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CONTEXT AND MEANING

PROCEEDINGS OF THE TWELFTH INTERNATIONAL
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Stephan T.A.M. Mols & Eric M. Moormann



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CONTENTS

Preface	XI
Key Note Lectures	
OLGA PALAGIA Highlights of Greek Figural Wall Paintings	3
HARICLIA BRECOULAKI & GIORGIOS KAVVADIAS & VASILIKI KANTARELOU & J. STEPHENS & A. STEPHENS Colour and Painting Technique on the Archaic Panels from Pitsa, Corinthia	15
Text, Site and Context	
NICOLE BLANC & HÉLÈNE ERISTOV Textes et contextes: archéologie et philologie du décor	27
FRANCESCA GHEDINI & ISABELLA COLPO Ovidio come fonte per la conoscenza dell'arte antica	33
GIULIA SALVO Forme di collezionismo privato? Riflessioni in merito ad alcuni ambienti pompeiani	39
FRANÇOISE GURY Pour une approche globale des programmes décoratifs	47
MONICA SALVADORI & NORBERT ZIMMERMANN Roman Funerary Painting: From 'Telling Stories' to 'Recounting History'	55
JULIA VALEVA L'image sur les murs des <i>domus</i> de l'Antiquité tardive: contexte et système décoratif	63
VERENA FUGGER The Meaning of Christian Figural Wall Painting in the Context of Late Antique Burial Chambers	69
GAËLLE HERBERT DE LA PORTBARRÉ-VIARD La mise en espace d'un programme iconographique au début du V ^e siècle: le témoignage de Paulin de Nole sur les fresques bibliques du complexe de saint Félix à Cimitile/Nola	75
DELPHINE BURLLOT & DANIEL ROGER Décontextualiser, Recontextualiser: fragments de peinture murale antique en musée	81
Motifs in Ancient Painting	
BAPTISTE AUGRIS Le corps transporté: À propos des figures en apesanteur dans la peinture pompéienne	89
ALIX BARBET Peintures murales romaines représentant des métiers <i>Quelle signification, dans quel contexte?</i>	95
BARBARA BIANCHI <i>Munera</i> anfiteatrali e <i>venationes</i> negli spazi domestici della Tripolitania romana	103

FRANCESCA BOLDRIGHINI Frescoes from Nemi's Theatre: A Dressing Room?	107
STÉPHANIE DERWAELE Au cœur des débats <i>La diffusion des têtes végétalisées dans les décors de «IV^e style»</i>	113
MARIO GRIMALDI Alessandro e forme di regalità ellenistica nella pittura romano-campana	119
ANU KAISA KOPONEN Egyptian Motifs in Pompeian Wall Paintings in their Architectural Context	125
ELEANOR WINSOR LEACH Costume and Context: What Medea Wears	131
PATRICK MARKO <i>sub persona risus</i> - Contexts of Painted Masks in Pompeii	137
JENNIFER MUSLIN <i>Heu me miserum!</i> The Rhetoric of <i>Misericordia</i> in Roman Depictions of the Fall of Troy	143
SYLVAIN PERROT Remettre en contexte la scène musicale sur la peinture murale grecque	149
VANESSA ROUSSEAU Ornament and Surface Acceptance in Late Antique Wall Painting	153
ANNA SANTUCCI Strutture sacre ipetre a pianta circolare: architetture reali, architetture rappresentate	157
Greece	
GUY ACKERMANN & YVES DUBOIS Fragments d'Érètrie: contextes et répartition des enduits ornementaux (VII ^e siècle a. - II ^e siècle ap. J.-C.)	165
LYDIA AVLONITOU A Contribution to the Study of the Wall Paintings Found in the Funerary Monuments of Ancient Macedonia	173
ANGELA PENCHEVA An Interpretation of the 'Wreath' in the Context of the Hellenistic Macedonian and Thracian Funerary Mural Painting	179
MARIA TSIMBIDOU-AVLONITOU An Unknown Painted Monument in Hellenistic Thessaloniki	185
KATERINA TZANAVARI Le décor mural de la tombe à ciste I de Dervéni, à l'ancienne Lété <i>Première approche interprétative</i>	193
MONICA BAGGIO & VERONICA ZAGOLIN Epedienti illusionistici per una relazione fra parete e oggetto nella pittura funeraria ellenistica	199
NIKOLAOS A. VAVLEKAS Roman Wall Paintings from Eleusis	207

Turkey, the Near East, and North Africa

BARBARA TOBER The Hierarchy of Late Hellenistic Wall Decoration in Ephesos	215
CLAUDE VIBERT-GUIGUE <i>La koinè étendue aux aménagements rupestres peints et stuqués de Beida (Petra)</i>	221
SILVIA ROZENBERG Between Alexandria and Rome	229
TALILA MICHAELI A Painted Tomb in the Upper Galilee and the Meaning of its Pictorial Program	237
ANNE-MARIE GUIMIER-SORBETS Peintures funéraires à Alexandrie: nouvelles recherches et interprétations	243
ANNA SANTUCCI Cirene N258: 'Tomba dei Sempronii' <i>Nuove testimonianze di pittura parietale</i>	249
ANNA SANTUCCI 'Sinopia' <i>Considerazioni su uso e funzioni nelle tombe di Cirene</i>	253
Roman Italy	
DORA D'AURIA Immagini allusive a vittorie militari in ambito domestico nel II secolo a.C.	259
DOROTHÉE NEYME Peinture à fresque d'une tombe à inhumation de la nécropole romaine de Cumes (Italie)	265
RICCARDO HELG & ANGELALEA MALGIERI Colours of the Street: Form and Meaning of Facade Paintings at Pompeii and Herculaneum	271
RICCARDO HELG & ANGELALEA MALGIERI & CHIARA PASCUCCI Le pitture del settore termale della Casa dell'Albergo a Ercolano: osservazioni preliminari	277
ALEXANDRA DARDENAY Decoration in Context <i>Decorative Programs in Buildings from Insula V at Herculaneum</i>	283
SUSANNE VAN DE LIEFVOORT The Power of Painting <i>Evocation and Authenticity in Roman Domestic Decoration</i>	291
MARGHERITA CARUCCI Painting in Contexts: Modes of Visual Responses in the House of Marine Venus at Pompeii	295
PAOLO BARONIO La percezione degli spazi e delle decorazioni parietali nell'edilizia residenziale a Pompei <i>L'esempio della Casa del Centenario (IX 8, 3-6)</i>	301
JOHN R. CLARKE The Three Contexts Provided by the Oplontis 3D Model <i>Real-Time Viewing, Database Exploration, and Reconstruction</i>	307

AGNES ALLROGGEN-BEDEL Context and Meaning: the So-Called Flora from Castellammare di Stabia and her Three Counterparts	315
RAFFAELLA FEDERICO Raffigurazioni pittoriche e loro significati contestuali in alcune ville vesuviane	323
MARGHERITA BEDELLO TATA & STELLA FALZONE Stucchi e affreschi da una villa dell'Ager Laurentinus	329
STELLA FALZONE Pittura parietale di Ostia (I secolo a.C./I secolo d.C.): i contesti domestici	335
CHIARA CONTE & DOMENICA DININNO & STELLA FALZONE & RAFFAELE LAZZARO & PAOLO TOMASSINI Contesti di pittura inediti della tarda epoca repubblicana e della prima età imperiale, conservati nei Depositi di Ostia	343
MARTINA MARANO Affreschi di IV stile pompeiano provenienti dallo scavo del Caseggiato dei Lottatori ad Ostia (V, III, 1)	349
MASSIMILIANO DAVID & ANGELO PELLEGRINO & STEFANO DE TOGNI & GIAN PIERO MILANI & CARLO MOLLE & MARCELLO TURCI Pitture e graffiti murali della prima età imperiale del quartiere fuori Porta Marina di Ostia	355
MARGHERITA BEDELLO TATA La tomba 33 e il dipinto di Orfeo agli Inferi nel contesto della necropoli laurentina	363
ARNAUD COUTELAS & STEPHAN T.A.M. MOLS & DELPHINE BURLLOT & DANIEL ROGER Farnesina Paintings in the Louvre? <i>Stylistic and Archaeometric Analysis of Some Paintings from the Campana Collection</i>	369
STEFANO TORTORELLA L'ipogeo di via Livenza a Roma <i>Il contesto, gli affreschi, il mosaico</i>	375
MATHILDE CARRIVE Le marbre et ses imitations dans les maisons d'Italie centrale et septentrionale au II ^e siècle ap. J.-C.: statut et signification	381
ILARIA BENETTI Nuove acquisizioni dall'Etruria costiera: le pitture dei <i>balnea</i> della villa di Poggio del Molino a Populonia (Livorno)	387
CARLA PAGANI & ELENA MARIANI Nuovi dati sulla pittura di I stile dalle recenti indagini nell'area del santuario di Minerva sul Monte Castelon di Marano di Valpolicella (VR)	395
BARBARA BIANCHI Tematiche figurative nella decorazione della villa delle grotte di Catullo a Sirmione: la pittura di paesaggio	401
ROBERTO BUGINI & LUISA FOLLI & ELENA MARIANI & CARLA PAGANI Pigment Composition and Applying Methods in Roman Wall Painting of Lombardy (2 nd Century BCE-4 th Century CE)	405
FERNANDA CAVARI & FULVIA DONATI L'uso dell'argilla nella pittura murale romana: nuove considerazioni	411

MARTINA MARANO Intonaci dipinti dal complesso archeologico del Barco Borghese (Monte Porzio Catone-RM): nota preliminare	417
FILIBERTO CHIABRANDO & FEDERICA FONTANA & EMANUELA MURGIA & ANTONIA T. SPANÒ 3D Models from Reality Based Survey Techniques: The <i>Domus</i> of 'Putti danzanti' in Aquileia	423
NICOLETTA DE NICOLO Frammenti di pittura parietale dalla Casa delle Bestie Ferite ad Aquileia	429
EMANUELA MURGIA & MARCO ZERBINATTI Draw-up Techniques for Painted Plasters in Aquileia <i>A Preliminary Analysis</i>	435
ALESSANDRA DIDONÉ Gli intonaci della basilica teodoriana di Aquileia (UD) <i>Una rilettura alla luce dei nuovi dati</i>	439
 Europe Outside Greece and Italy	
SABINE GROETEMBRIL & CLOTILDE ALLONSIUS & LUCIE LEMOIGNE De la scène figurée à l'enduit architectural. Choix et critères ornementaux des divers espaces de deux vastes <i>domus</i> au cœur de la cité des Tongres (Belgique)	447
JULIEN BOISLÈVE La représentation de Vénus dans les absides et exèdres en Gaule romaine	455
JULIEN BOISLÈVE Les stucs figurés en Gaule	465
LARA ÍÑIGUEZ BERROZPE <i>Virtus</i> in Bilbilis (Calatayud, Zaragoza, España)	471
CARMEN GUIRAL PELEGRÍN & LARA ÍÑIGUEZ BERROZPE & MANUEL MARTÍN-BUENO & CARLOS SÁENZ PRECIADO A New Sample of Republican Decoration in the Ebro Valley (Spain): The Valdeherrera ceiling	477
MICHEL E. FUCHS La peinture d'Echzell: un programme commodien pour une chambre d'officier	483
RENATE THOMAS Die römischen Wandmalereifunde vom Offenbachplatz in Köln	489
RENATE THOMAS Zur Bedeutung der dionysischen und apollinischen Ikonographie in der römischen Wandmalerei in der Provinz	493
DIANA BUSSE Wandmalereifunde aus der gallo-römischen Villenanlage von Reinheim (Deutschland)	501
BARBARA TOBER Old Finds Newly Recovered: Wall Paintings from the Roman Province of Noricum	505
INES DÖRFLER Auf der Suche nach dem Kontext <i>Der Iphigenie-Komplex vom Magdalensberg</i>	509

JELENA ANDELKOVIĆ GRAŠAR & EMILJA NIKOLIĆ & DRAGANA ROGIĆ Pictorial Elements and Principles in the Creation of Context and Meaning of the Ancient Image Using the Example of Viminacium Funerary Paintings	515
ESZTER HARSÁNYI & ZSÓFIA KUROVSZKY Wall Paintings of the Early <i>Iseum</i> of Savaria, Pannonia	523

Pictorial Elements and Principles in the Creation of Context and Meaning of the Ancient Image Using the Example of Viminacium Funerary Paintings

Jelena Anđelković Grašar & Emilija Nikolić & Dragana Rogić

Abstract

*The aim of the paper is to determine which pictorial elements and principles were dominant in the compositions of Viminacium paintings, based on preserved tomb frescoes. Many of the pictorial elements and principles used played a symbolic role in the content or narrative context. Since the painting of the above-ground structures of ancient Viminacium is preserved only as fragments, the similar use of line, space and colour, or balance, rhythm and proportion in tomb paintings could be useful for the future reconstruction and understanding of the particular styles of the artists who were based in Viminacium.**

INTRODUCTION

The idea to decode the particular language which the ancient artist mastered depends on the point of view of his contemporary observer or on contemporary artistic norms that are familiar to us. This means that ancient works of art can be interpreted in various ways within the representation of realism (natural) and the artist's deformations of it.¹ Ancient artists skilfully achieved the desired meaning through the use of pictorial elements such as line, space, texture, colour, shape and form. However, pictorial elements were not always interpreted successfully in ancient works of art, especially in painting, due to the fresco technique, a technique that doesn't allow for correction. The same is true with pictorial principles, recognised as movement, harmony, variety, balance, rhythm, emphasis, proportion and pattern. Line, colour and space are basic pictorial elements used by Viminacium painters. Among the pictorial principles used, we will describe balance, rhythm and proportion.

More than 14,000 graves, including twenty-nine fresco-painted tombs, were discovered in the necropolises of Viminacium, a Roman archaeological site in present-day Serbia.² The fresco painting in four tombs is almost completely preserved, while from many other tombs only separate walls, or fragments thereof, have been saved. These tombs are 'Christian tomb' G-5517 (*fig. 2*),³ 'Pagan tomb' G-2624 (*fig. 1*),⁴ 'Tomb with Cupids' G-160⁵ and tomb G-5464.⁶ From other tombs (G-3869, G-4734, G-5313, G-3130)⁷ only separate walls are preserved or their fragmented frescos, but they can still testify to the achievements of Viminacium art.

PICTORIAL ELEMENTS (*fig. 3*)

Line

A tomb wall, being the background surface, represents that limited frontal plane, a physical support for all pictorial representations.⁸ This white frontal plane, framed by straight lines, is the base of all compositions within a tomb. Straight lines (horizontal, vertical and diagonal) and curved lines are used in the creation of forms.⁹ When a drawing is the base of a painting, shapes are made by contours or boundaries.¹⁰ In Viminacium tombs, these contour lines are thick and strong, mostly used to create and describe forms. Sometimes they are rendered in a geometric style and sometimes more freely, closer to the impressionistic manner. Geometrically rendered lines are most strikingly visible on the depiction of Christ's monogram in the 'Christian tomb' G-5517. The letters X (Chi) and P (Ro) are made of precise, straight, vertical and diagonal lines. Objects such as vessels, amphorae, or dishes are formed with precise contour lines combined with thinner lines whose function it is to create the inner forms of objects. The form of the amphora between the peacocks in tomb G-5464 is defined only with black lines, giving it an almost perfectly spherical shape. The kantharos between the peacocks in tomb G-5517 is a combination of strong, black, contoured lines and easily rendered accents made of short, white lines. Red lines define the shapes of the baskets, the cornucopia between the cupids and within the fields with the peacocks as well as the kantharos in the scene with birds, from tomb G-160. A



Fig. 1. Frescoes of tomb G-2624 presented as individual panels on the walls of the National Museum in Požarevac, here presented as tomb's reconstruction set up in the Archaeological Park of Viminacium (photos M. Korac).

new level of significance is given to the line in the depiction of these motifs, since besides being present as contours which build forms, the lines here are created to give an impression of texture. Impressionistically rendered lines are usually used to depict the curved shapes of birds' bodies, especially those of peacocks.¹¹ Sometimes that line is unbroken and gently flows, describing the bird's body or feathers, as can be seen in the depiction of the peacocks from tomb G-2624, or the preserved peacock's foot from tombs G-3130 and G-5313. Alternatively, small, discontinuous lines, similar to a comma form, accentuate the bird's features, which is noticeable in the depiction of the peacocks and birds from tomb G-160 and the peacocks from tomb G-5517. A treatment which combines these two approaches of describing forms is visible in the depiction of the peacocks from tomb G-5464. Some motifs derive from the combination of lines of diverse colours;

thus sometimes it can be said that the motif is the line itself. This is visible in the motif of a grapevine depicted in tombs G-160, G-5517 and G-5464. Artistically, the best use of line is visible in human forms, especially portraits. Red and pink contours form the cupids' bodies, while fine brownish lines define the facial features of the servants in tomb G-160. The most beautiful combination of lines of various thickness and nuances of brown created the portrait of a deceased lady from tomb G-2624. In this portrait, the aforementioned lines took the role of the tone in creating a three dimensional face which was hard to achieve with a demanding technique such as *fresco*.

Colour

Also within the tombs' paintings it can be seen that some of the motifs were created without lines, only with colours. This is the case with the



Fig. 2. Frescoes of tomb G-5517 presented as individual panels on the walls of the National Museum in Požarevac, here presented as tomb's reconstruction set up in the Archaeological Park of Viminacium (photos M. Korać).

red ivy shaped leaves in the servant's background (G-2624) with the red and blue spots combined together, probably with the idea of creating the violet nuances of grapes (G-5517), thus resembling the style of impressionistic or even post-impressionistic paintings. Colours often have a naturalistic value, as is the case with the grapevine in tomb G-160, which is a combination of light and dark green. This suggests the idea of healthy growth in our mind,¹² pointing to the green paint as a life-giver, thus as a restorer of youth and, together with the symbolism of the motif itself, it suggests immortality.¹³ In the same tomb the colours used to define the bodies of the birds over the kantharos are designed without any resemblance to the feather colours of any known bird from nature.¹⁴

However, in some tombs, such as G-5517, the meaning and symbolic context of the whole narrative is achieved with the careful use of colours, mainly red and blue.¹⁵ Red, as a colour which symbolises earth, blood or fire,¹⁶ is here connected with the representation of an earthly horseman on the northern wall,¹⁷ depicted with a red *paludamentum* and red trousers. Blue *clavi* on the horseman's tunic, his trousers, the landscape in the background and the panther, dominate the scene of the heavenly horseman,¹⁸ where blue, as a less material colour, could indicate eternity, heaven or the sky.¹⁹ Understanding colour symbolism, Viminacium painters used two basic colours to accentuate the battle between heaven and earth in this tomb. The balance of these colours



Fig. 3. Pictorial elements in Viminacium painting: line, colour and space. Kantharos - tomb G-5517, amphorae - tomb G-5464, portrait of the deceased lady - tomb G-2624, heavenly horseman - tomb G-5517, framed fields - tomb G-160, grapevine - tomb G-5517, portrait of a servant - tomb G-2624, grapevine - tomb G-160, Christ monogram - tomb G-5517 (photos M. Korać). Space in tombs G-2624, G-160 and G-5517 (schemes Emilija Nikolić).

can be seen in the scene of the paradise garden, depicted on the eastern wall, while light and dark blue are used in the representation of the Christ monogram on the western wall, using the aforementioned symbolism. Intense colours such as red, ochre and green were used in the 'Tomb with Cupids', G-160, to paint the frames for the scenes.²⁰ In style and manner, these colourful frames resemble the ones created by the painters of Roman catacombs, where green and red lines were used to separate fields around the main motif.²¹

Space

Usually the space is considered as an important element which corresponds to other elements in the two dimensional image. The trapezoidal section of seventeen painted tombs, speculated by some authors to be specific for Viminacium,²² in our analysis points to the tomb's space as an important pictorial element of this painting, but in a three dimensional tomb space, where images on four walls correspond to each other in a compositional or symbolical way. In such a way the space between becomes an element which enables the correct reading of some pictorial principles such as symmetrical balance or symmetry, which was very important to Viminacium paint-

ers when creating the image. Whether it is some intimate message within the narrative or an after-life story, all the images in the tomb correspond by way of the space being a pivot for their bilateral, mirror or rotational symmetry arrangement.²³

PICTORIAL PRINCIPLES (fig. 4)

Balance

Besides in three dimensional spaces, symmetry exists within each scene painted in the tombs. Bilateral, right hand, left hand symmetry, translational, rotational, radial, spiral, ornamental or repetitive symmetry, can all be found within the motifs or scenes from the tombs.²⁴ This leads to the existence of balance in the tombs' design and in each scene within.

Rhythm

Rhythm is achieved using the naturalistic spiral shape of the grapevine, which is the case in tombs G-5517 and G-5464, or in the delicately designed and constructed spiral on the eastern wall of tomb G-5464. These natural vines or geometrical spirals run from one wall to another, thus causing the eye move in a specific direction. By repeating these ele-

ments and motifs, movement is indicated. Sometimes, by using a purposely designed fresco arrangement by a skilled artist, as can be seen in the arrangement of the scenes from tomb G-5517,²⁵ this movement is made a basic principle of the painting.

Proportion

As one of the most important geometrical principles,²⁶ proportion is transferred to art. Proportion has always played an important role in image design, especially if it consists of human figures. Since good human proportion has always been described, even by ancient authors,²⁷ by looking at human figures, it can be said that ancient artists were well trained and those who knew good body proportion were probably master painters. Human figures can be found in Viminacium tombs G-160, G-5517 and G-2624. Considering everything said before, it is almost certain that, in late antique Viminacium, members of an artistic workshop conducted funerary painting and, most probably, the decoration of public buildings. Many different pictorial styles can be found within the Viminacium tombs. That is the case with the representations of human figures. The two horsemen on the lateral walls in tomb G-5517 are depicted

with a bad shortening of the figures, due to either the painter's poor knowledge of human proportions or the position of the lateral wall, which stood inclined and made the work of the artist very difficult. Also we need to keep in mind the fact that painters of underground structures had many difficulties during their work, such as limited space, bad light, body posture, etc.²⁸ Contrary to the previously mentioned tomb, in tomb G-160 the human figures, male and female servants, are depicted in the same position, but in a much better manner and with accurately realised proportions. This makes the figures look solemn and monumental. On the frontal wall of the same tomb, a pair of Cupids is depicted as stocky little boys, which could reveal the possible existence of another artist, not as well educated as the one who painted the servants. Lastly, we can say that the most educated artist and the best painted human figures can be found in tomb G-2624 where, on the western wall, there is a portrait of the deceased lady which stands as the most significant portrait of the late antique Viminacium art gallery, probably of the whole province, and certainly as an important achievement of Roman art.

Considering the tombs' construction, the trapezoidal section could be related to the golden sec-

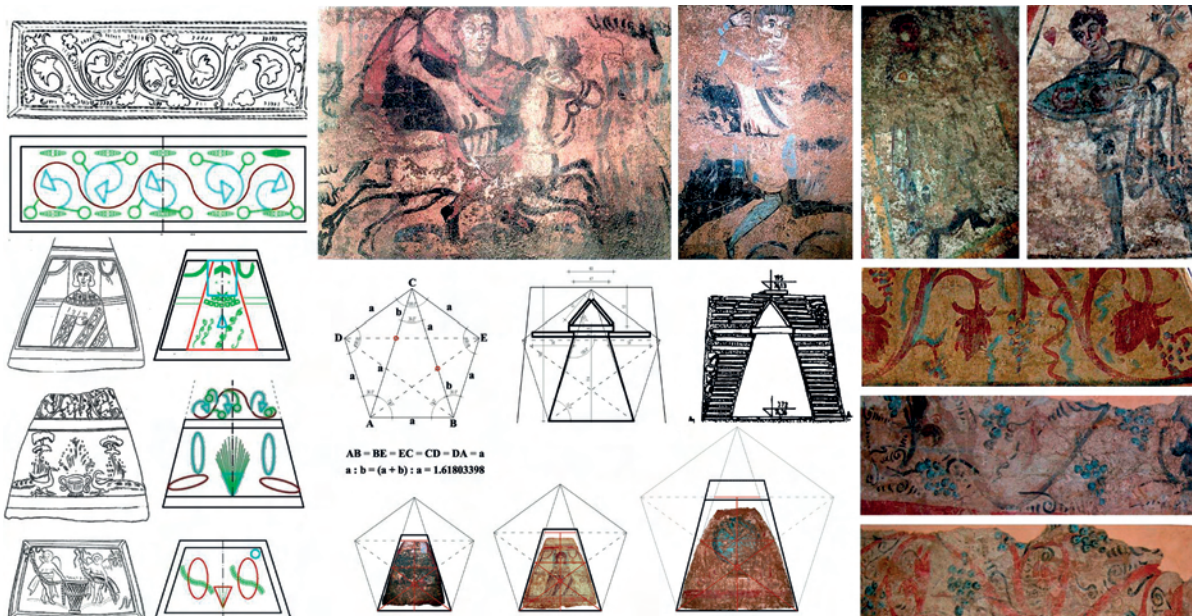


Fig. 4. Pictorial principles in Viminacium painting: balance, rhythm and proportion. Earthly horseman - tomb G-5517, heavenly horseman - tomb G-5517, maidservant - tomb G-160, servant - tomb G-2624, grapevine - tomb G-5517, grapevine - tomb G-5464, grapevine - tomb G-5464 (photos M. Korać). Balance in the scenes of grapevine (G-160), deceased lady (G-2624), paradise scene (G-5517) and cupids (G-160). Trapezoidal cut and designing of the golden section of tombs with possible positions within painted compositions connected to it. (schemes Emilija Nikolić).

tion, i.e. the divine proportion. It appears in different forms in nature and, as such, it was always fascinating to mathematicians and artists.²⁹ A regular pentagon can, very easily, be constructed around a trapezoidal section of a tomb. There it can be seen that the angle created between the larger base and the trapezium arm, approximately corresponds to the angle at the base of an isosceles, 'golden' triangle, which is 72°, around which is delineated the aforementioned pentagon. During the formation of a regular pentagon, it is necessary to determine the golden section of the triangle's arm. This can then be used in an attempt to introduce this rule within the structure of a particular scene.³⁰ In this way, the lines that divide the area of a triangle into parts, according to the golden section and, hence, the trapezium area too, could be the basis for forming the wall painting's composition in a tomb. This division may have a relation with painted representations, such as the division of the eastern trapezoidal wall into two fields in tomb G-160 (since the western, usually the main wall, here is not preserved), or with the balsamarium bottle in the right hand of the deceased lady from tomb G-2624, or finally with the protruding brick below the Christ monogram in tomb G-5517, thus indicating compositionally or symbolically important points within the scenes or walls.

CONCLUSION

Based on everything said, it can be concluded that in the period of the 3rd and 4th centuries AD, an important and well educated artistic workshop consisting of painters who knew pictorial elements and were skilled at painting according to pictorial principles, was based in Viminacium.³¹ The Roman style of wall painting, known as the four Pompeian styles,³² sometimes still dominated with drawing and line, or with large planes of colour, absorbed many influences which were inherited from the past or came into it through the multicultural society of the heterogeneous Roman Empire. In the same way the paintings of Viminacium, a city situated on one of the main Roman crossroads, consisted of traditions which came from the West and East but were shaped in the local workshops.

Besides the content conveyed with the dominant symbolism of the philosophy of death, the idea of transfer from earthly to heavenly life was also expressed with the careful use of colour contrast - mostly of red and blue. This different understanding of reality, where life became the after-

life, caused an appearance of new motifs which were set on the mortar background of the tombs' walls, as a neutral space, not intended to resemble, but to signify. Thus, all images can be seen not so much in the manner of naturalism and realism, but of surrealism. Exactly these symbols and signs were reduced to essentials, enough for the message to be identified.³³ The certainty of this comes from the fact that Viminacium funerary painting was art without an audience, at least not a perceptible one. Here, sometimes, the motifs are not recognisable, not because the artists did not have a proper pictorial solution, but because the mental message was more important.

Since Viminacium's public painting of above-ground structures is not preserved and available only in fragments, it is not possible to speak more specifically about the iconography. So, a possible way of reconstructing and understanding the meaning could be by understanding the pictorial elements and principles. If we know the patterns and regularities of funerary images, we are able to recognise the same models within the fresco fragments from the Viminacium baths³⁴ or the amphitheatre,³⁵ whether it was a white background with dominant green and red colours resembling floral motifs from tomb G-160, or the geometrical scheme of four petal flowers indicating a floral grid from tomb G-5313.

NOTES

* The article results from the project: Viminacium, Roman city and military camp - research of the material and non material culture of inhabitants by using the modern technologies of remote detection, geophysics, GIS, digitalization and 3D visualization (no 47018), funded by The Ministry of Education, Science and Technological Development of the Republic of Serbia.

¹ Uspensky 1976, 219-220.

² Korać 2007, 247-261.

³ Anđelković 2012, 4; see also Korać 2007, 33-68.

⁴ Anđelković 2012, 4-5; see also Korać 2007, 69-101; 1993, 107-122.

⁵ Anđelković 2012, 2-4; see also Anđelković-Grašar et al. 2013, 73-100; Korać 2007, 125-140.

⁶ Korać 2007, 18-22.

⁷ Korać 2007, 18-28.

⁸ Saint-Martin 1990, 76.

⁹ All these lines are described in modern theory, although it is more than visible that ancient painters new about their significance or symbolism. Kandinsky 1947, 55-113.

¹⁰ Euc. *Elementa* 1.14.

¹¹ More about the painted peacocks in Viminacium tombs in Anđelković et al. 2011, 233-241.

¹² Heather 1948, 172.

¹³ MacKenzie 1922, 161. Associations between the green colour and healthy growth or everlasting life can be found in the New Testament, cf. John 6:27, Luke 8:11-15 and most remarkably in the words: 'The reward of the

- righteous will be to experience a rebirth; dying and being "sown" in the grave and then being raised at Jesus return to new life once again. Just like the new growth sprouting from the sown seed' in I Cor 15:35-44.
- ¹⁴ More about the possible natural origin of these painted birds in Anđelković-Grašar et al. 2013, 87-89.
- ¹⁵ Symbolism and potency of certain colours as an expression or revelation of divine influence is well known and inherited from prehistoric or Egyptian times, especially in religious art. MacKenzie 1922, 138-142.
- ¹⁶ Gerbran/Ševalije 2004, 113-115; The Greek term *pyrrhos* is usually translated as red, from *pyr* – fire. In the Old Testament red is associated with the Original sin, and thus with the human sin and terrestrial world (earth), which can be recognized in the words: 'Though your sins are like scarlet, They shall be as white as snow; Though they are red like crimson, They shall be as wool.' (Isaiah 1:18). Symbolism of red wine is well known from Christ's words: 'This cup is the new covenant in My blood. This do, as often as you drink it, in remembrance of Me' (I Cor. 11:25).
- ¹⁷ Korać 2007, 49-56.
- ¹⁸ Korać 2007, 57-62.
- ¹⁹ Gerbran/Ševalije 2004, 713-716. In conjunction with precious stones, the sky blue colour of sapphire represents heavenly things: 'And above the firmament over their heads was the likeness of a throne, in appearance like a sapphire stone' Ezek 1:26
- ²⁰ Anđelković-Grašar et al. 2013, 93.
- ²¹ Герке 1973, 9-47.
- ²² Васић 1907, 83-91
- ²³ Anđelković-Grašar et al. 2012, 256-257.
- ²⁴ Anđelković-Grašar et al. 2012, 243-255.
- ²⁵ Korać 2007, 63-68.
- ²⁶ Euc. *Elementa* 5.
- ²⁷ Vitruv. *De Arch.* 3.1.2.
- ²⁸ Lamberton 1950, 259.
- ²⁹ Hargittai/Hargittai 1994, 160.
- ³⁰ Anđelković-Grašar et al. 2013, 77-78.
- ³¹ Spasić-Đurić 2002, 188-189.
- ³² Little 1945, 134-142.
- ³³ Although with not so many different symbolical connotations, Christian catacomb art was developed. Lamberton 1950, 259-260.
- ³⁴ Рогоћ, Д./Д. Деспотовић 2008, 271-276.
- ³⁵ Rogić, 2014.
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