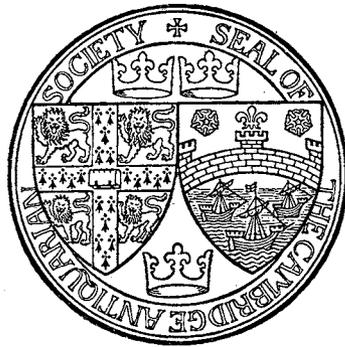


PROCEEDINGS  
OF THE  
CAMBRIDGE ANTIQUARIAN  
SOCIETY



VOLUME XLIV

JANUARY 1950 TO DECEMBER 1950

CAMBRIDGE  
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# PAINTED WALL-PLASTER FROM ROMAN VILLAS IN THE CAMBRIDGE REGION

JOAN LIVERSIDGE, M.LITT.

PAINTED wall-plaster is one of the most characteristic decorative features of the Romano-British country farms and houses commonly known as 'villas', and it is customarily found in some quantity when any such site is excavated. As it is fragile and usually only recovered in small fragments, little heed has been paid to it in the past, except in the rare cases where some interesting pattern has been observed, with the result that the amount of material surviving and available for study is sadly limited. Under these circumstances, the thirty or more fragments from local sites excavated by the Hon. Richard Neville about a century ago and now preserved in the Braybrooke Collection, in the Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Ethnology, are not without importance. On first inspection few of them proved to be labelled, but the discovery in a portfolio of drawings of four illustrations in colour of finds from the villas at Ickleton and Hadstock assisted in their identification, as well as preserving for us further evidence of the colour and design of fragments of plaster which have unfortunately not survived.

In his account of his discoveries at the Hadstock villa in 1852, the excavator says: 'the painted decorations of the walls... judging from the numerous well-finished fragments selected from among the ruins, must have been of a superior description. The colours retain their brilliance, and the designs appear to have been of a highly enriched character.'<sup>1</sup> That he did not overstate the case is clear from the two plates illustrating this plaster which have come to light. These show thirty-six fragments of varying designs, four of which can now be identified among the Collection in the Museum, where they bear testimony to the accuracy of J. Youngman, the artist. Plates I and II are photographs of his illustrations. In the majority of cases the designs are painted on a white ground, and nearly half of them consist of the bands and lines of colour used to divide up the walls into panels. Red, black and yellow are the predominating shades for these, while an olive green appears on Plate I, Nos. 9 and 12, and Plate I, No. 15, portrays a red stripe on a lavender-blue ground. Some pieces show circles and other geometric patterns, of which the most striking are on Plate I, Nos. 2*a* and *b*, and No. 11.<sup>2</sup> Plate I, No. 2*a*, depicts a yellow quatrefoil, or four-pointed geometric star, in a red circle (radius 1 in.) within a broader green circle (radius 2.5 in.). Near this is a red leaf-shaped motif outlined in yellow, while part of another in blue and yellow may be observed above it. A similar red and yellow motif occurs on Plate I, No. 2*b*, and No. 4 may be another fragment of

<sup>1</sup> *Arch. Journ.* vol. VIII, p. 31.

<sup>2</sup> Museum numbers 48.1036*a*, *b*; 48.1037.

the same design. Plate I, No. 11, shows a quatrefoil, this time painted green, and surrounded by a yellow circle enclosed within a red one, and Nos. 1 and 3 have circles coloured in two shades of red, outlined in black on the outside, on a yellow and white ground. Other designs of interest include Plate I, No. 21, and Plate II, Nos. 1 and 4, which show decoration with splashes of paint or stippling, and Plate I, Nos. 10, 18 and 19, which show parts of trellis patterns. More unusual motifs occur on Plate II, No. 5, sea-blue outlined in white on a yellow ground,<sup>1</sup> and Nos. 6 and 7, both in yellow on a ground of grass-green.

We turn now to the finds from the Ickleton villa where most of the rooms seem to have had decorated walls. Much plaster was found there by the excavator in 1848, some of it, apparently, in a rubbish pit. The prevailing colours included 'red; red and white with black stripes; blue; a greyish blue spotted with red and yellow; yellow, red and white. . . . The walls of some of the rooms appear to have been ornamented with a ground of deep rich red, divided into panels by borders of various colours, in which were interspersed birds, flowers, stars and fanciful objects.'<sup>2</sup> A few pieces of this plaster illustrated the published report of the Ickleton excavations, and they include an interesting design of a scarlet fleur-de-lis on a buff ground divided up by black and white stripes in a lattice pattern.<sup>3</sup> Another fragment, Plate III, No. 6, is painted with white, buff, and red stripes divided off from one another by black and red lines, the buff and red stripes being further decorated with short, diagonal lines in brown and black, several of which have white blobs on the end.<sup>4</sup> Plate III, No. 4, shows one of two surviving pieces<sup>5</sup> of some kind of foliate pattern consisting of white buds, perhaps on a branch, on a red ground. Better preserved is the fragment shown as Plate III, No. 5,<sup>6</sup> which seems to portray the end of a building outlined in black on a brown ground, the roof being indicated by fine reddish lines.

Most remarkable among the plaster surviving from Ickleton are the two larger pieces illustrated on Plate IV, *a* and *b*. From its curved shape *b* must have come from the angle of a wall, perhaps from a doorway, and it depicts a rose, carefully painted in varying shades of red, with small green leaves, on a white ground.<sup>7</sup> On one side of it are curved lines of dark red and red and black stripes. More striking still is the other fragment<sup>8</sup> which portrays a human foot and part of the drapery of a dancing female figure, perhaps a nymph or Maenad. The foot is painted in flesh tints and the drapery is pale green, with a darker brownish border. The ground is pale buff and green. Since the foot measures at least 8 in. in length, the figure must have been life-size, and it indicates that we have here the relic of a large-scale figure scene.

In addition to the examples described above, there are also a number of plaster fragments preserved in the Braybrooke Collection, the provenance of which is unhappily not known. They were presumably all found by Neville in the course of his

<sup>1</sup> Mus. no. 48.1036*d*.

<sup>3</sup> Mus. no. 48.1035*a*.

<sup>5</sup> Mus. nos. 48.1035*c*; 48.1027.

<sup>7</sup> Mus. no. 48.1034.

<sup>2</sup> *Journ. Brit. Arch. Ass.* vol. iv, p. 361.

<sup>4</sup> Mus. no. 48.1043.

<sup>6</sup> Illustrated upside down, op. cit. n. 4. Mus. no. 48.1045.

<sup>8</sup> Mus. no. 48.1033.

excavations, and apart from the two sites already mentioned, he records the discovery of painted plaster at four other places in the Cambridge region. At the Bartlow villa, a site on which, in view of the rich burials in the neighbourhood we might expect some interesting wall decoration, some seems to have been found in the well, recalling the finds in the rubbish pit at Ickleton. Neville, however, only remarks that 'Many remnants of painted fresco prove... that the walls were ornamented.'<sup>1</sup> Plaster painted in various patterns is also recorded from the building at Ashdon,<sup>2</sup> and fragments decorated in red and green in a kind of trellis-design were discovered at the house at Wenden.<sup>3</sup> Other finds were made during the excavation of the site of the small Roman town of Iceanum (Great Chesterford),<sup>4</sup> a mile or two from Ickleton. The pieces which now survive may come from any of these sites, or, indeed, from Hadstock or Ickleton. They include some rather indistinct versions of foliate motifs with small white buds or flowers and green leaves, or with larger green leaves, on a red ground. There exist two fragments of the design shown on Plate III, No. 1,<sup>5</sup> which seems to consist of green and black leaves apparently twined round a brown support, perhaps a pillar, again on a dark red ground. Another fragment, Plate III, No. 2,<sup>6</sup> shows a single red flower stencilled on a black ground, and a third, Plate III, No. 3,<sup>7</sup> has an odd little motif in red outlined in white, on a background of the same colour. One piece, not illustrated, depicts a band of scarlet stippling on a white ground.<sup>8</sup>

On first examination this assemblage of fragments does not, perhaps, convey a very striking picture of local standards of wall decoration in Roman times; and the study of published accounts of other plaster found near Cambridge does little beyond rousing our curiosity still further. Painted plaster was noted without description on the sites of buildings at Comberton,<sup>9</sup> Grantchester,<sup>10</sup> and Shepreth,<sup>11</sup> and it must surely have occurred in the extensive villa known to exist at Litlington. At Ridgewell<sup>12</sup> stripes of yellow, blue, purple, brown, crimson and green were found, on pieces described as being 2-3 yards in extent, and much wall-plaster coloured white, red and black awaits discovery in the remains of the house which lies beneath Burwell Castle.<sup>13</sup> Most tantalizing of all is the account of the villa at Swaffham Prior,<sup>14</sup> where the decoration of the hypocaust wing included elaborate floral devices in yellow, black and red, with bands of vermilion, blue and green. No detailed description or drawings of this apparently survive, so we must look farther afield for material to help us to build up some picture of what these decorated walls may have looked like to the occupants of the villas.

<sup>1</sup> *Arch. Journ.* vol. x, pp. 17, 18.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* p. 15.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* p. 357.

<sup>4</sup> Royal Commission on Historical Monuments (England). *An Inventory of the Historical Monuments in Essex*, vol. 1, p. xxiii.

<sup>5</sup> Mus. nos. 48.1046; 48.1026.

<sup>6</sup> Mus. no. 48.1040.

<sup>7</sup> Mus. no. 48.1041.

<sup>8</sup> Mus. no. 48.1023.

<sup>9</sup> *Gentleman's Magazine* (1842), 1, p. 2.

<sup>10</sup> *C.A.S. Proceedings*, vol. xxii (1921), p. 124.

<sup>11</sup> *C.A.S. Reports*, vol. xlvi, p. lx.

<sup>12</sup> *Archaeologia*, vol. xiv, p. 65.

<sup>13</sup> *C.A.S. Proceedings*, vol. xxxvi (1936), p. 127.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* vol. ii (1892/3), p. 233. *Cambridge Review*, 24 November 1892.

Much of the wall-plaster recovered during excavations consists of fragments painted with one colour only, or else with stripes and lines in various shades on a contrasting ground. Examples of these have already been described. They must have belonged to plain dados covering the lower part of the walls, and to simple outlined panels painted at the higher levels. Some of the panels were obviously decorated to imitate wall-veneers of marble or other stone, of the type which characterized the early 'Incrustation' style in Italy, at Pompeii and on other sites, and which persisted in a modified form throughout the Roman era. The 'marbled' effect was produced by splashing on paint with a brush, and no attempt was made to imitate veining. Plaster with decoration of this kind is not uncommon in Britain, and a particularly fine selection of it, imitating different shades of granite, from the Roman villa at Box,<sup>1</sup> may be seen in the Museum at Devizes. Several examples of it occurred at Hadstock, such as those on Plate I, No. 21, with dark red splashes, and on Plate II, No. 4, with black, dark red and white markings, all on a pink ground. The fragment shown on Plate II, No. 1, with white splashes on a yellow ground bordered with a white line and a pink stripe, may also be of this type.

Geometric designs such as the circles illustrated from Hadstock occur quite frequently on Roman sites, but there seem to be no exact parallels to the quatrefoils and the leaf-shaped motif which accompanies them. The design on Plate III, No. 3, also appears to be unique, although motifs which bear some likeness to it can be seen in Taunton Museum on fragments from the Roman site at Stoke-sub-Hamdon. A close parallel to the pattern on Plate II, No. 5, seems to have existed at the villa in Whittlebury Forest near Towcester,<sup>2</sup> and the scarlet fleur-de-lis found at Ickleton bears an interesting resemblance to a pattern in the unique collection of wall-plaster recently discovered at Lullingstone.<sup>3</sup> Floral and foliate motifs of the type of Plate III, Nos. 1 and 3, are also popular designs frequently described in published accounts of wall-plaster. Particularly striking is the exquisite leaf-spray fragment from London.<sup>4</sup> The Ickleton rose, however, with its shaded petals and green leaves, has so far no rival.

Birds and stars were also motifs described by the excavator at Ickleton. These have failed to survive, but it is possible that the stars were really geometric flowers, resembling the twelve-petalled feature in white and chocolate brown described as a star or a flower in the report on some plaster found at the Castle Dykes villa in Yorkshire.<sup>5</sup> Painted representations of birds rarely survive, but examples are known, as, for instance, the bird and branch on a white ground recorded at Acton Scott in Shropshire,<sup>6</sup> and the bird found at Brading which, it is suggested, may have been a parrot.<sup>7</sup> Representations of buildings are also seldom found in Britain, but there

<sup>1</sup> Described in *The Wiltshire Archaeological Magazine*, vol. xxxiii, p. 244.

<sup>2</sup> *Journ. Brit. Arch. Ass.* vol. vii, Pl. XII.

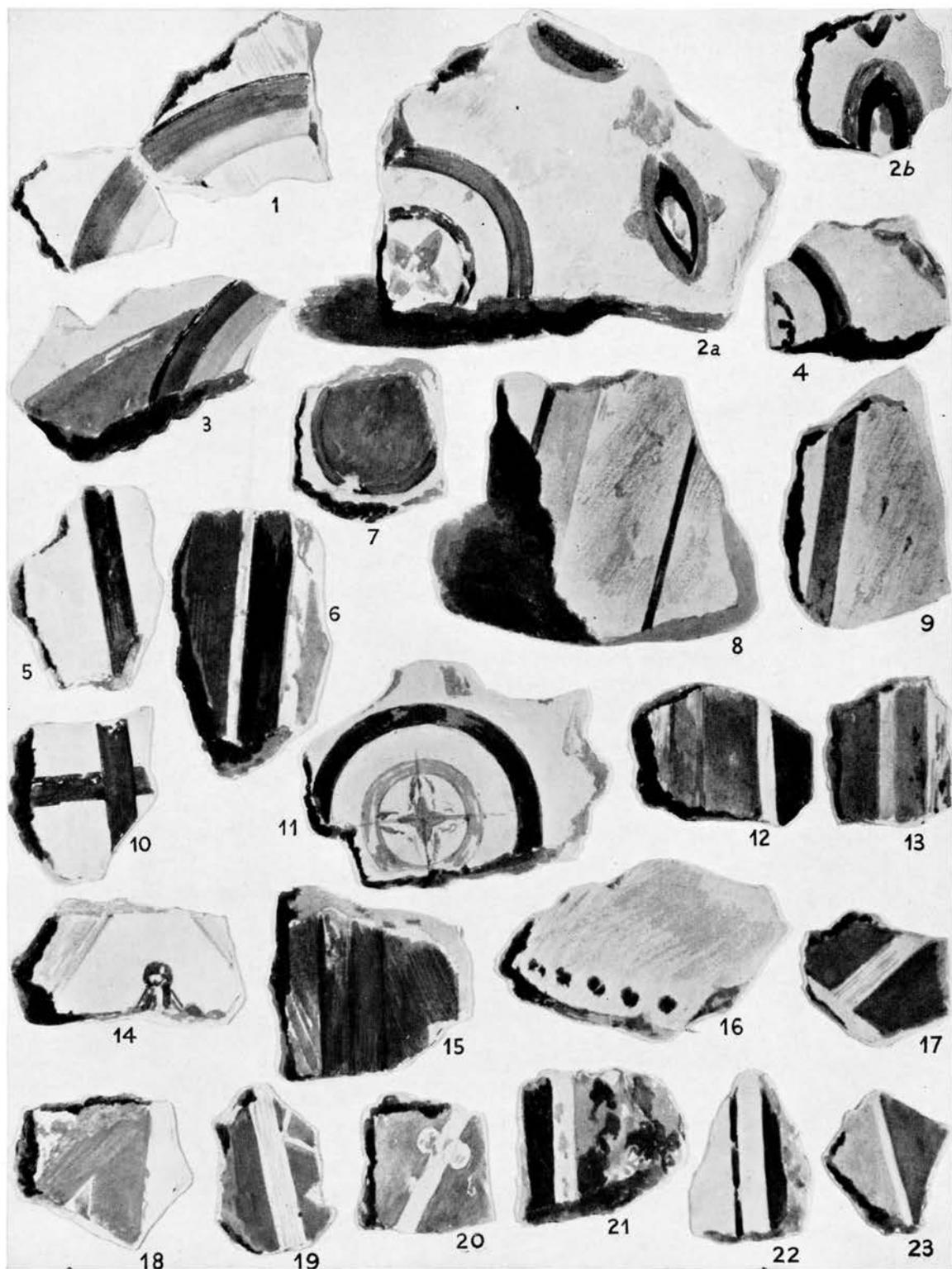
<sup>3</sup> For a brief account of the Lullingstone plaster, see *Archaeological News Letter*, vol. II, no. 10 (March 1950), p. 165. For permission to refer to this unpublished material I am indebted to Lieut.-Colonel Meates, F.S.A., and C. M. Nicholson, Esq., F.R.Hist.S., F.S.A. (Scot.), F.S.G.

<sup>4</sup> *London Museum Catalogue*, no. 3, 'London in Roman Times', Pl. XI.

<sup>5</sup> *Arch. Journ.* vol. xxxii, p. 138.

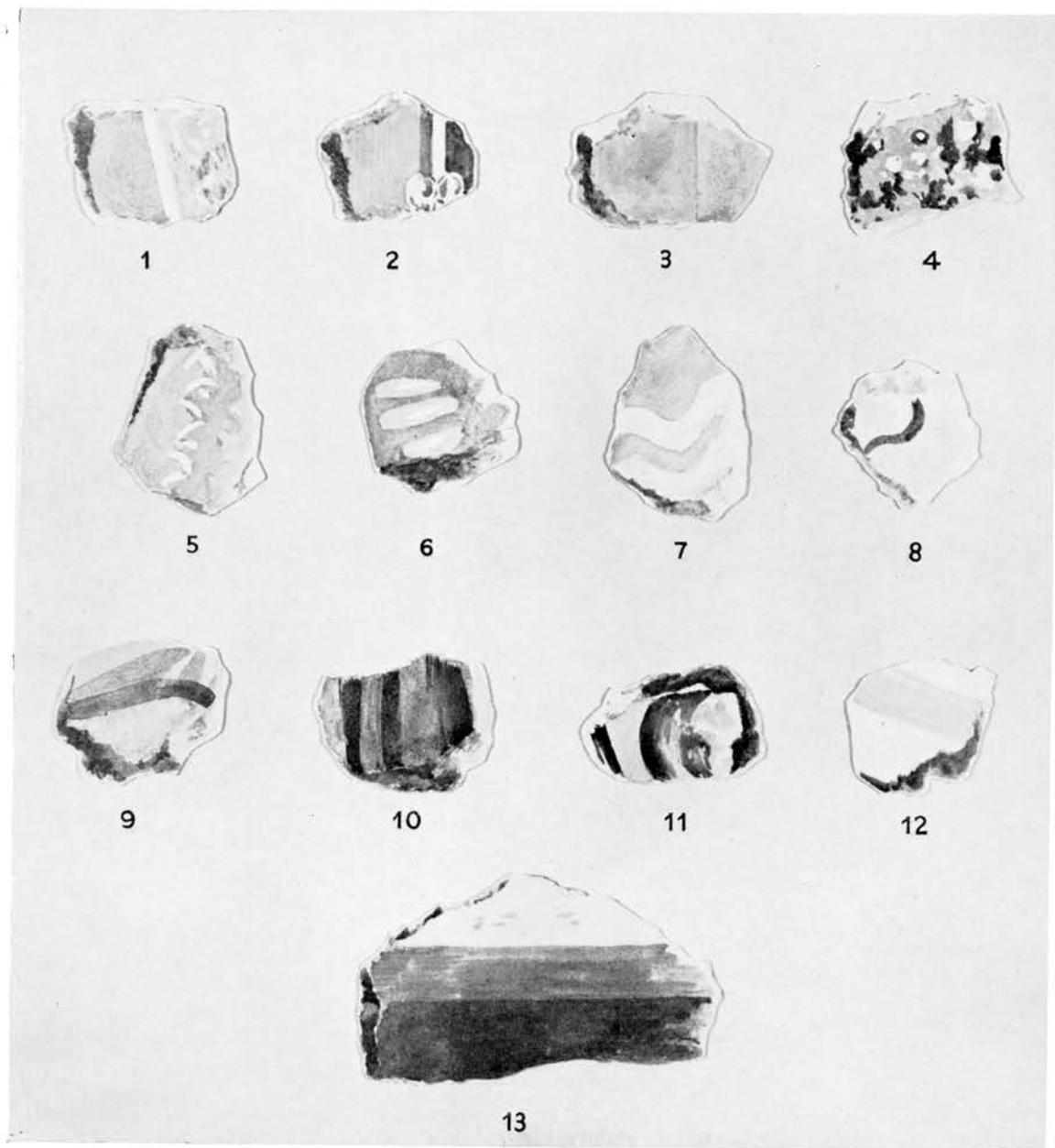
<sup>6</sup> *Victoria County History of Shropshire*, vol. I, p. 259.

<sup>7</sup> J. E. and F. G. H. Price, *The Roman Buildings at Morton, near Brading* (1831), p. 12.

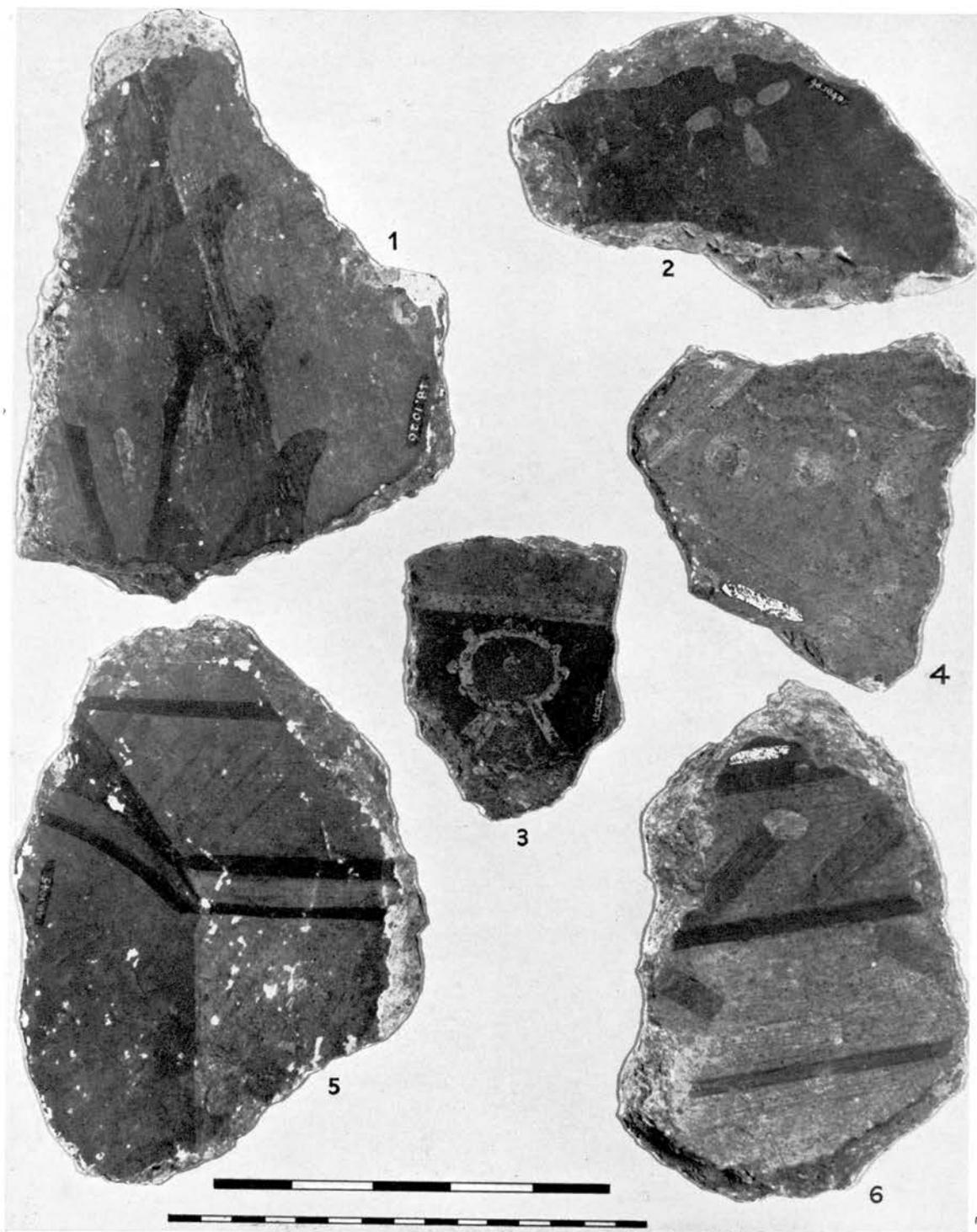


Fragments of painted wall-plaster from Hadstock, as drawn by J. Youngman  
(approximately one-third natural size)

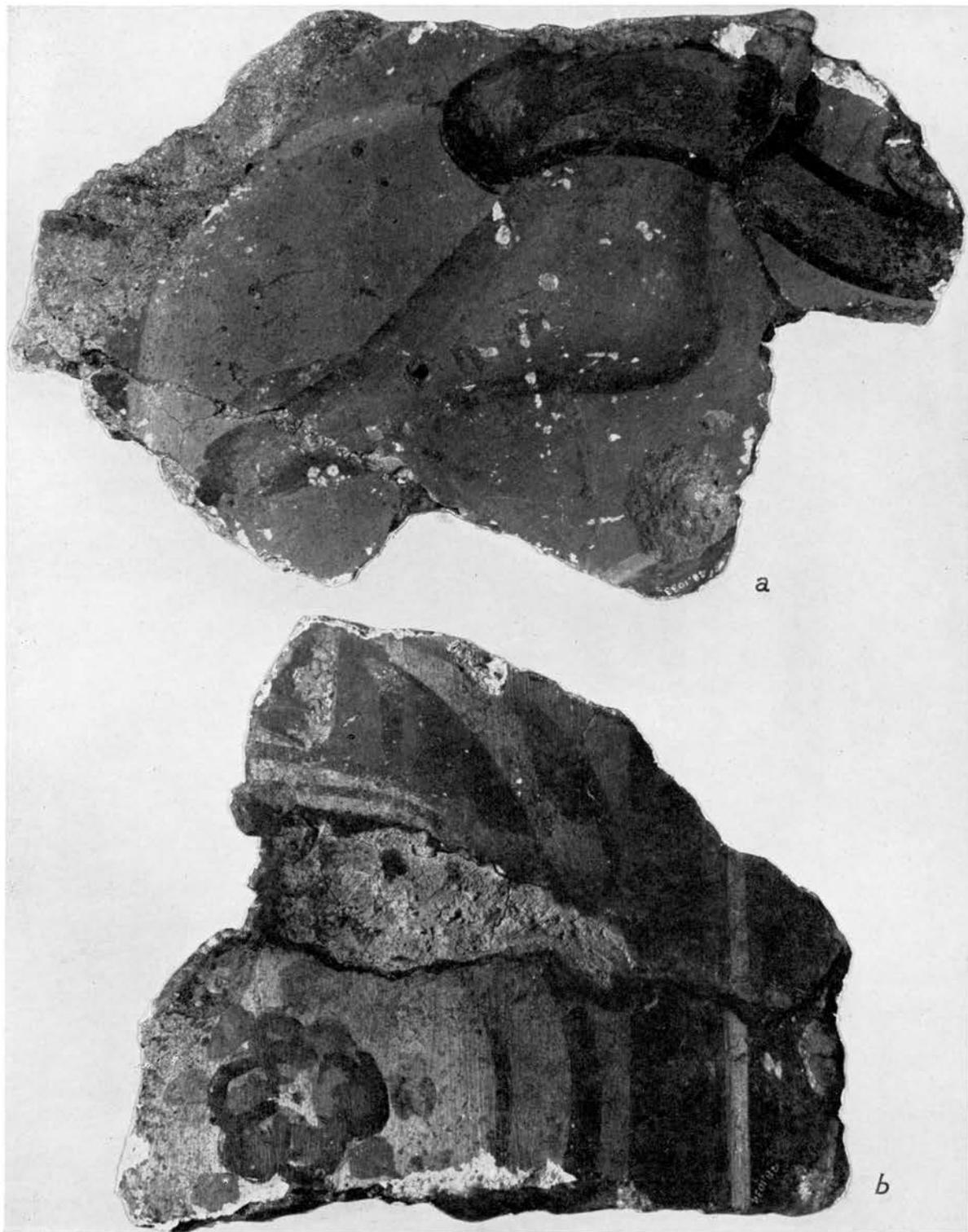
PLATE II



Fragments of painted wall-plaster from Hadstock, as drawn by J. Youngman  
(approximately one-third natural size)



Fragments of painted wall-plaster from the Braybrooke Collection:  
Nos. 1-3, provenance not known: Nos. 4-6, from Ickleton (half natural size)



Fragments of painted wall-plaster from Ickleton (half natural size)

seems to be no doubt that a building is what Plate III, No. 5, is intended to depict. The closest parallel to it so far published is a graffito sketch of a building scratched on a piece of plaster found in 1933 on the site at Hucclecote in Gloucestershire. This has the same type of gable-end as the Ickleton fragment and Professor Hawkes suggests that it may even be a sketch of one of the 'elevations' of the Hucclecote villa itself.<sup>1</sup> It is tempting to see here too a picture of part of the house at Ickleton.

Lastly, we return to the major discovery from Ickleton, the human foot. Evidence for the portrayal of human figures in Roman Britain at all is rare, and always tantalizingly incomplete. Small faces occur, such as the one sketched in red and yellow described in the report on the villa at Box already mentioned,<sup>2</sup> and others have been found in London. Fragments of plaster showing parts of two naked figures, as well as the arm and part of the body of a man brandishing a spear, were found at Otford in Kent<sup>3</sup>—perhaps a Virgilian scene, as the associated fragment of painted inscription suggests. But it is doubtful if any of these were life-size. The only evidence for a large-scale figure scene comparable to the one which must have existed at Ickleton is found in Lysons's illustration<sup>4</sup> of some plaster found *in situ* on a wall of the villa at Comb End, Colesbourne, Gloucestershire, in 1779. This shows the lower part of a large scene, about 135 ft. in length, containing the feet and part of the draperies of several figures, together with portions of some pillars, panels, and a design of squares probably representing masonry. An orange 'masonry' dado runs below, the figures were outlined in black, shaded with red, on a white ground, and the pillars and 'masonry' were outlined in black.

Although it is difficult to reconstruct the actual schemes of wall decoration even when a good selection of material is available from a site, we have enough evidence to prove that these paintings were extremely varied, both in colour and design. The Hadstock plaster described above shows a wide range of colours, and out of thirty-six pieces only two show the same motif; a similar variety must have existed at Ickleton, Swaffham Prior, and probably other local sites. The same types of decoration were obviously current in both town and country villas in Britain, and they in their turn show a strong family likeness to those which occur on Roman continental sites in north-west Europe. How far the designs of our villa walls fell below the standards of Rome and Pompeii it is difficult to say, in view of the fragmentary state of our material. But such discoveries as the scene from Comb End, the Otford figures, and the Ickleton foot show us that Romano-British wall-painters were not without ambition.

<sup>1</sup> *Transactions of the Bristol and Gloucestershire Archaeological Society*, vol. LV, p. 353 and Pl. XIV.

<sup>2</sup> *Op. cit.* n. 25, p. 263.

<sup>3</sup> R. P. Hinks, *Catalogue of the Greek, Etruscan and Roman Paintings and Mosaics in the British Museum*, 1933, no. 84, p. 56, fig. 64.

<sup>4</sup> S. Lysons, *Reliquiae Britannicae Romanae*, vol. II, Pl. I.

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