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Mural paintings in the Sacello del Silvano

§ 1 Introduction

Some ten years ago H. Mielsch wrote in a striking article on wall paintings of the third century AD: 'Ansatzpunkte für eine genauere Datierung einzelner Wände oder Bilder innerhalb des Severischen sind selten'.¹ In this respect the murals in the *sacellum* of the Caseggiato dei Molini at Ostia are of particular importance, as, thanks to the graffiti, they can partly be dated back to 214-215 AD. An extra clue is given by the masonry techniques recently analyzed by T.L. Heres.² For these reasons the *sacellum* is unique within the bulk of third-century mural decorations known so far, since these are often indeed extremely difficult to date and subject to dating attempts which are of uncertain outcome.³ There are furthermore some iconographic particularities, apart from the dating mentioned above, which make the paintings in the *sacellum* different.

A short technical, stylistic and iconographic analysis of the paintings will follow. They show no high standard of quality, neither technically - considering the painting technique and the coarse plaster substance - nor artistically, since the rendering of the figural motifs, which are scarce anyway, is poor.

§ 2 Technical, stylistic and iconographic analysis

2A Phase 2

The oldest decorations undoubtedly belong to the period of the Severi. At this time the wall is no longer interpreted as a determined area to be decorated as a whole, but as a random surface. In other words: when, during the two previous centuries, architectonic prospects and hypotactical systems derived from these were in use, and it remained possible to discern clear divisions of the walls into at least three horizontal areas and a number of vertical ones with a central part, now, in the third century, the fields or

¹ Mielsch 1981, 229. Cf. Fuchs 1987 and Belot 1989 on this period and its problems.

² Heres 1988, 49-53 (room 25).

³ Mielsch 1981, 219-222, 227-231.

rectangles seem ranged in an arbitrary order. The longer the wall the larger the number of panels. Thus it is the dimensions which are more important than composition or subdivision.⁴ Nevertheless we know exceptions to that rule - one need only read the concise, precise remarks made by Mielsch in the essay quoted. The combination of the green-red framework that is encountered in the *sacellum* is usually considered typically Severan and must, like the dominant use of red-framed fields, originate from previous decorations.

The paintings in the shrine have been executed rapidly, without care for details. Bands and lines are coarse, the background remains white. There are only few figurative elements, on the west wall: a Medusa head, a bird, and a dolphin, all dotted down sketchily with broad strokes and similarly without care for precision. A certain impressionism seems created since the impression, or rather the recognizability of these motifs dominates.

The fields are seamed by a broad red band which is framed by thin lines. Within these fields a rectangle is designed by means of similar red lines: a motif which is only remotely reminiscent of the panels of the orthostates which were imitated realistically during the Second Style period and evolved into simple rectangles later on. The combination of a broad band and thin parallel lines also occurs in room IV of the building below the church of S. Maria Maggiore in Rome, known thanks to the excellent publication by F. Magi, and dated by him between 332 and 394. Even for the dolphin in Ostia a parallel is found: a fish which twines around a trident. The easy stroke-treatment is notable as well. Magi points at the strong contrast between light and dark parts which seems to suggest the effect of relief.⁵ Mielsch proposed a different dating in his review of this monograph and concluded that the phase of decorating room IV must be established at the beginning of the third century. The spectacular calendar painting, dated around 350 by Magi, might possibly have been painted in the same period.⁶

⁴ According to Van Essen phase 1-2 in the bakery is to be dated to c. 210, like decorations in the Terme dei Sette Sapienti (Van Essen 1956-1958, 165-168 (time of the Severi): 167). On the composition of the walls Joyce 1981, 22-46 ('modular system'), specifically 42, fig. 35 ('modular system, linear'): to be confronted with decorations in the rooms underneath S. Giovanni in Laterano, p. 66 note 254 (*exemplum* of Severan linear systems, 'a nearly overwhelming ascendancy in Italy in the third century, all but driving out the others'); Mielsch 1976, 501-502; Mielsch 1981, 227-231; Fuchs 1987; Belot 1989. M. Fuchs prepares an all-over study on Severan wall paintings found at Aventicum (Avenches, Switzerland).

⁵ Cf. Moormann 1988, 37-38.

⁶ Magi 1972, 14, fig. 12, tav. XX-XXI (vano IV). The dolphin on the north wall of the *exedra*: 49-51, tav. XXI 2, XXVIII 3. Cf. Mielsch 1976, 501-502 as to dating. Stern 1981, 453-454 maintains the dating by Magi.

The style of painting in which we observe swift brushwork, is pointedly characterized by M. de Vos 'a macchia' in her essay on two murals found near a building adjacent to the church of S. Crisogono in Rome. These paintings are said to have been executed at the end of the second (De Vos) or the beginning of the third century (Fuchs: after the erection of the Arch of Septimius Severus on the Roman Forum). The floating figures which adorn the panels do not appear in the bakery.⁷

One figure, the depiction of Silvanus on the south part of the west wall, deserves a few iconographic remarks. This deity gained tremendous popularity during the Roman Empire. In Ostia alone several dedications and representations are known. The figure in the *sacellum* is to be compared in the first place with the mosaic from a niche in a room adjoining a *mithraeum* in the so-called 'Imperial Palace' (Regio III) (now stored in the Vatican museums, originally Lateran collection), which must be dated back to the first half of the third century, i.e. to the same period as the *sacellum* painting.⁸ Silvanus' pose is identical in both monuments: his weight is on his right leg and he is clad in a short tunic. The *sacellum* painting differs insofar as the god in our case seems to be wearing a longer, not girdled fringed cloak and the dog is sitting aside a little. The plants and the pillar with fruit suggest elements of a sacral-idyllic landscape. The short poles at either side of Silvanus' head seem to be alien to the representation.⁹

The execution of the figure is similar to that of the human figures in phase 3-4 to be dealt with later. The brushwork is easy, even negligent. The use of colours is scarce. The body of Silvanus is somewhat elongated and shows sharp contours - characteristic elements, according to Mielsch, for a Severan dating.¹⁰ We may have to assume that a number of layers were applied one after the other in a simple and rapid technique; it may even be that a mere stratum of diluted whitewash was occasionally applied onto the previous layer or that the paint was fixed on immediately without any undercoat.¹¹

⁷ De Vos 1972, 165-170; Mielsch 1981, 212, Taf. XXV 37; Fuchs 1987, 70 fig. 2.

⁸ Becatti 1961, 167-168, tav. CCXI, no. 310 (first half of third century AD); Helbig 1963, no. 1145 (dating to third century AD); Saletti 1966, with fig. 384 ('tardo-antica'); Sear 1977, 121-122, pl. 52, no. 125 (quotes Becatti and an unpublished opinion of J.M.C. Toynbee who states a dating to the early fourth century). Bakker cat. A, appendix.

⁹ On Silvanus Jensen 1962. On the poles cf. Bakker, ch. 9, § 4C.

¹⁰ Mielsch 1981, 227-231.

¹¹ Mielsch 1981, 221 uses 'Kalchmilch'.

2B Phase 3-4

The murals of this phase cannot be dated with precision from the stylistic point of view. They must still be Severan and only little later than those of phase 2, in view of the graffiti.¹² The depictions of Alexander the Great and Augustus do not - to our knowledge - have any pendants in the art of painting preserved so far. Painted Imperial portraits are rare anyway as a consequence of the transitoriness of the medium, whereas a large number of them must certainly have decorated public buildings and places. I shall now discuss the few examples known to us.

From Egypt stems a wooden circular *pinax* representing Septimius Severus and his family (now Antikensammlung in Berlin). Geta has been obliterated in a later phase due to his *damnatio memoriae*, obviously on the instigation of Caracalla, who is still present on the *pinax*. The artist has painted his figures with vivid, sometimes sharply contrasting colours. He seems to have applied dots instead of strokes - as if he were a forerunner of the impressionists of the nineteenth century.¹³

Fragments of paintings were rescued from the calottes of the apses at both sides of the central hall in the temple of Hercules at Sabratha. The southern apsis was adorned with a tondo depicting Marcus Aurelius inside a Zodiac. The Emperor is being carried into heaven by Jupiter's eagle and is therefore represented as deified. According to F. Ghedini this representation fits into the propagandistic iconographic programme of Commodus which has been visualized in various spots in Sabratha. For that reason Ghedini dates the painting between 185 and 190. Stylistically it corresponds with the tendency started during the so-called 'Antoninische Stilwandel'.¹⁴ Ghedini characterized it as a 'pittura antinaturalistica', showing an impressionistic atmosphere. The colourful palette is comparable to that of the Severi panel in Berlin, which, of course, is some years younger.¹⁵

Diocletian ordered a room for the Imperial cult to be built in the temple of Ammon at Luxor about 290. The extremely badly preserved decorations in the main niche represent him and the other Tetrarchs surrounded by

¹² According to Van Essen phase 3-4 or phase 5 belongs to the time of the Gordiani: 'Le pitture che essa (i.e. layer 3-4 or 5) reca, sono comunque di uno stile libero con linee rosso-verdi; per quanto vi siano ricordi dello stile classicheggiante di Severo Alessandro, tutto è divenuto più pesante e sciolto. Le figure (Isis, Arpocrate ecc.) sono trasparenti, lo sfondo è visibile attraverso la vernice' (Van Essen 1956-1958, 172-174). Phase 3-4 or phase 5 is dated by Wirth to the end of the third or the fourth century (Wirth 1934, 139-141).

¹³ Inv. no. 31329. *Römisches im Antikemuseum* 1979, 50-53; Caputo - Ghedini 1984, 100-105 with bibliography; Hannestad 1988, 259-260, fig. 158 (in colour).

¹⁴ Caputo - Ghedini 1984, 36-99.

¹⁵ Caputo - Ghedini 1984, 100-114.

their attributes. The colours are rich, the style can already be labelled hieratic and forebodes the early-Christian frontal and linear method of representation.¹⁶

From the period of Constantine we possess a highly complicated example of painted portraits of members of the Imperial family: the coffer ceiling of the Imperial *basilica* in Treves. This monument is by no means relevant for the study of the Ostian *sacellum*.¹⁷

We may conclude that all these paintings have been executed on behalf of the Emperor himself, his successor, or one of his high dignitaries. They were all (or probably all: we do not know the exact provenance of the wooden *pinax*) found in official or cult areas of a more or less public character. To return to the *sacellum* decoration, we must establish that there are no real parallels for the Ostian paintings, which may have been executed by order of local bakers.¹⁸

A few remarks as far as the iconography is concerned will follow.

Augustus

The excavator of the Caseggiato dei Molini, G. Calza, believed to recognize the shape of the Augustus of Prima Porta in the left male figure in the row of figures on the south part of the east wall.¹⁹ This figure indeed shows a similar stance: the ponderation is equal, the left foot is set aside and backwards a little, the lance rests on the left upper arm and the right hand is raised. Considering the fact that the figure in the *sacellum* is nude we cannot readily accept the Prima Porta parallel. Nevertheless we know, thanks to the profound study by H.G. Niemeyer, that only during the first century AD Emperors were represented nude apart from a drapery around the hips and, sometimes, over the shoulder ('Hüftmantel').²⁰ Such

¹⁶ Deckers 1979; Moormann 1988, 118 cat. 043.

¹⁷ Weber 1984 with bibliography; Brandenburg 1985; Simon 1986 (sceptical reaction: Pohlsander 1987, 501-502). Brandenburg rejects the hypothesis that the busts are portraits, because of their position in a ceiling decoration, the *nimbus*, the attributes and the context, and interprets them as personifications of happy life, supported by the presence of the Erotes and the philosophers (or better: symbols of philosophy).

An attempt to the interpretation of a Hercules as Nero in the Aedes Augustalium in Herculaneum (Moormann 1983) seems incorrect: if the figure indeed is an Emperor he must be Vespasian (hair; face; stance), which observation is relevant as to the dating of the paintings. On painted portraits furthermore De Kind (forthcoming); Moormann in Peters (forthcoming).

¹⁸ Cf. Bakker, ch. 9, § 4F.

¹⁹ Calza 1915, 247, fig. 6.

²⁰ Niemeyer 1968, 55-57. Probably this type represents the so-called *statua paenula induta* (Pliny the Elder, *Naturalis Historia* 34, 18-20): Niemeyer 1968, 38 and Meyboom 1988, 302 expressed doubt whether such statues are known. The word *paenula* is translated in different ways: 'a close-fitting, hooded cloak, made of weatherproof material' (OLD), 'Umhang' (R. König in *Tusculum* edition Pliny, Darmstadt 1989), 'manteau' (H. Le Bonniec in *Budé* edition Pliny, Paris 1953),

statues were not intended to present the Emperor in a specific function or authority like cuirassed or togaed statues did, but in a heroized form, especially after death.²¹ The Emperor is always shown in the same stance and barefooted. Niemeyer does not exclude a derivation from the Doryphoros of Polykleitos (any more than he claims only that statue to be the prototype). C. Maderna was able to refine the research of Niemeyer with respect to a number of prototypes. The figure, nude apart from a mantle, should rather be associated with another type from the third or second century BC. The latter goes back to Polykleitos's models from the middle of the fifth century, which enjoyed great favour in the first century AD - especially according to the coin images -, but were later seldom applied compared to other types.²²

In trying to give a name to our figure we must, first, conclude that it indeed represents an Emperor. Then the chronological restriction of the use of this type will lead us towards the first century AD, especially the Julio-Claudian dynasty.²³ Obviously the painter may have used his own variations on the motif known to him from statue galleries, but considering the striking restriction of time as mentioned above this model was out of fashion around AD 200. Therefore it seems justified to postulate a conscious choice made in view of a specific Emperor (Augustus according to Bakker), even if the use of a cartoon specimen-book cannot be cancelled totally; it still does not alter the fact of the old-fashioned aspect and the 'Bedingtheit des Themas'.²⁴

Alexander the Great

Calza interpreted the second figure as Alexander the Great.²⁵ It can without doubt be associated with miniature bronze replicas of the famous 'Alexander with the lance' by Lysippos. This lance is an iconographic borrowing from representations of Alexander's great Homeric model, Achilles. Within the group of preserved statuettes it is the Nelidow piece

'cloak' (H. Rackham, Loeb edition Pliny, London/Cambridge Mass. 1952).

²¹ Niemeyer 1968, 54-59; 101-104, Taf. 23-26, nos. 71-81; 104, Taf. 27, no. 72 (Augustus as Jupiter with 'Hüftmantel'). A statue from the *nymphaeum* of Baiae can be added: Andreae 1988, 53, fig. 113-115. Nearly all examples depict Augustus, Tiberius and Claudius.

²² Maderna 1988, 18-24, Taf. 2-4.

²³ Cf. Maderna 1988, 19 on the chronological aspects of the type.

²⁴ Cf. Maderna 1988, 32-52 with rich points of discussion and references. Bakker, ch. 9, § 4C.

²⁵ The representation can be compared to the lower part of a figure on a painting in the Ostian museum, coming from Caseggiato IV,II,5 (Bakker, cat. A, nr. 66).

(now Fogg Art Museum, Cambridge Mass.) which best fits the descriptions from antiquity and the stylistic characteristics of Lysippos' statue: the right arm rests on the hip, the left one is stretched up high, whereas the left leg is set aside a little. The eyes are directed towards the lance.²⁶ Our figure only differs in the bent left arm. Nothing can be said about the glance. The scarcely shaded incarnation of the man does not claim exactness with respect to the imitation of the original statue. We can only establish that the Alexander with the lance has been used as a prototype, on account of its popularity.

We possess three parallels in painting, which have only recently become known: two of them for the stance, one probably deriving directly from the sculptural model. The decorations on the facades of tombs at Lefkadia (end of the third century BC) show warriors in Greek cuirass and tunic, standing in a mirrored position with respect to the original, but with similar ponderation and position of the arms.²⁷ The most important example is a *pinax* - part of a Fourth Style wall decoration -, interpreted as Alexander and Roxane, in a house in the Insula Occidentalis at Pompeii; the figure of Alexander, however, is shown in mirror image.²⁸ The *nimbus* is an addition by the painter and belongs to the canonical symbols of apotheosis.²⁹ The well-known representation of a seated Zeus/Alexander in the Casa dei Vettii at Pompeii, dated to the last decades before the eruption of Mount Vesuvius, should also be mentioned, because it may go back to Apelles' Alexander.³⁰

Augustus and Alexander

The combination of the 'Augustus' and the 'Alexander' as such was analyzed by Maderna.³¹ She illustrates the relationship with the founder of Alexandria - a link made by Augustus - by means of literary and iconographic data. The new leader takes charge of the orphaned Alexander *imperium* and creates a new happy era. Especially the relationship of the Emperors to Egypt itself must be considered. In the case of the bakery the

²⁶ Hundsalz 1985, 107-118, Taf. 36 (with synopsis of other statuettes and bibliography). On a similar statue by Apelles *ibid.* 119-120. Moreno 1987b, 92-96 discusses a statuette in Parma which is significant because of the *anastole*. A good bibliography in Fittschen 1987, 402.

²⁷ Moreno 1987a, 192, fig. 214-215 with bibliography.

²⁸ Moreno 1987a, 161-162, fig. 154; Lagi de Caro, 1988.

²⁹ Collinet-Guérin 1963, with bibliography.

³⁰ Cf. Maderna 1988, 51, Taf. 5.5: the head corresponds to those of the seated Jupiter/*imperator* statues.

³¹ Maderna 1988, 49-50.

special interest of Caracalla, who imitated Alexander in a special way, must be regarded as an extra clue.³²

The Dioscures

The two Dioscures belong to the same phase of decoration. The horses show a similar use of the brush and are set up in similar tones. The shades near the hind legs are similar to those of Augustus. The importance of the Dioscures in Roman Imperial art is beyond doubt, since their famous intervention in the battle of Regulus Lake in 499 BC, and considering their function as guards of the cavalry and as patrons of seafaring and shipping trade. Augustus had his *princeps designatus*, Tiberius, devote a new, even more magnificent temple on the old site on the Forum Romanum in the year AD 6, a rebuilding that expressed the *religio* and *pietas* of the Emperor.³³

2C Phase 5

Here and there the figures have been renewed and sometimes altered. The repainting of the Augustus can no longer be verified; the figure may have remained unaltered. The Isis clearly became smaller or was put downwards. She received a *patera*: thus her identity probably changed into that of a Genius. The Harpocrates was repainted. The Fortuna was painted in a nearly completely new form; the right arm of the previous goddess was used again. Her hairdo seems associated with that of the late Severan period or the early period of the Soldier Emperors. Annona was painted anew. The Alexander figure was given other proportions; the mantle is wider, the legs are knobby and gnome-like.

The decoration appears still more coarse than the former ones. This coarseness hampers an exact dating and stylistic analysis. We can only observe a similar way of painting (brush strokes, paint, colours). The style of hairdressing of the Fortuna may be a clue to a more precise dating in the third century. However, the problems concerning the dating of female portraits in that period are enormous.³⁴ The hairdo in question seems

³² Cf. Bakker supra p. ch. 9, § 4C. Michel Fuchs read a first draught of my text and, in a letter from 12 November 1990, he expressed doubts on various topics, especially on the interpretation of "Alexandros" and "Augustus": the first one, in his opinion is "un Mars de belle figure", the second figure is Mercury holding a *marcupium* in his right and a *caduceus* in his left hand. The series of figures, therefore, should be interpreted as the seven days of the week. Fuchs will discuss this problem in his forthcoming study on the Avenches paintings.

³³ Zanker 1987, 110, 114; Sande - Zahle 1988, 213-224. Other statues of the Dioscures were erected on the steps of the temple of Jupiter Tonans (Martin 1988, 255).

³⁴ The difficult iconography was recently discussed by Wood (1986).

preferred in the first half of the third century; within these years - obviously some 30, starting from the Caracalla dating given for phase 3-4 -no precise generation or Emperor's reign can be given.

2D Phase 6

According to Wirth the bulk of the decorations was covered with a thin layer of stucco in order to redecorate the walls with new figural motifs. Van Essen did not express a view on this phase. T.L. Heres proposes a layer of preparation for a new decoration. Bakker does not exclude a cancelling of the old iconographic programme.³⁵ In a technical sense both propositions are viable. The reasons for redoing the room may vary. As far as the painting itself is considered no conclusion can be drawn. The date of the new plaster can neither be established technically nor stylistically. We only observe very broad and coarse brush strokes.³⁶

³⁵ Wirth 1934, 139; T.L. Heres in oral suggestion; Bakker, ch. 9, § 4C.

³⁶ I want to express my thanks to Mrs P. Sandford who was so kind to correct and improve my English text.

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