

Roman Wall Plaster Assessment

Site code: ONE94

Undated

Author: Richenda Goffin



Museum of London Archaeology
© **Museum of London Archaeology**
Mortimer Wheeler House, 46 Eagle Wharf
Road, London N1 7ED
tel 0207 410 2200 fax 0207 410 2201 email
mola@mola.org.uk



1. Introduction

A total of 54 shoeboxes and 3 body boxes of Roman painted wall plaster were recovered from the excavations at Poultry. The wall plaster was initially cleaned and packed on site. Where necessary, conservation and reconstruction was undertaken by finds personnel and MoLAS Conservators.

Area Number	Box quantity
Area 3	8 shoe + 1 slab
Area 8	4 shoe
Area 9	19 shoe
Areas 7-11 Miscellaneous	1 shoe
Area 10	6 shoe + 3 body
Area 12	4 shoe + 3 slabs
Evaluation (Shaft 4)	2 shoe
TOTAL:	54 shoeboxes (equiv) + 3 body

2. The assemblage

Figures in bold characters refer to groups and sub-groups (i.e. **907/8** would refer to group 7 subgroup 8, in Area 9; **1204/12** would refer to group 4 subgroup 12 in Area 12).

Area 3 (Observe and Record Area)

Fragments of a highly decorated middle zone were recovered from [4907] as well as other associated contexts. It is hoped that this deposit may be successfully correlated with land-use data in order to identify a source building.

Several pieces of high quality plaster were lifted and subsequently reconstructed into a small block. The underlying mortar backing or *arriccio* was substantial. The elaborate decoration consists of an architecturally based scheme of the top of a group of fluted Corinthian columns with capitals, supporting part of an entablature festooned with garlands in green and cream. The light source appears to be coming from the left, and it seems as though the painting may have been set at slightly higher than eye level in the wall. This suggests that it could form part of the middle zone of a large scene. The spaces between the columns are painted in what would have originally been bright green, but this has now faded. No apparent pecking marks on the surface of the plaster were observed to indicate that it formed only one phase of decoration.

Decorations based on architectural schemes are uncommon in Britain. Such elaborate designs would require a painter with some expertise in painting perspective and shading, rather than a mere craftsman who could paint two-dimensional decorations. The wall scheme fits into a well-known category of types recognised elsewhere in the Empire, especially in Campania itself. It can be called 'trompe d'oeil', since it simulates a real architectural perspective. Unlike some of the other examples in Britain, it does appear to be a realistic depiction of the architectural elements, rather than a somewhat schematic and inconsistent portrayal. This may suggest that it is earlier rather than later in date, perhaps second century (Ling, 1981, page 32). The plaster is of considerable significance not only for its relevance to the site, but also to the broader picture of wall plaster studies in Britain and beyond.

Further fragments from [4907] were also recovered, including pieces which had been painted with more expensive pigments such as Egyptian blue and cinnabar (mercuric sulphide). Abraded fragments of red ochre divided into zones were also found, and may have originated from another wall.

Material which is directly comparable to the architectural scheme was found in context [4902] and [4909]. This includes some large fragments painted plain green which are made from substantial mortar layers and are possibly pecked. They may form part of the decoration at one side of the main decoration. Other fragments show remnants of a linear design which may represent parts of columns.

In addition there was evidence from [4902] of fragments belonging to a second phase of decoration. These were characterised by having a much less thick *arriccio* and a crude decoration of a white background with red ochre linear decoration which is typical of a secondary phase.

Context [4696] contained fragments of an abraded dado design, with a maroon background with black, pink and white stipples. Very little of the second layer of the *arriccio* has survived.

Area 8

Fragments from [7434] **809/16** and [8378] **806/20 (Post Hadrianic Fire)** have similar characteristics to the reconstructed slab from the Observe and Record Area. Several fragments show evidence of cinnabar as a pigment.

Other fragments belonging to a discrete post-Hadrianic grouping were found in [8356] **808/1**, which consisted of a small quantity of good quality smooth red ochre plaster.

Contexts [8310] **806/7**, [8312] **806/7**, and [8139] **807/5** contained fragments of very discoloured plaster which was probably originally white with red ochre banding. Context [8312] has fragments which indicate a second phase of plaster.

Plaster which still adhered to the mudbrick walling was recovered from [8574] **804/53 (Open Area 17, Boudican/Hadrianic fire debris)**. It was most insubstantial and consisted of a thin mortar layer with a white background *intonaco* and grey stripe. In addition a fragment of quarter moulding from the wall/floor join was painted a watery red.

Area 9

Plaster from [3491] **907/48** consisted of fragments of a homogenous nature, including some chamfered fragments from a window or doorway. They are decorated with grey blue and orange bands. The surfaces are very abraded, and some fragments show possible evidence of keying. Some have maroon bands. This material came from the backfill for a secondary wall on the north side of the hypocausted room in Building 25 (mid 3rd century).

Substantial quantities of plaster were found in [3643]. They consisted of fragments with large mortar layers, similar in type to the main slab from [4907]. The decoration is abraded but appears to consist of faded pink and maroon decoration with swirls which may form part of a dado at the bottom of the wall. Contexts [3596] and [3641] also contain fragments possibly related to the same scheme. The plaster also came from the same backfilling of the additional wall of Building 25.

Fragments with Egyptian blue were found in [3205] **909/7**, [3596] **907/19**, [3641] **907/19** and [3700] **907/27**. These came from demolition dumps on the west side of Building 25, makeup for the secondary wall described above, and later makeup layers under the apsidally ended modification to the hypocausted room.

Fragments from the upper layer of plaster from *in-situ* material from a blocked-in doorway were retained from [3738] **907/8** in Building 25. The surface was decorated with discoloured swirls crudely painted in small zones of different shades of pink with pale green and cream, with two periodic vertical black stripes. Underneath this layer a few fragments of the previous plaster phase were retained, although only faint evidence of the pattern could be determined. It appears to be a polychrome linear design with white stripes, in green, black and orange pink with maroon.

A small area of plaster was recorded **in-situ** from [4013], **907/8** the corner of a north facing wall of Building 25. Two layers of plaster were recorded, the lower one being almost completely unrecognisable, although noted at the time as being decorated possibly in green/blue. The upper layer was decorated in pink areas with black vertical stripes, probably part of the same dado design as [3738].

Plaster from [3435] **906/9** consisted of several interesting fragments, including one decorated with a scroll-like motif in brown and black with abraded overpainting. Some fragments show thickening of the mortar from joining the top, bottom or side of the wall. The group comes from a Hadrianic fire-debris dump and is not homogenous.

Plaster from [3683] **907/15** consisted of 10 homogenous fragments rather like the orange and blue striped material in [3491]. The *intonaco* was crudely applied with brushmarks clearly visible, over an insubstantial limey mortar.

Area 10

Good quality plaster was recovered from [11574], consisting of fragments made from substantial mortars, and decorated with red ochre with green bands and white stripes.

Fragments of burnt plaster were found in [11920], mainly plain red and plain black in surface decoration.

Plaster from [11958] consisted of good quality fragments with plain red ochre background. A second type may have originated from a second phase of decoration, with discoloured white background with black stripes.

Abraded plaster was found in [11947] decorated with red ochre background. 1 fragment shows the remains of a yellow and green foliate motif.

Plaster from [12779] consisted of many fragments of plain white, of which one or two may show evidence of additional stripes.

Miscellaneous fragments were recovered from the following contexts:

11032	12482
11733	12666
11865	12736
11929	12738
12263	12740
12318	12742
12328	12796
12360	12793
12416	12796
12433	12830

In addition the following fragments were recovered from non-environmental sampling:

12242
12263 Large fragments of plain white
12433
12648
12720
12779
12933

Evaluation (Shaft 4)

Fragments recovered from [1107] **1203/28 (Open Area 16 Boudican/Hadrianic fire deposit)** consisted of good quality plain smooth red plaster, decorated with an internal yellow stripe and probably green banding. This probably originates from a panel decoration of red

panels and green banded surround. Another fragment which had the same mortar construction is decorated with a white dado design with black and red splashes, and may form the lower part of the decorative scheme of the wall. More fragments probably related to this scheme were found in individual bags from [1103], **1204/1** [1104] **1204/1**, [1108] **1203/26** [**Boudican/Hadrianic Fire deposit**], [1112] **1204/1**, [1428] and [1431].

The overall standard of the work is quite good, but the design is very standard, and no expensive pigments have been used.

Area 12

Much of the plaster from this area is reasonably homogenous, being made from one mortar type with a simple yet well executed decoration, consisting of plain white and red stripes, plain red and red/black stipples on a white background. Such plaster was found in [18081] **1203/26**, [18172] **1202/11**, [18177] **1203/10**, [18089] **1202/12**, [18079] **1203/25**, [18057] **1204/1**, [18145] **1203/28**, [18172] **1202/11**. Most of these represent Boudican or Hadrianic fire deposits.

In addition several small slabs of a different plaster type were recovered from [18161] **1205/1**. This was made from a very low quality soft limey mortar, which originally was attached to a mudbrick wall. The decoration consisted of plain red areas, with black bands and a plain white expanse. The largest fragment suggests that plaster may originate from the junction of the bottom of the middle zone with the dado, and that the middle zone was decorated with red ochre panels, but this needs further investigation.

Miscellaneous plaster was recovered from the following additional contexts:

18314 **1202/23**
18149 **1203/27**
18150 **1203/23**
18073 **1203/28**
18072 **1203/28**
18085 **1205/1**
18089 **1202/12**
18211 **1202/30**
18244 **1203/6**
18319 **1203/12**

This also mainly represents material from Boudican or Hadrianic fire deposits.

3. Potential of the data

1. In the first instance the study of the wall plaster may contribute to a description of the overall appearance of individual buildings. It is hoped that it will be possible in some instances to relate parts of individual wall decorations to particular rooms and even particular walls within a room. In certain cases the wall plaster will be discussed with other internal decorative elements such as mosaics, hypocaust systems, wall structures, ceilings, windows and doors. The fragments will be examined for evidence of multi-phase activity, either from several layers of mortar and plaster built up over each other, or from the hacking of the surface of individual fragments for better adhesion of the secondary layer.

2. The plaster may contribute to phasing of the construction of individual buildings, and in some instances facilitate the establishment of a sequence of building modification.

3. Individual decorative schemes or decorative elements will be discussed in terms of the quality of overall designs. The number of separate layers, the thickness and the type of mortar backing forming the *arriccio* of individual wall types may also provide useful indicators. A study of the preparation and treatment of the background surface on which the decoration was applied, can for example, provide useful information about the care, and thoroughness of the craftsmen involved, even though the actual main designs may be missing. Certain

pigments were more expensive and therefore rarer, and more likely to be used for reception rooms of good quality. Thus both artistic and technological details may contribute to a discussion on the overall significance of individual rooms, and the affluence and status of the people who commissioned such work. Comparisons will be made with plaster with similar decorations from both the London area and beyond, and in certain instances, from other sites in Northwest Europe. Parallels may include plaster from the Painted House, Dover, and material from Leicester and Verulamium.

4. Study of the wall plaster may provide evidence of the possible function of individual rooms, through both a physical examination of the mortar and impressions in it, and consideration of the type of decoration used. Where appropriate comparisons will be made with plaster of a similar date from other buildings in London, both within the City (Fenchurch Street, Lloyds Registry, sites included in West of Walbrook), Southwark (Winchester Palace, Courage's Brewery), and elsewhere.
5. The plaster will be considered in relation to parallels from military sites.
6. The mortar layers, technological application of the decoration and pigments used may be of interest for the study of Roman wall plaster studies.
7. Cinnabar and Egyptian blue were identified, and there may be other pigments worthy of further analysis. This will facilitate a discussion on the use of expensive pigments and the function and date of building types. Is there any evidence for example that cinnabar was used after the second century? What about Egyptian blue? This may be more suitable for an inter-site study.
8. The architecturally-based design will be used to form a discussion on the question of **ateliers** for painters and plasterers and thoughts on the nature of artisan organisation. Is there any indication that the painters of similarly dated schemes on the two side of the river were executed by the same personnel?
9. A general survey of the quality of the plaster from the site from the 1st and 2nd century through to the 4th century could be made. This could then be easily assimilated into an overall study of wall plaster in the London area.
10. The plaster from Poultry could be included in a synthetic volume surveying the Roman plaster from London, equating decorations and construction techniques with building types and function of rooms, building dates etc. This has been attempted on the Continent for certain countries in North-western Europe but has never been done in the UK.

4. Revised research aims

1. How does the plaster contribute to our knowledge of the overall appearance of individual buildings/rooms?
2. Can the plaster facilitate cross-area phasing, through identification of the same mortar fabrics, or indicate further refinements in building sequences in certain rooms?
3. Can the plaster contribute to an overall assessment of the function, status and dating of individual buildings/rooms?
4. Can any of the plaster be considered in relation to the overall internal decorative scheme of particular rooms/buildings along with such features as mosaics?
5. Can any fragments of plaster be identified as belonging to the same wall as the hypocausted room of Building 25, which had two phases of dado recorded **in-situ**?

6. What building did the plaster with the architectural scheme originate from? Can we reconstruct any more of the decorative elements? Can the plaster be dated on art historical grounds?
7. Can the work of the artist of the architectural scheme from Poultry be compared to other architectural schemes in the City area of similar date and elsewhere? Are there any outstanding similarities suggesting commonality of work? How do the colours used differ?
8. How do the painting techniques of the architectural scheme compare with continental parallels, and can it be equated to any of the Pompeian styles?
9. Does the architectural scheme show any indication of specifically British tendencies in decorative treatment?
10. How does the preparation of the architectural decoration compare with the very fine work from the lunette at Winchester Palace? How many *intonaco* layers are there, and what is the evidence for burnishing of the surface? Is it more like the architectural scheme from Fenchurch Street in terms of its technology and quality?
11. What evidence is there for plaster belonging to the chalk-walled building?
12. Can other more closely attributable fragments of plaster give any indication of where the homogenous groups of plaster from [18161] and [1107] came from?
13. Can any plaster groups with particular decorative elements be tied in to closer dating by the Boudican or Hadrianic fires or dendro dates?
14. Can the material from Poultry contribute to the increasing amount of schemes based on red panels with green borders, sometimes with black intervals, apparently popular in First and Second century contexts in Southwark and elsewhere? Can anything be said about the type of buildings that they were used in?
15. Cinnabar and Egyptian blue, supposedly expensive pigments, were found in sites at Southwark and also in the City. Can any generalisations be made about the type of buildings to which they were associated?
16. Are there any other unusual pigments used at Poultry, such as the bright green from the architectural scheme?
17. How would the wall plaster from Poultry contribute to an overall survey of this subject for the London area?

Bibliography

Davey, N. and Ling, R. 1981 *Wall-painting in Roman Britain*