

Painted Plaster by Howard Mason

Fragments of both plain and painted plaster-rendering were retrieved from Phases III (turret infill) and IV (rampart wall rebuild) deposits. In addition a plaster render, with red painted lines suggesting stone coursework, was found *in situ* on the external rear face of the corner turret (Phase II). This has been discussed on p. 10.

It should be noted that the types of finished decorative plaster recovered from the Phase III deposits were not necessarily restricted to the 'important' buildings of the fortress or those associated with recreational purposes such as the Fortress Baths. The nearest buildings to the interval turret where this material was recovered are the barrack blocks and the presumed utilitarian buildings found between the rampart and the *via sagularis*. The occurrence of painted plaster in fortress barrack blocks has been noted and discussed by Davison (1996, 176-7). A more detailed discussion, arranged by phase, follows.

Phase III

This phase incorporated three contexts (D4, D5 and D6) representing the use of the basement room of the excavated interval turret as a dump containing ash, charcoal and burnt clay probably derived, in the main, from the clean out of ovens similar to those noted behind the rampart elsewhere (e.g. Nash-Williams 1931, 123; Evans and Metcalf 1992, 9-13). This material was thrown in through the rear entrance to this basement room. Deposition had perhaps begun by the end of the first century and continued well into the second century. No plaster was recovered from the earliest layers (D6). The deposition of painted plaster only started occurring in context D5 – dated by associated pottery to the Trajanic-Hadrianic period. A fragment of plain, lime washed plaster representing 0.0078m² and painted plaster representing 0.021m² were recovered from this context.

Colours represented were: pale blue, light and dark olive green black, orange-red and brick red. Fragments of burnished brick red painted surface noted by Zienkiewicz in the Fortress Baths collection (1986a, 294, 296, 302) and characterising the 'better quality Roman wall paintings' (Ling 1991, 204) were found from this context. At least five different types of plaster were noted (determined by colour and the character of inclusions). There was a maximum of two coats before a painted surface and the maximum thickness of any single coat was 30mm.

D4 is stratigraphically later, but a continuation of the same deposit as D5. The coarse pottery provides a Hadrianic to Antonine date for the context with a *terminus post quem* of A.D. 150/60. It produced a 0.12m² of plain, lime-washed plaster of which a couple of fragments showed a second, heavily brushed lime slurry coat giving a rilled surface (perhaps analogous to the 'combed surface' noted by Zienkiewicz 1986a, 289, 294). One fragment showed distinct lathmarks >25mm width on the undersurface. This fragment was heavy and dense suggesting its use on a wall rather than a ceiling. There was a total of 0.0081m² of painted plaster. The colours represented were brick red and pale orange. One piece had an uniform dark magenta paint with a scintillating micro-crystalline surface perhaps due to the addition of calcite crystals to the paint pigment to cause a reflective surface (see Ling 1991, 204 for discussion). There was a total of eight fragments bearing the distinctive burnished red paint. One piece had an imprint on the back surface of a white curvilinear painted line suggesting that the plaster had been applied to a previously painted surface. Another piece showed the plastering and repainting of a previously painted surface. It consisted of a bottom coat 8mm thick (or possibly two coats both 4mm thick) of plaster which was given a red burnished finish. This was subsequently covered with two coats of plaster, the undercoat 3mm thick and the

final coat 4.5mm thick, which was given a red burnished finish. Another piece had a white painted decoration over a red burnished background consisting of a curvilinear line, and perhaps a bud, suggestive of a vegetal design.

Nothing was retrieved from the Phase III deposits that has not been discussed in detail from the larger collection recovered from the Fortress Baths (Zienkiewicz 1986a, 281-302). Zienkiewicz suggests the use of burnished plaster was for surfaces liable to be subjected to splashing – implying a water-proofing function (*ibid.*, 296 - see also Ling 1991, 204 for a further discussion of burnished surfaces). A polishing stone with traces of red paint on it was retrieved from the Fortress Baths; perhaps this was the tool type used to achieve this effect (Zienkiewicz 1986b, 215, no. 43).

No evidence of work requiring specialist skills over and above those which could be expected to be available at a legionary fortress was recovered. There is no evidence of the careful multi-layering with increasing quantities of marble or chalk found in true fresco work, however *fresco secco* and *tempra* techniques may have been applied. (For discussion of painting techniques cf. Davy and Ling 1982, 56-8; Ling 1991, 198-221).

The D4-D5 deposit represents a series of episodic dumps of waste occurring during the second century. The plaster recovered probably represents material accrued from the demolition of structures because the usual practice of redecorating a room involved re-surfacing the existing plaster rather than removing it. The amount of plaster rendering increased in quantity by more than three times from the earlier (D5) to the later deposits (D4) (from 0.023m² to 0.128m²). The variety of different types of plaster indicates that the original source of the plaster was from more than one room or structure if it was applied as an external treatment.

Phase IV

These deposits are associated with the two rebuilds of the perimeter wall. The contexts from which the plaster is derived are the infills of the cutback of the rampart front to repair the rampart walkway after the patching of the wall. The only significant painted plaster is the area of 'false jointing' rendering noticed *in situ* in Phase II and noted above. There was a total of fifteen fragments from the rebuild of the straight section (rebuild II) and twenty-four fragments from the rebuild of the corner section (rebuild I). These are residual deposits possibly derived from the rendering of the original (Phase II) perimeter wall that was being repaired.