten wir zeigen, dass neue Trends auch außerhalb Kampaniens bestanden haben. Es geht um Darstellungen von Meeresszenen in einem Badehaus aus hadrianischer Zeit, mit Fischen, Booten und Meerögöttern. Die Fische scheinen frei im Wasser zu schwimmen, sind in ihrer Wiedergabe aber nach toten Tieren auf dem Fischmarkt gestaltet worden. Sie stehen in einer Reihe von vergleichbaren Darstellungen, die im Hellenismus anfängt. Unsere ‚freien‘ Fische sind allerdings mehr römisch als hellenistisch geprägt.

Introduction: Research on Post-Pompeian Painting

Until today, research on Roman wall painting on the Italian Peninsula has very much focused on the period before the eruption of Vesuvius in 79 AD. Indeed, most examples of mural painting come from this area, especially from Pompeii, Herculaneum, Stabiae, and their surroundings. Although it is generally assumed that only a small number of examples from the city of Rome survive, we are convinced that the actual number was much higher. On the other hand we must ask to what extent Campanian wall paintings are representative of all mural decorations created in the centre of the Empire from 200 BC onwards. A complication is that many examples known from the city of Rome come from houses of the social elites, such as the senators and the Imperial family. Very often, no comparison can be made between the rich patrons of these paintings and the patrons of the Campanian examples. Fortunately, there are exceptions, thanks to which one can grasp an idea of the development of mural painting in the centre of the Roman Empire until 79 AD.

Because after the fatal eruption of Vesuvius the number of preserved wall paintings diminishes drastically, it becomes much more difficult to conceive the development of this type of interior decoration. Therefore, Roman wall painting has often been considered synonymous with Pompeian wall painting, and seems to end with the Fourth Style in 79 AD. This trend is apparent from many publications on Roman painting, which emphasize the development of Pompeian wall painting. Let us consider some recent publications, beginning with two French ones, the influential book of A. BARBET from 1985 and the 2005 publication of J.-M. CROISILLE, respectively entitled: *La peinture murale romaine*, and *La peinture romaine*. A. BARBET primarily discussed the Campanian material, and did not treat post-Pompeian paintings at all. In only 24 of his 300 pages, does J.-M. CROISILLE discuss examples after 79 AD¹. R. LING'S *Roman Painting*, published in 1991, has 24 of 222 pages on later material². H. MIELSCH'S monograph is rather the exception: one quarter of his *Römische Wandmalerei* from 2001 deals with paintings from the 2nd century onwards. In earlier studies he already had discussed later material, which explains this choice³. The Italian publication by I. BALDASSARRE, *Pittura Romana* from 2002 is to a certain extent comparable with H. MIELSCH'S. One quarter of the work,

¹ Barbet 1985 (re-issued in 2009); Croisille 2005, 103–125. We are grateful to A. O. KOLOSKI-OSTROW for her critical reading and correction of the text. She and A. SANTUCCI gave some valuable additional information.

² Ling 1991, 175–197.

³ Mielsch 1981; Mielsch 2001, 94–138.

106 pages, concentrates on post-Pompeian painting, of which half of the examples are from Rome and Ostia⁴. Both works demonstrate the lack of absolute dates for many of these later paintings.

In contrast, some older works treat the material from Rome and its surroundings, but these studies are partially of low quality, like V. DORIGO's *Pittura tardoromana* or its translation *Late Roman Painting*, and the articles of C. C. VAN ESSEN, on the paintings from Ostia⁵. An exception is M. BORDA's *La Pittura Romana*⁶. This author actually tried to give a complete overview of Roman painting. He clearly put an emphasis on the Italian peninsula as a whole and collected material from Hellenistic to late Roman times. An absolute chronology for late Roman painting, however, is almost entirely absent.

Due to the relative scarcity of the material and the lack of well dated contexts, the development of wall paintings in the centre of the empire remains elusive. Luckily, recent publications on wall paintings from Rome and Ostia are helpful in this respect and a reliable corpus is growing. And this is especially true for wall paintings recently found in well dated contexts⁷.

The End of the Fourth Style

On earlier occasions, we both argued that the end of the Fourth Style dates to the reign of the Emperor Hadrian⁸. To be precise, we proposed its finale in the Thirties of the 2nd century AD. One of the arguments that should be taken into account is that until that decade new impulses can still be traced in mural painting. This is especially true for the way large landscapes are depicted: we can see an ongoing development from the Pompeian landscapes bordered by a band as if they are seen through windows, to totally free landscapes without any cornice at all and freely 'moving' on the surface. The same is true for seascapes: here we can compare those in the *frigidarium* of the Suburban Baths in Pompeii with the ones in the Baths of the Seven Sages in Ostia or with examples from Rome itself, found in the neighbourhood called Pietrapapa, in the south of the city, not far from the Basilica of San Paolo fuori le Mura⁹. The Pompeian examples are framed by cornices, while the murals from Rome lack such borders and fill the whole wall and even the ceiling of a room. In what follows we concentrate on the Pietrapapa paintings as the starting point for our considerations.

Fish in the Bath of Pietrapapa

The Pietrapapa bath complex was excavated in 1938 in an area where new embankments for the Tiber were to be constructed¹⁰. The archaeological remains were unfortunately destroyed after the explorations and cannot be studied any longer. Thanks to brick stamps of 123 AD, the structure can be dated to that year or slightly later during the reign of Hadrian. Most paintings found in the complex belong to that phase. In 1939 the paintings and mosaics were stripped and brought to the Museo Nazionale Romano¹¹. Part of the material was lost during removal, transportation, and even afterwards. The surviving fragments of painting are now partly exposed and partly stored in the Palazzo Massimo in Rome¹².

The largest group of paintings originally covered walls and barrel vaults of two different rooms in a continuous composition, showing seascapes with fish and boats (Abb. 1–2)¹³. The representations of all pieces

⁴ Baldassarre *et al.* 2002, 277–383.

⁵ Dorigo 1966; Dorigo 1971; Van Essen 1956–1958. We do not discuss pre-war studies.

⁶ Borda 1958, 91–142.

⁷ Falzone 2004; Oome 2007 (Ostia); Mols – Moormann 2010 (Rome).

⁸ Moormann 1998, 26; Mols 2007.

⁹ Pompeii, Suburban Bath: Jacobelli 1995, 160–163 fig. 6–8, pl. 3.1; Ostia: Mols 2007; Rome, Pietrapapa, see below.

¹⁰ Iacopi 1938–1939; Iacopi 1940; Iacopi 1943.

¹¹ Rossetti – Tella 1991 present a catalogue of 21 fragments of painting and one of the mosaics known in the museum.

¹² We thank Dr. R. PARIS, director of the museum, for the permission to study these decorations. We have had the opportunity to analyse other material as well (see Mols – Moormann 2008 and our contributions in Bragantini 2010, 347–352 on the so-called Dea Barberini, and 197–202 on Castel di Guido respectively).

¹³ From rooms C, D and E, Iacopi 1938–1939, pl. 162. Brief discussions in Rossetti – Tella 1991; Rossetti – Tella 1993; Rossetti – Tella 1998, 283–286; Baldassarre *et al.* 2002, 181 f. (Third Style dadoes, with peacocks from room T); Baldassarre *et al.* 2002, 286 f. (boat and fight of fish).

are based on different prototypes. The six boats are of types that were only in use for traveling on rivers. Since they show Egyptian or less specific, rather Nilotic elements in their decoration and have inscriptions in Greek, we may assume Egypt as the source of inspiration for the boats. The excavator G. JACOPI even suggested an Egyptian, or, more precisely, Alexandrian origin for the entirety of these compositions¹⁴. As we have seen, this might be true for the boats¹⁵, but does not specifically hold for the fish (Abb. 3).

The boats do not serve for fishing and are moved by young nude boys. They show a rather vivid multicoloured decoration that looks like the decoration of modern ‘folkloristic’ carts like those in Sicily. We do not agree with the idea suggested by C. ROSSETTI and F. TELLA that the vessels, thanks to this fantastic decoration, were a type of river ships used for feasting (‘*navicelli fluviali di gala*’)¹⁶.

In our contribution, we discuss this supposed Alexandrian origin of the motifs, variations, and make a suggestion as to the exemplary function of the Pietrapapa paintings themselves from late Hadrianic times onward.

Battle between Sea Creatures

The supposed Hellenistic, possibly Alexandrian origin can be ascertained for two compositions, both showing struggles between a moray, an octopus and a crayfish (Abb. 4). In the way the three creatures are depicted, the two combat scenes from Pietrapapa show direct parallels to fish mosaics of which we possess various copies. These fish mosaics were especially popular as *emblemata* in Roman dining rooms, for example in House VIII 2, 16 and in the Casa del Fauno in Pompeii, amply studied by P. MEYBOOM. He has made a reconstruction of the prototype and suggested an origin of this prototype in Alexandrian painting¹⁷. There is, however, an important difference between the Pietrapapa paintings and the mosaics: the mosaics never display the three animals combating each other simultaneously in one composition. In the mosaics that show all three animals, the moray does not interfere in the fight. This is also the case with the fish painted in the *frigidarium* of the Forum Baths in Herculaneum (Abb. 5)¹⁸. Furthermore, the scenes differ in that they are much less lively than the Pietrapapa examples¹⁹. This conclusion leads us to different prototypes for the mosaics and the Herculaneum painting on the one side and for the Pietrapapa examples on the other.

For both groups, we may assume that these prototypes were Hellenistic. This is supported by two parallels for the Pietrapapa combat scenes in Greek literature, namely in *Aelianus, De Natura Animalium* 1.32 and *Oppianus, Halieutica* 253–349. Both works are from the late 2nd or beginning of the 3rd century AD, but rely on older works – now lost – that were probably late Classical or Hellenistic in date²⁰. We can recall for instance descriptions as in Aristotle’s *Historia Animalium*²¹. Not long before the production of the painting,

¹⁴ Iacopi 1940, 101 mentions Plin. *HN* 35, 101 about the painted decorations of boats by the famous artist *Protogenes*.

¹⁵ Iacopi 1938–1939, fig. 3: ship named ΛΑΚΕΝΑ, which means Lacedaemonian (or Spartan) woman or ship. Another vessel bears the name ΝΙΚΗ (Victory). Also Iacopi 1940, 100 f. pl. 2.

¹⁶ Rossetti – Tella 1993, 10. In the same vein Iacopi 1940, 10; Borda 1958, 279 f.

¹⁷ Meyboom 1977, 66, fig. 16a. He mentions the Pietrapapa paintings, but suggests a fight between an octopus and a dolphin (75 and note 313).

¹⁸ Maiuri 1958, 97–99, fig. 74–75.

¹⁹ Meyboom 1977, 65.

²⁰ Ael. 1, 32: “Enmity and inborn hate are a truly terrible and cruel disease when once they have sunk deep into the heart even of brute beasts, and nothing can purge them away. For indeed, the Moray loathes the Octopus, and the Octopus is the enemy of the Crayfish, and to the Moray the Crayfish is the most hostile. [etc.]” Loeb Translation A. F. SCHOLFIELD (Cambridge Mass. 1958, 51).

²¹ *Historia Animalium* 8, 2, 590b: “Crustaceans feed in like manner. They are omnivorous; that is to say, they live on stones, slime, sea-weed, and excrement – as for instance the rock-crab – and are also carnivorous. The crawfish or spiny-lobster can get the better of fishes even of the larger species, though in some of them it occasionally finds more than its match. Thus, this animal is so overmastered and cowed by the octopus that it dies of terror if it becomes aware of an octopus in the same net with itself. The crawfish can master the conger-eel, for owing to the rough spines of the crawfish the eel cannot slip away and elude its hold. The conger-eel, however, devours the octopus, for owing to the slipperiness of its antagonist the octopus can make nothing of it. The crawfish feeds on little fish, capturing them beside its hole or dwelling place; for, by the way, it is found out at sea on rough and stony bottoms, and in such places it makes its den. Whatever it catches, it puts into its mouth with its pincer-like claws, like the common crab. Its nature is to walk straight forward when it has nothing to fear, with its feelers hanging sideways; if it be frightened, it makes its escape backwards, darting off to a great distance. These animals fight one another

Pliny the Elder reiterated the enmity of the three sea creatures²². All these authors stress the enmity of these three species of animals which causes eternal fighting.

At the same time, our paintings could very well derive from zoological illustrations in pattern books or on papyri, like those on the 1st century AD *Artemidorus Papyrus*²³.

Fish in the Sea or on the Market?

The two combat scenes are in sharp contrast with the fish depicted in the other paintings from the Pietrapapa Bath complex. In the first place, the latter show a much lower degree of liveliness. We furthermore encounter boats with boatswains, Erotes on dolphins and, on one occasion, the depiction of a Nereid (Abb. 6)²⁴. There is no indication of a Nilotic landscape, neither rocks nor birds as in the mosaic *emblemata*²⁵. The background consists only of water.

The fish are depicted not only on the walls but also on the ceilings of the rooms, which makes the decorations even more unrealistic in their total appearance. In the Pietrapapa Bath it was probably the intention of the painters to give bathers the suggestion of being part of a marine world, as if they were immersed in it. Only nowadays, in modern zoos, a realistic version of these depictions can be experienced²⁶. This would indeed have been possible with only fish depicted, but the boats, seen in profile and not only showing their keels, spoil the underwater world effect. The same counts for the Erotes and the Nereid.

In sharp contrast to the exactness of the rendering of each animal, we note the striking lack of correspondence between the proportions of the different animals in the paintings which seems to point at different origins of the motifs.

The fish and shellfish that surround both boats and the goddess are depicted in rather random compositions that vary between the different rooms of the complex. All boats, human figures, and animals are painted in a very realistic way within a sketchily painted blue sea. The fish seem to combine elements taken from different examples that have been put together in constantly new combinations. In a thorough study of the fish, C. ROSSETTI and F. TELLA were able to distinguish twenty three species in the animals depicted²⁷.

Although painted realistically, the fish differ very much from those depicted on the mosaic *emblemata* (Abb. 7–8). In their realism, the fish look much more of Roman origin than their Hellenistic counterparts. They also do not derive from fixed groups as in the case of the *emblemata* but are painted individually in compositions that are never the same. This conveys the impression that these compositions of individual, almost scientifically precise fish do not have the above-mentioned Hellenistic origin, since the same phenomenon can be detected in early 2nd century contemporary imperial art, for instance in the reliefs on Trajan's column in Rome, where proportions do not correspond, although individual elements are depicted in a realistic way. Are we actually looking at a true trend initiated at the beginning of the 2nd century AD?

There is, however, another striking element in the fish depicted which possibly betrays their Roman origin: we are looking at dead animals rather than at living creatures! We see their flanks, with a shadow line under the belly, which is odd for animals swimming in their natural environment. We therefore suggest that the painters found their models for fish and shellfish on one of the nearby Roman fish markets, and mixed

with their claws, just as rams fight with their horns, raising them and striking their opponents; they are often also seen crowded together in herds. So much for the mode of life of the crustacean." (Translation, D'ARCY WENWORTH THOMPSON see: <http://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/a/aristotle/history/contents.html>).

²² *HN* 9, 185.

²³ Now in Turin, Fondazione di San Paolo, but under the custody of the Egyptian Museum. There are fights between mammals, snakes and birds, but not between sea creatures on the verso of the scroll. See for all aspects of the papyrus Gallazzi *et al.* 2008; on the animals Kinzelbach 2009. We consider the papyrus and the illustrations as authentic and not as a forgery as put forward by L. CANFORA in numerous discussions.

²⁴ From the west wall of vestibule C. Iacopi 1943, 10 fig. 9; Rossetti – Tella 1991, 213–232 no. 19 fig. 19.

²⁵ Meyboom 1977, fig. 1. 15.

²⁶ Think for example of aquariums in the zoos of Arnhem, The Netherlands, and Atlanta, Georgia (Abb. 9), where the visitor walks through a corridor that runs through the fish basins.

²⁷ Rossetti – Tella 1993. See their list already in Rossetti – Tella 1991, 234 f.

these with motifs of Hellenistic origin in the decoration of the boats, the Erotes on dolphins and the Nereid. The resulting compositions were eclectic, and therefore very Roman in character.

A contemporary and probably similar composition with fish was painted in the Baths of the Seven Sages in Ostia, also datable by means of brick stamps to the reign of Hadrian, in or slightly after 126 AD²⁸. A few decades later this painting was struck with pick axes – what made it almost illegible – and covered by a totally different decoration in what is called the linear style, a style emerging in the Eighties of the 2nd century AD. It therefore cannot have been the model for the very famous depiction of *Venus Anadyomene* in room 26 (Abb. 10) and her less well known counterpart, *Venus Marina* in the same room, wall paintings that have to be dated to 209 or slightly later²⁹. Very similar to these are the paintings in the *frigidarium* of the Terme del Faro in Ostia³⁰. Both rooms were probably of the same date and painted by the same craftsmen. In both cases, the fish are combined with mythological figures like the Nereid and the Erotes in the Pietrapapa paintings. The difference in date of the paintings from Ostia with those from Pietrapapa on the one hand and the likeness with these on the other, are indications that we can probably speak of a trend in interior decoration in the centre of the empire that lasted for a very long time. Further away from the centre, but still on the Italian peninsula, are paintings showing fish found in a *nymphaeum* in Cupra Marittima (Marche)³¹. Examples from Roman provinces, however, indicate that this trend was more than a local phenomenon. We can recall, for example, the paintings from a bath complex in Langon, near Bordeaux in France, also datable in the early 3rd century AD that show similarities to the Ostian examples³². From about the same date are paintings from the Casa del Mitreo in Mérida, Spain³³, and from a house found in Mülheim-Kärlich in Germany³⁴, both preserved only in fragments. And there are many more examples, as far as we know from Greece and the western part of the Empire, such as Corinth and Hölstein³⁵.

Apart from paintings we also encounter examples in mosaics, sometimes slightly earlier than the painted ones, and geographically more dispersed, like the mosaic found in a bath complex at Isthmia in Greece, dating to 150–170 AD or the mosaic with *Peleus* and *Thetis* surrounded by fish from Zeugma on the Euphrates in Turkey from the late 2nd century (Abb. 11). Rather late examples, from the 4th century, come from villas at Carranque in Spain, and Nabeul in Tunisia³⁶.

Conclusion

The trend shown here has its origins in the city of Rome in the Thirties of the 2nd century AD. It demonstrates the importance of the study of wall paintings from the centre of the Roman Empire in order to increase the amount of well-studied and dated examples. These can shed more light on local and more widespread developments in Roman painting and other forms of decorative arts. We hope to have shown that the Pietrapapa paintings are the first examples of a typically Roman genre that became popular in the course of the 2nd century AD and remained en vogue for a long period. It combines elements of Hellenistic provenance, like boats and mythological figures or gods, with very realistically painted, but dead fish. Starting as a local phenomenon, the motif soon became widespread, as can be illustrated with paintings in the Western Provinces and mosaics even in very distant parts of the Roman Empire.

²⁸ Mols 1999, 302–305 fig. 61. 63–64 (room 4).

²⁹ Mols 1999, 278–281 fig. 35. 45 (room 26).

³⁰ Mols 2002, 170 fig. 23.

³¹ Percossi Serenelli 1993.

³² Barbet 2008, 311–313 fig. 477–478.

³³ Abad Casal 1982, 64–67 cat. 12.16; 371, 372–375 (on fish).

³⁴ Gogräfe 1997.

³⁵ Corinth: fragments from the chambers III and IV of the Peirene Well, applied under *Herodes Atticus*. See Duell, in: Hill 1964, 114 f., who coins the fish as “fairly representative of the fish market of Roman Corinth.” Hölstein: see D. HECKENBENNER, M. MONDY and M. THOREL in this volume.

³⁶ Isthmia: Gregory 1995, 287–289 fig. 5 pl. 56–57; Zeugma: Önal 2002, 35; Carranque: Fernández-Galiano 1994, 207 fig. 16; Nabeul: Darmon 1980, 84–90 pl. 42–45. 80–81.

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Abbildungen

- Abb. 1: Rome, Palazzo Massimo, from loc. Pietrapapa, baths, room D, fish (photo authors)
Abb. 2: Rome, Palazzo Massimo, from loc. Pietrapapa, baths, room D, seascape (photo authors)
Abb. 3: Rome, Palazzo Massimo, from loc. Pietrapapa, baths, room E, seascape (photo authors)
Abb. 4: Rome, Palazzo Massimo, from loc. Pietrapapa, baths, room unknown, battle between moray, octopus and crayfish (photo authors)
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Abb. 8: Rome, Palazzo Massimo, from loc. Pietrapapa, baths, room D, fish (photo authors)
Abb. 9: Atlanta, Georgia, Aquarium (photo zoo, from http://www.google.nl/imgres?imgurl=http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/thumb/e/e1/Georgia_Aquarium_-_Ocean_Voyager_Tunnel_Jan_2006.jpg/400px-Georgia_Aquarium_-_Ocean_Voyager_Tunnel_Jan_2006.jpg&imgrefurl=http://nl.wikibooks.org/wiki/Aquaristiek/Openbare_aquaria&usq=__8AWfC6_4URFICb_gAEhUP8OK2HM=&h=247&w=400&sz=52&hl=nl&start=8&zoom=1&um=1&itbs=1&tbnid=bdvg5pgXDmIaSM:&tbnh=77&tbnw=124&prev=/images%3Fq%3Dburgers%2Bzoo%2Bocean%26um%3D1%26hl%3Dnl%26sa%3DN%26rls%3Dcom.microsoft:en-US%26tbs%3Disch:1&ei=96aITf_McjqOeOtibgN as seen on March 22, 2011)
Abb. 10: Ostia, Baths of the Seven Sages, room 26, seascape with *Venus Anadyomene* (photo authors)
Abb. 11: Archaeology Museum Gaziantep, mosaic with *Peleus* and *Thetis* from Zeugma (photo authors)

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