

Colours in the oasis: the Villa of Serenos

The Villa of Serenos is situated at the site of Amheida, the ancient Trimithis, in the northwestern part of the Dakhleh Oasis. One of the first houses of the ancient city to be investigated by the Dakhleh Oasis Project (DOP) back in 1979, it revealed astonishing wall paintings. **Dorothea Schulz** describes the ongoing reconstruction project.

After the 1979 discovery the walls were reburied and had to wait for more than twenty years to be excavated properly. A team sponsored by Columbia University under direction of Roger S. Bagnall began excavations at Amheida in 2004, starting with the house of which the painted room was part.

This house has proven to be a rich and fascinating object of study and we are still far from finishing our work on it. The work is still ongoing and now sponsored by New York University, Institute for the Study of the Ancient World.

After clearing the central ‘painted room’ of the ‘Villa’, subsequent field seasons revealed other rooms decorated with intricate geometrical and floral motifs. Additional archaeological finds date the paintings to the second quarter of the 4th century AD. Furthermore, several ostraca provide information about the owner of the house, most likely being a town councillor, named Serenos.

Both the paintings *in situ* and the collected fragments pose considerable conservation problems; the layer of plaster is very thin and extremely fragile. The best way of conserving this precious building for future generations was refilling it with sand – after extensive documentation.

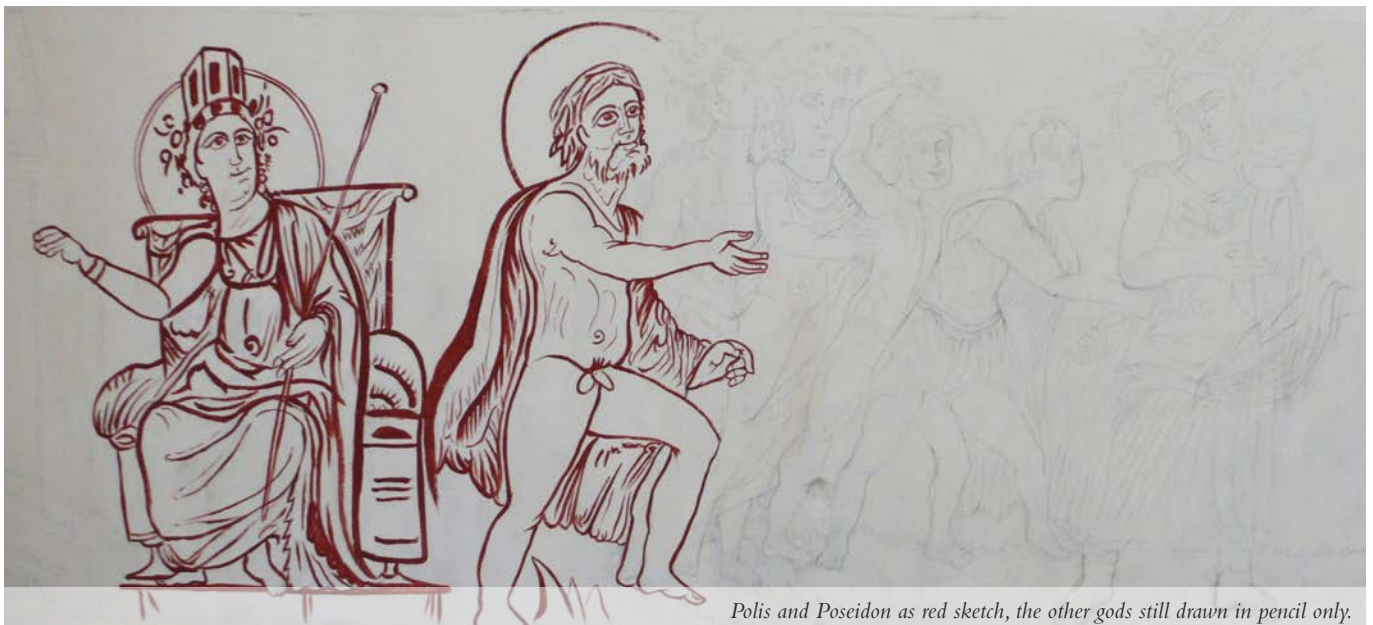
In order to make this fascinating building visible to the

broader public the plan was soon been made to build a full-scale reconstruction, including facsimiles of the wall paintings. This way the site would get a spectacular visitors centre.

The ‘new Villa’, designed and built by architect Nicholas Warner, was finished in 2009 and during the 2010 field season the decorators could move in. They started with the Red and the Green Room, simply because most of the decoration is still *in situ* and the missing parts were fairly easy to reconstruct. After completing these two rooms, work started on the surviving geometric registers from the Central Room. These could be finished in 2012 and the painters moved on to the huge dome, which must have been completely decorated as well. Since the dome of the original villa entirely collapsed not one fragment of the decoration is still in place. Even worse, large parts of the walls are smashed and of the dome there are only smithereens left. Even so, closely based on these remaining fragments a very probable solution for the decoration of the dome could be made by my colleague Martin Hense and me. Subsequently, the decoration was applied to the dome in only four weeks time by no more than two



Detail: cat from the west wall (see the scene of a couple playing a board game overhead).



Polis and Poseidon as red sketch, the other gods still drawn in pencil only.



In the lower register, Polis and running gods, headed towards Aphrodite and Ares to catch them 'red-handed' in a compromising situation... On the right, two men wearing Phrygian caps (guards?). In the upper register, more gods or heroes on thrones, a horse and two golden cups (meaning unclear).



The finished reconstructed decoration of the dome.



Projecting and tracing a figurative scene (Perseus and Andromeda).

Detail: female figure adorning a corner of the domed room.



The banquet scene reconstructed.



The banquet scene on the west wall before reconstruction, showing probably the family of the house enjoying a festive meal, accompanied by a musician playing the double aulos. In the register above the remains of a couple playing a board game can be seen.





Four stages of painting Polis.

painters, my extremely skilled assistant Tamer Ramadan and me.

While working on the geometrical patterns it struck me again and again how cleverly constructed they are. Every element is absolutely necessary, not a single line or a single dot can be omitted. The last details, often white highlights and a multitude of white dots and lines, bring the pattern to life. The dome pattern alone needed the dazzling amount of 17.920 lines, adding up to nearly a kilometre.

After finishing the dome I could finally move on to the spectacular figurative scenes of the Central Room.

While the geometrical patterns could be constructed using the original techniques (working from grid lines) the best result for copying the figurative scenes were obtained by projecting them on the walls and tracing them. In a first step, digital (or at least digitized) photographs had to be 'restored' and straightened out. They were then projected onto the walls and carefully traced with pencil. The next step was to paint the sketches in red, which is the first 'authentic' step since underlying red lines can be observed in several figures.

The original paintings are often faded and some pigments even have lost their original hue altogether. Green, for instance, has the habit of changing into a greyish tint. It would have made little sense to reconstruct these magnificent paintings to their former glory while using faded shades, thus the colours had partly to be reconstructed as well. The palette is not that extensive but was extremely well used by the skilful painters of the original.

While working on study sketches for the figurative scenes I noticed that the best result, which resembles the original as closely as possible, could be obtained by working in layers: on a foundation, several more or less transparent layers are applied, over the course of the process highlighting folds or the modelling of the body. Pure white is only used for the final details. This technique is similar to the traditional technique used for classical Orthodox and

Byzantine icons. I have no definite proof yet that the painters actually employed what I call 'icon technique' but the results of my own application of this method look very convincingly like the originals. Further study, especially of the original and other contemporary paintings, will most probably reveal more information.

While working on the copies I considered various ways of indicating (or not) original work and reconstruction. In the end, I decided not to differentiate between the two, simply because the results would have looked very odd. However, I did not invent images, scenes or figures, though always based at least on some small traces and details to build on. To help me with the reconstructions I used parallels, either from the Villa or from classical art.

Some details and scenes could not be completely reconstructed yet, as there are simply not enough traces on which to build a reliable reconstruction. One hopes that suitable parallels or more missing links will still be found, enabling us to complete more of the decoration.

For a future season I plan to decorate the Central Room making further use of the larger fragments found in the Villa. Now that there is a framework on the walls it should be possible to figure out where these larger blocks belong. Since some of the fragments are truly spectacular it would be a pity not to include them in the final reconstruction.

We are currently working on plans to prepare the house for opening to visitors to provide them with a unique visitors centre. In the meantime, more information and numerous images can be found at www.amheida.org and on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/pages/The-Villa-of-Serenus/161742407197412>.

□ Dorothea Schulz is an Egyptologist and artist who has worked on the Amheida Project for several seasons. The project could not have been realized without the generous funding of the Embassy of the Netherlands in Cairo, the tremendous help of the Netherlands Flemish Institute in Cairo and the indispensable support of its director, Roger Bagnall, and all the wonderful members of the Amheida and DOP team. Special thanks to Peter Sheldrick and to my assistants Sophia Cecci and Tamer Ramadan. All photographs courtesy of Excavations at Amheida, New York University, Dakhleh Oasis Project (and Christopher Kleihege).

Detail: sea monster from a Perseus and Andromeda scene.

