

Fragments of Wall Painting from Residential Buildings at the Site of Čair (*Viminacium*)

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Dragana GAVRILOVIĆ / Bebina MILOVANOVIĆ

Abstract: This paper focuses on the remains of wall paintings from residences of the area of antique *Viminacium* (capital of Roman province of Upper Moesia). The largest number of specimens comes from the residences researched during the re-excavations in 2007 at the site of Čair, while a smaller portion comes from the public bath (*thermae*) and amphitheater. Detailed analysis of the fragments of wall painting showed that these buildings were once meticulously maintained since the materials show traces of renovation. These fragments revealed an entirely new image of plaster composition, which differs significantly from that found in the funerary painting of *Viminacium*. Highly polished surfaces of certain specimens, as well as possible figurative representations, indicate luxurious buildings which were in use during the 2nd and 3rd century.

Key words: *Viminacium*, Čair, wall paintings, fresco technique, mortar, pecking.

INTRODUCTION

Viminacium, the capital of the Roman province of Upper Moesia, was erected by the confluence of the Mlava and Danube rivers (the village of Kostolac, Republic of Serbia). Owing to its favorable geographic position, this area has been inhabited ever since the prehistoric times (Bulatović et al. 2019, 26-56), throughout the antiquity (Mirković 1968; Mirković 1986; Зотовић / Јордовић 1990; Korać / Golubović 2009; Спасић-Ђурић 2015), and until the medieval period (Зотовић 1981, 95-116; Поповић 1987, 1-37; Ivanišević et al. 2006). A great advantage for the researchers of this multi-layered site lies in the absence of modern-day settlements in this area. On the other hand, the development of an industrial zone, the construction of a thermal power station and coal exploitation in a strip mine, accelerated development-led archaeological excavations at the site in the early 1980s. Due to these factors, *Viminacium* is now a well-researched site. The best researched areas are those that are directly threatened by the expansion of the strip mine, which encompasses the periphery of Roman *Viminacium*. These are, primarily, the necropolises around the city. Up to now ca. 14000 graves (southern, eastern and northern necropolises) have been excavated plus memorial family tombs, suburban and rural villas and buildings with economic facilities (Зотовић / Јордовић 1990; Korać / Golubović 2009; Korać et al. 2018, 62-63). The area of the city itself, which is not directly endangered by the advance of the surface mine and belongs to the protected zone of *Viminacium* Archaeological Park, is the least researched. In the past decade, the following buildings in the city zone were researched: the public city bath (Nikolić et al. 2017, 39-58), amphitheater (Bogdanović / Jevtović 2019, 109-116) and parts of the *castrum* – military fort (Nikolić et al. 2019, 125-134, fig. 1).

The first systematic research of the city area began around the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century. M. Valtrović conducted the first archaeological excavations as early as 1882

(Валтровић 1884, 3-14, Таб. V), which continued until 1902 and 1903. The excavations took place on multiple locations: in the *castrum* (the site of Mali Čair), the city (site of Veliki Čair), the southern necropolises and the left bank of the Mlava river (site of Mali grad) (Vassits 1905, 104-107; Васић 1904, 248-259). On that latter occasion, a part of the city centre was also researched, the site of Čair, which had buildings directly facing the street. A smelting furnace was found in one of the rooms next to the street. In the western part, a well with drainage canals was researched, and a staircase leading to the basement identified, as well as three rooms which had floor heating with brick hypocaust. The complex consisted of three construction phases dated from the end of the 2nd to the beginning of the 3rd century. Except for one workshop, since it is not mentioned what type of objects these were. The workshop could have been a part of the city with residential and workshop buildings abutting the street. While, if some of the rooms were residential, they would have been luxurious, judging by the hypocausts, marble revetment on the walls and wall paintings.

In a text by M. Vasić, the painted stucco on a polished surface belongs to the first phase of construction; he also mentions painted stucco on unpolished plaster from the second phase. The author also writes about the marble revetment that used to cover the walls (Vassits 1905, 104-107). It is possible that the author had mixed up the terms, referring to wall painting as stucco decoration (Валтровић 1906, 129, 132)¹.

The re-excavations at the site of Čair were carried out in 2007, after which the western part of the area was excavated and partly researched by M. Vasić around the beginning of the 20th century (**fig. 3a, b**). The condition of the site required clearing of vegetation and wood, as well as careful removal of tree stumps, which significantly slowed down the works and damaged the buildings to a certain degree. A grid with square fields was laid, as shown in old Vasić's map, with the dimensions of each square being 5x5 m. A total of twelve squares were researched (I-VI and XV-XX; **fig. 2**). The first set of squares encompassed the southeastern part of the previously excavated area with a smaller Roman well built of limestone rock, visible on the surface of the terrain. As the excavations progressed, the walls and floors discovered earlier quickly became visible.

The walls were made of greenschist cut rubble (the local stone from Ram – Roman *Lederata*) set in lime mortar or bricks. The transverse walls in some rooms were destroyed down to the foundations, due to the vegetation and precipitation, but partly also because they had been deconstructed by the local population. Parts of the floor, which used to be *in situ*, were preserved only in the form of impressions on the mortar floor base. The situation was identical in the rooms with hypocaust, in which only the impressions of pilae stacks for floor heating remained on the hydraulic mortar floor base. The building materials found at the site include the remains of roof (tegulae and imbrices) and floor bricks (butterfly-shaped and hexagonal).

Small, movable archaeological finds from the re-excavations are modest. Apart from some atypical ceramic and glass fragments, eight bronze coins (most of them poorly preserved from the 4th century),

¹ In M. Valtrović's essay about the wall painting of a tomb in Brestovik, the author mentions "a specifically designed adherent coating (*stucco*) – on the walls" which probably refers to the plaster of the wall painting. It is possible that the author mistook the plaster of wall painting for *stucco*.



Fig. 1. Aerial photo of *Viminacium* showing the city and the *castrum* (photograph from the documentation of the Institute of Archaeology, Belgrade)

two fragments of a thin bronze sheet (fragments of a pyxis or inkwell), a bone game token, three bone hairpins with spheric heads, iron loop, and an agate bead were found. It is important to remember that all these finds come from displaced layers which had previously undergone archaeological excavation, and thus cannot be used for accurate dating of the buildings.

When it comes to the decorative elements, archaeological finds do not reveal stucco decoration, only fragments of wall paintings. These fragments were found in squares XV, XVI, XVII and XVIII (**fig. 2**).

A DESCRIPTION OF THE CONTENT AND PLASTER OF THE FRAGMENTS OF WALL PAINTINGS

During the re-excavations at the site of Čair, more than 200 fragments of wall painting were found in the abovementioned squares. However, they cannot be assembled into larger units. This paper describes the fragments which yield the most information about the painted content.

Fig. 4a. This fragment has several colored sections. It can be noticed that first it was painted with ochre, then red paint. The red zone has traces of the ochre underpainting only in the part in which these two overlap. After that, it was painted green, with a thick coat of paint. There is a white vertical line on the left side and the green surface is decorated with two horizontal pinkish-white lines. There are three diagonal strokes on the upper line. The position of the fragments can be determined by the drop of green paint on the red surface (the

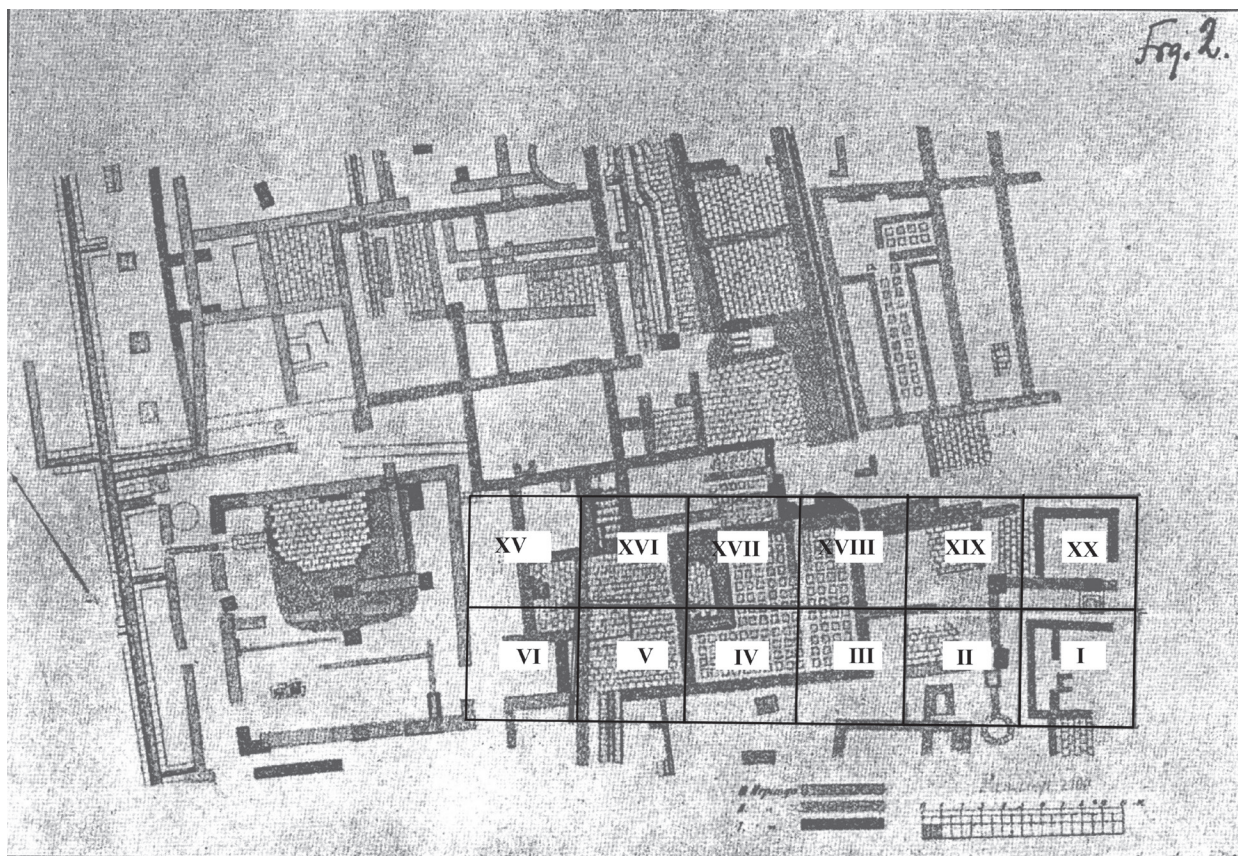


Fig. 2. Map of Čair sites with a marked square grid, researched in 2007. Fragments of wall painting were found in squares XV, XVI, XVII, XVIII (after Vassits 1905, 104)



Fig. 3. Re-excavations at the site of Čair from 2007 (photograph from documentation of the Institute of Archaeology, Belgrade)

upper left part of the fragment). The plaster was smoothed, but not polished.

Fig. 4b. The plaster surface has red underpaint, with green paint over it. On the border of these two colors two horizontal white lines merge into one. Horizontal traces of brush are visible on the plaster. The plaster of the intonaco is smoothed, but not polished.

Fig. 4c. The light red surface was decorated by sprinkling white paint, which represents an inept imitation of porphyry (Faedo 2000, 63). Imitation of marble revetment was the most common in the First

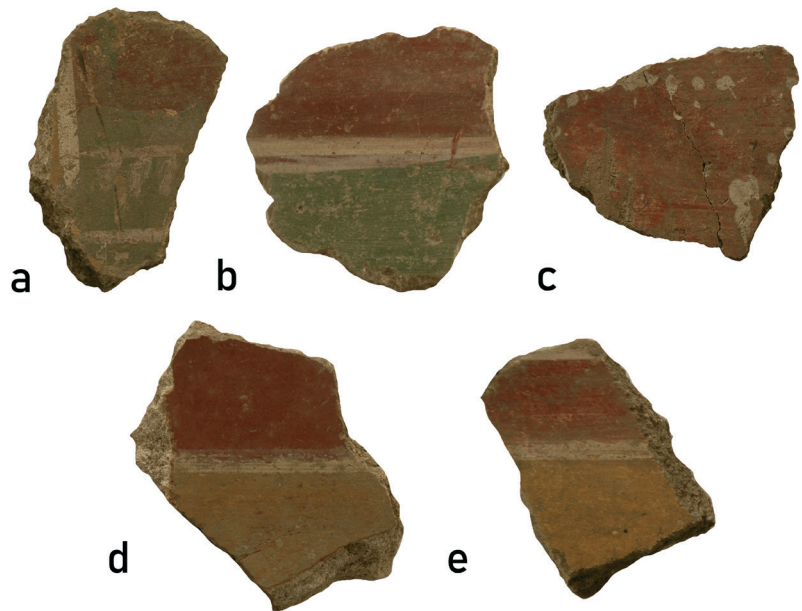


Fig. 4. Fragments of wall paintings, *Viminacium*, Čair (photos by the authors)

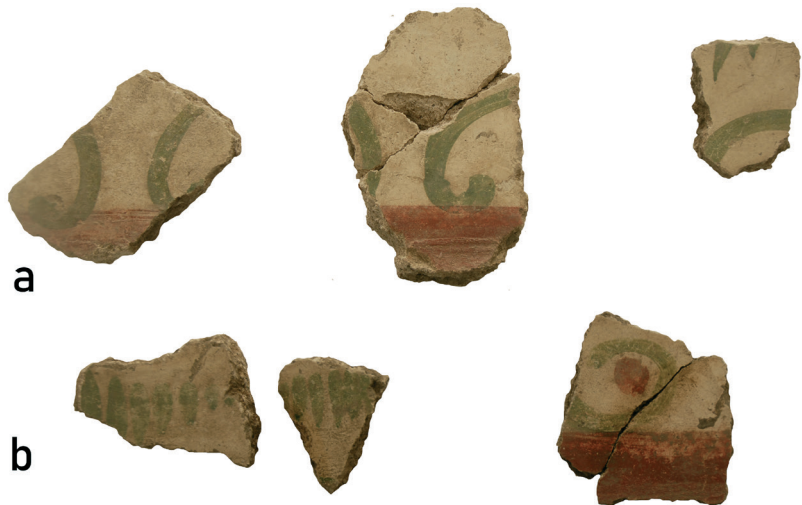


Fig. 5. Fragments of wall paintings, *Viminacium*, Čair (photos by the authors)

Pompeian style, where a variety of colors non-existent in natural stone were used. This type of decoration was not abandoned in the ensuing styles, nor in the painting of the Late Antiquity period, where it appears in the socle zone (Ling 1992, 13; Rogić 2018, 172-173).

Fig. 4d. Two fragments have identical decoration, although they were rendered using different painting techniques. On the fragment shown in **fig. 4d**, the entire surface was covered with a red underpaint and polished, then ochre was applied, and the white line painted in the end. In the case of the fragment in **fig. 4e**, there is no red underpainting; the red zone was painted first, followed by the ochre, and lastly the white line (the paint was not polished). The fragment used to belong to a jamb, head or another opening in the wall; from the other side of the corner it spreads on top of the red surface.

According to the painted content and the plaster features, fragments in **fig. 5a** and **fig. 5b** belong to the same wall painting, but cannot be combined into a larger unit. Green volute motifs painted next to the red border can be seen in **fig. 5a**. Among the fragments which could be classified as belonging to this group, there are also

ones with white plaster surfaces and a red border, which extend to the white mortar surface. In **fig. 5b**, on the left, there are two fragments with decoration in the form of short strokes made with a brush with a rounded tip. The strokes are painted from bigger to the smaller ones. On the third fragment, a part of a motif resembles the one from **fig. 5a**, but it positioned differently and has a red dot in the middle of the volute.

Fig. 6. Short and thin, semicircular lines are painted on a white plaster surface. The lines resemble hair, indicating that there might have been figurative representations painted in one of the rooms. Figurative representations in Viminacium have only been found in funerary painting so far (Rogić 2018 a, 900-901).

Fig. 7a. shows a very thin coat of red paint that extends to the edge of a dark blue surface. Traces of the brush on intonaco are visible, suggesting that the painting was made on fresh plaster (fresco technique). The painted coat was damaged by pecking (Ling 1992, 198-199; Salvadori et al. 2015, 24)².

In **fig. 7b** there is an ochre surface with green plant motifs; the painted coat is very thin. Plaster surface is damaged by pecking.

A polished red surface, damaged by pecking, is shown in **fig. 7c**.

Fig. 7d – the entire surface is underpainted red, which extends to a dark blue area and an ochre strip. White lines are painted on the edges of the ochre strip. The plaster surface was pecked.

Fig. 7e. The fragment which used to belong to a jamb, door head or another opening. On one side of the angle, the fragment has a well-polished red underpaint covered with a blue border which continues to the ochre surface. Blue and ochre are separated with a white line. On the other side, only blue is visible, without the red underpaint. The entire plaster surface is pecked.

Evidently, in many fragments, the surface is damaged from pecking with a sharp tool. The deepest notch is 6mm deep. For the most part, the plaster of the pecked surfaces shows the same features, it is preserved in two or three coats, except in the cases listed further in the text (**figs. 4d, 5a, 5b, 6, 7e**). Plaster thickness ranges from 3 to 5 cm. White, 2-4 mm thick intonaco can be seen (a mixture of slaked lime and marble-dust). Arriccio is grey (a mixture of slaked lime and sand), 1.5-3 cm thick, with fine gravel visible in some of the fragments. The coat for wall levelling is not the same in all fragments; in some cases, it is somewhat lighter than the arriccio.

In fragments which are not damaged by pecking, there are three coats of plaster, though only arriccio and intonaco are visible in most of them. The white intonaco is 3-4 mm thick. The grey arriccio is 1.5 cm thick, while the levelling plaster coat is white and friable, with high concentration of lime.

The fragment in **fig. 4d** stands out by its reddish intonachino³ about 1 mm thick. The intonaco is white, about 2 mm thick, while the arriccio is grey. Total plaster thickness is approximately 3 cm.

The red intonachino identified in the fragment in **fig. 7e** differs from the other fragments damaged by pecking. It has four coats, which is a rarity when it comes to the preserved wall paintings from Viminacium (normally, a smaller number of plaster coats are preserved). The plaster is about 5 cm thick. Intonachino is reddish and about 1mm thick, intonaco is white, 3 mm thick, arriccio is grey (4



Fig. 6. Fragments of wall paintings, Viminacium, Čair (photos by the authors)

² In order for the new plaster to adhere well, the previous coat of dry plaster (wall painting) was chipped with chisel and hammer – the so-called pecking.

³ Intonachino is a very thin coat of plaster applied onto the intonaco, consisting of fine, sifted aggregate, with the addition of powdered brick. Paint is applied onto this layer.

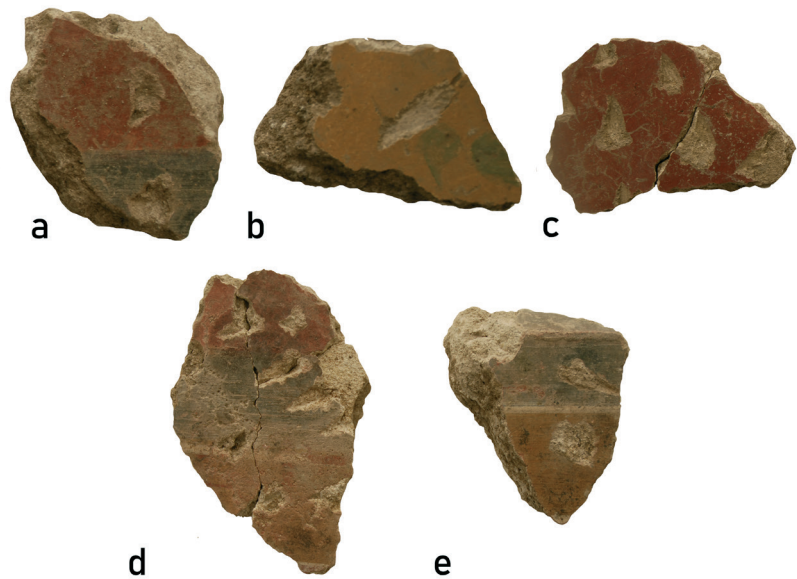


Fig. 7. Fragments of wall paintings, *Viminacium*, Ćair (photos by the authors)

cm), and the rest belongs to the first coat of plaster (levelling plaster), which has the same colour as the arriccio.

The groups of fragments in **figs. 5a, 5b, 6** have the same features of plaster, which is 1.5-3 cm thick. The intonaco is white, 1-3 mm thick, grey arriccio is about 1.5 cm thick, while the levelling coat is white, with a high concentration of lime, and it is friable, with visible traces of straw in the plaster.

It is known that Roman plasters were not always consistent in the number of coats they applied. Vitruvius recommended seven coats of plaster, and such examples can be found primarily in *Pompeii* and *Herculaneum*. Despite these recommendations, the number of plaster coats were often reduced to three, two, or even just one. Even in *Pompeii* there are examples of simplified plasters, where the first coat is made of slaked lime and sand aggregate, while the second one consists of marble dust and slaked lime, or a lime-based paint is applied (Ling 1992, 198).

The irregularities in wall level were often fixed by filling the uneven areas with plaster, and then entire walls were plastered in several coats. There are many examples in which hydraulic plaster was applied instead of the first coat to level the walls; such is the case of *thermae* in *Viminacium* (Nikolić et al. 2015, 71-92)⁴. This coat of plaster is usually missing from the fragments. Each coat was applied before the previous one was dry and thinner than the previous one. The total thickness of plaster usually came to about 4 cm, the first coat being the thickest one, while the painted coat was only a few millimeters thick. The dampness of the plaster ensures firm binding of the next layer. Thus, the plaster coats provide the moisture necessary for the fresco technique (Ling 1992, 200).

For firm adherence of the next coat, a fishbone or criss-cross pattern was incised on the previous one. Beside the incision method, there was another technique, the so-called pecking, used to ensure firm adherence of the next coat; chipping of the previous coat of dry plaster with a chisel and hammer (Ling 1992, 198-199; Salvadori et al. 2015, 24). This method was used only if the previous plaster coat was dry; pecking can be seen in the examples of renovated wall painting

⁴ Vitruvius recommended plaster with the addition of ground brick or tuff for damp places, most often lower wall zones. Vitruvius VII, IV, translation by M. Lopac 1951, 153-154.



Fig. 8. *Viminacium, thermae*, wall paintings (photo by the authors)

in the past, as shown in **fig. 7a-e**, but also in some examples from the Thermae and the Amphitheater in *Viminacium*.

As it has been mentioned, in the immediate vicinity of the site of Čair, there are Thermae built around the end of the 1st, and destroyed in the beginning of 5th century (Rogić et al. 2008, 175; Nikolić et al. 2017, 39-58). Moreover, the amphitheater which was in use during the 2nd and 3rd century, and abandoned in the 4th century (Богдановић et al. 2018, 46). In these buildings, used over a long period of time, remains of renovated wall painting were also found, consisting of a multitude of fragments of wall painting, as well as the painting *in situ*.

In the Thermae, two layers were identified in the preserved *in situ* paintings, one on top of the other, i.e., in one moment in the past, a new painting was made over the previous one – **fig. 8** (Rogić 2018a, 899). The earlier painting has a marble motif and was decorated by sprinkling red paint onto the white plaster surface. The painting of the later period contains green branch and garland motifs, and between these two motifs, there are two vertical ochre strips, with a somewhat wider red strip between them. Fragments of wall painting with highly polished painted plaster surfaces were also found at the site.

For examples of renovation in the amphitheater on the fresco from the earlier phase, see the zoomorphic motif in **fig. 9b**, and the floral motif in the fresco from the later phase (**fig. 9a**). These two frescos were separated by a conservation procedure (Rogić 2014, 508).

CONCLUSION

The research of the city center of Roman *Viminacium* has been modest and based on the scarce data from the beginning of the 20th and 21st century. When observing the map published in 1905 (**fig. 2**), it was deduced that in the central part of the city of *Viminacium* (site of Čair) there were several buildings along the right side of the street with a portico (direction NE- SW). The function of these buildings has not been determined, but the remains of floor heating (*hypocaustum*) and wall painting suggest that some parts of the complex were residential; they could have been homes of distinguished citizens or served to host important persons from the public life. The very

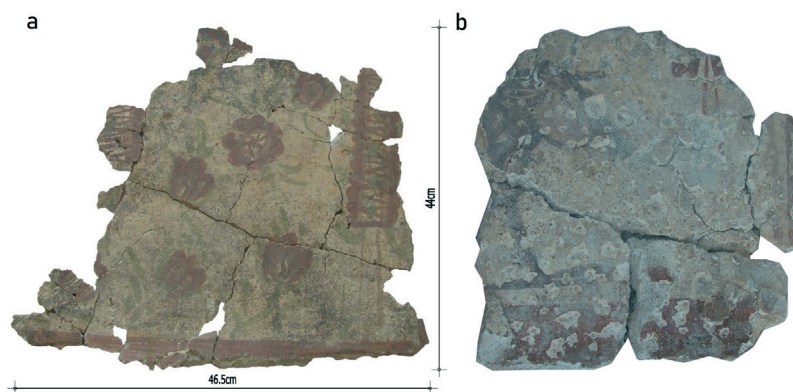


Fig. 9. *Viminacium*, amphitheatre, wall painting (after Rogić 2014, Abb. 2)

position of these buildings indicates their importance. The proximity of the public bath and amphitheater could imply that only the privileged citizens enjoyed the advantage of living in the vicinity of these type of buildings. The existence of the smelting furnace was not confirmed during the re-excavations. Field documentation from the period of the excavations led by Vasić was not preserved, and it is difficult to identify the rooms which were researched at the time. It is also possible that the smelting furnace was a *praefurnium* (furnace) for floor heating, knowing that there were three rooms with hypocaust.

The re-excavations in 2007 did not include the total area of the previous excavations but were reduced to its minimal part, primarily due to unregulated property rights. Therefore, they have not yielded clear and reliable data to help interpret the complex in the city centre. However, according to some details which, in this case, are related to fragments of wall painting, certain singularities, unique to the previously mentioned buildings, were identified.

Only a small number of fragments of wall painting were found, so an extensive description of the iconography cannot be made; no preparative or incised drawing were identified in the fragments. What can be seen, however, are simple motifs; parts of a linear decoration, border fragments, porphyry imitation, green volute motifs, plant motifs, decoration in the form of short diagonal strokes. The most significant fragments are the ones depicting strands of hair, since they testify to the existence of figurative representations, which have, so far, only been found in the funerary painting in *Viminacium*.

The fragments of wall painting from the site of Čair present an entirely new image of plaster composition, which differs significantly from the one found in the funerary painting of *Viminacium*. The fragments in question have multiple (four) plaster coats, and there is also a reddish intonachino (thin layer of plaster with brick powder filler, on which paintings were made). The highly polished surfaces of some fragments suggest that these used to be luxurious buildings. Some fragments show traces of the paintbrush, indicating the fresco technique. The wall painting in the buildings at the site of Čair was renovated, which indicates that they were used over a long period of time. Remains of renovated wall painting, as well as a multitude of fragments, have also been found in the nearby public bath and amphitheater, which further suggests that these buildings were in use for a longer period of time.

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Драгана ГАВРИЛОВИЧ / Бебина МИЛОВАНОВИЧ

(резюме)

Виминациум бил столица на римската провинция Горна Мизия. Той е разположен на устието на река Млава, вливаща се в Дунав край Костолац, Сърбия. Местността била населена от праисторическо време до средновековието. Времето на римската империя било най-благодатно за местното население. Римският град Виминациум е сред добре проучените археологически обекти. Досега са разкопани 14000 гроба от неговия обширен некропол, както и околни частни сгради – жилищни и стопански. Слабо е изучен самият Виминациум. През последното десетилетие в града са изследвани: обществена баня, амфитеатър, дялове от военния лагер. Първите системни проучвания във Виминациум били проведени около 1900 година. Те включвали част от градския център (в м. „Чаир“) с жилищни помещения покрай улица. В тях била разкрити: топилна пещ, кладенец с отводнителни канали, стълбища към мазе, хипокауст с тухлени колонки, носещи суспензурата. Този архитектурен комплекс има три строителни фази за времето от края на II век до началото на III век. През 2007 започнало частичното му повторно проучване. Намерени били разнообразни находки, включително монети от IV век. Но те лежали в разбъркани пластове от предходни разкопки и не давали добра датировка на помещенията. Открити били и над 200 парчета от стенописи. В настоящата статия се обсъждат най-информативните сред тях. Те се различават значително като състав в сравнение с гробната живопис във Виминациум. Освен че имат четири пласта мазилка, те включват още фин, тънък пласт с тухлен прах, върху който били нанасяни рисунките. Понякога тази повърхност била полирана. Стенописите били поправяни, защото помещенията били използвани дълго време. Синхронни стенописи в близките градска баня и амфитеатър имат сходни характеристики. Някои фрагменти стенописи от м. „Чаир“ представят кичури човешка коса. Досега човешки фигури бяха известни само от гробната живопис на Виминациум.

Institute of Archaeology

Knez Mihailova 35/IV

PO BOX 202

SRB-11000 Belgrade

Dragana Gavrilović PhD

conservator-restorer, research associate

gavrilovicdragana@yahoo.com

Bebina Milovanović PhD

archaeologist, research associate

bebina27@yahoo.com

