

Dakhleh Oasis Project
Columbia University
Excavations at Amheida 2005
Area 2.1: the wallpaintings of room 1

During the 2005 season the fragments of wallpainting retrieved during the clearance of this room with a domed ceiling in the 2004 season were studied in relation to the published record of the décor in the NE sector of the room, revealed by the DOP's partial clearance in 1979 (Leahy 1980), and the photographic record made when the whole room was cleared to floor level in 2004. Both the paintings in situ and those recovered as fragments pose considerable conservation problems, a fact already recognised at the time of the DOP's preliminary work; the paintings have been executed on a very thin layer of white lime plaster with no effective substratum to support them.

The fragmentary material recovered in 2004 falls into three distinct groups: four substantial pieces of wallpainting still attached to a mass of brick masonry (three fragments from the upper W. wall and part of the apron decorated with erotes from the niche in the S. wall); smaller blocks with areas of painting still attached to bricks (83 in all); and a large number of very fragmentary and friable pieces of painting, mostly with little supporting material still attached, stored in 48 x 48 cm wooden trays with a note of the fragments' findspot, where known. This latter material was the particular focus of this season's study: the fragments were examined in detail and sorted, to establish joins within the boxes and also with the larger fragments still attached to bricks; the trays were relabelled with the findspot information and a brief indication of the pictorial matter, to facilitate further study; and the contents of densely-packed trays were redistributed between two or more trays, resulting in a new total of 133 trays. These have been regrouped for storage according to their findspots.

The decoration of the room can be categorised as four principal areas above a shallow, plain dado: on the lower part of the walls, still in situ, is a series of panels painted with a variety of geometric designs, the patterns of which can be paralleled in contemporary mosaic pavements, but are here executed in a greater profusion of colours. Two of these panels show two phases of decoration, with a second layer of white plaster and a new pattern superimposed on the first. Above this panel zone, the wall is decorated with figure scenes; on the E. and W. walls these are divided into discrete compartments by black linear frames, which also serve as groundlines and in one case carry Greek captions to the pictures (E. wall: Leahy 1980; only one fragment with Greek letters has been identified amongst the detached pieces). Larger figure scenes are painted on the N. and S. walls, that on the W. half of the N. wall (below Perseus and Andromeda) having an unrelated (and more crudely painted) sub-zone of two panels, that at the left showing a servant in a decorated tunic standing beside wine jars in a rack, then at the right a nude child reclining on a bolster - probably a depiction of Harpocrates, originally featuring a snake (cf. his association with the infant Herakles, attested in bronzes)

which has been obscured by the later overpainting of cherub-like wings. A number of the boxed fragments retrieved from this part of the room are clearly related to these figures - much pink/brown skin and drapery - but do not hold out the likelihood of substantial additions being made to the imagery of what survives in situ. From the central part of the wall come fragments of a colourful geometric pattern based on lozenges which was apparently above the doorway.

Of the figure scene on the S. wall, to right of the niche, there remains in situ only a horse's head some distance above a reclining turbaned woman, details reminiscent of scenes in which an Emperor rides in triumph above prostrate barbarians, but not as yet clearly identifiable as such here. The large number of painted fragments related to this wall show foliage and dark clothing, but they are in bad condition, some of them much weathered, and no coherent picture has so far emerged from them.

The pendentives of the dome, where the plaster coarsens, each contained a standing female figure with nimbus and green wings, arms upraised and hands holding the ends of a pink petal garland arching overhead, and a red-brown ribbon falling in a descending arc. Whether these ribbon/garland motifs formed a continuous ornament around the lower part of the dome is not yet clear from the numerous detached fragments. The upper part of two of these pink and smiling figures can be partly reconstructed from the fragments. They can be recognized as sisters to the winged females who support zodiacs and portrait tondos in Palmyrene art, as well as the supporting figures of painted zodiac tomb ceilings at Muzawaqqa and Salamuni, but the nature of their interaction with the design of the domed ceiling is not yet confirmed (see below).

In situ on the W. wall is a scene of a family at table; the three large detached blocks from this wall display material of a more mythological kind comparable to that already known on the E. wall: Orpheus with the animals, in a composition echoing contemporary mosaic pavements; a chariot scene which is evidently not the most commonly-encountered subject of this kind (the abduction of Persephone) but features a male figure in military dress standing beside a female who is not being carried off protesting (a scene of apotheosis, perhaps); and a group of figures including a woman restraining another person who is brandishing a sword. These are all in an incomplete state, but many further related fragments have been identified amongst the smaller detached pieces, and reassembly should aid specific identification. This is a priority in conservation of the detached pieces but will require some highly complex work. Most surprisingly, there are also fragments of a second lyre-playing figure comparable to Orpheus.

Detached fragments of the E. wall recognisably belong to the upper register of figure scenes, of which the lower part remains in situ, as well as the further southward extension of the lowest register of 'captioned' mythological scenes; but despite their lively content, no identifiable subject-matter has yet emerged from these very disjointed survivors, even when individual figures are recognizable, such as a satyr and maenad in lively dispute [illn.], or the upper part of a goddess, probably Isis in one of her syncretistic forms, a purple veil arching over head. The eclectic nature of the room's décor, combining hectic patterns, literary and mythological subjects, and popular religion, makes it difficult to predict likely subject-matter.

Most problematic is the decoration of the dome, surviving in numerous but shattered fragments which

give evidence of three quite different themes: polychrome scale-pattern ; a geometric design of interlocking shapes outlined in black on yellow to brown backgrounds, suggesting the imitation of wooden panelling; and a black-ground design with repeat floral motifs sketched in red and yellow. There is little evidence on the fragments for significant junction points of these three designs, to suggest their interrelationship and original layout. The scale-pattern was most likely in the circular 'shield' format familiar in many Alexandrian mosaics, and would thus have formed the centrepiece of the ceiling, as it does in the mammisi of the temple of Tutu at Kellis, and also in the dome of tomb-chapel 25 at Bagawat, where the circle is supported on the outspread wings of the eagles painted in the pendentives. No fragments show a direct relationship between the female supporters here and the scale-pattern, nor is there anything to indicate a central motif (which would typically be a gorgoneion or a portrait) framed within the scale-pattern.

Detailed work on the iconographic minutiae of these fragments, and the significance of their findspots, is needed before a fuller picture can be obtained of this remarkable room, and its highly-coloured mélange of pictorial and decorative themes. A carefully-thought-out conservation strategy will also be needed to deal with this very frail material.

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