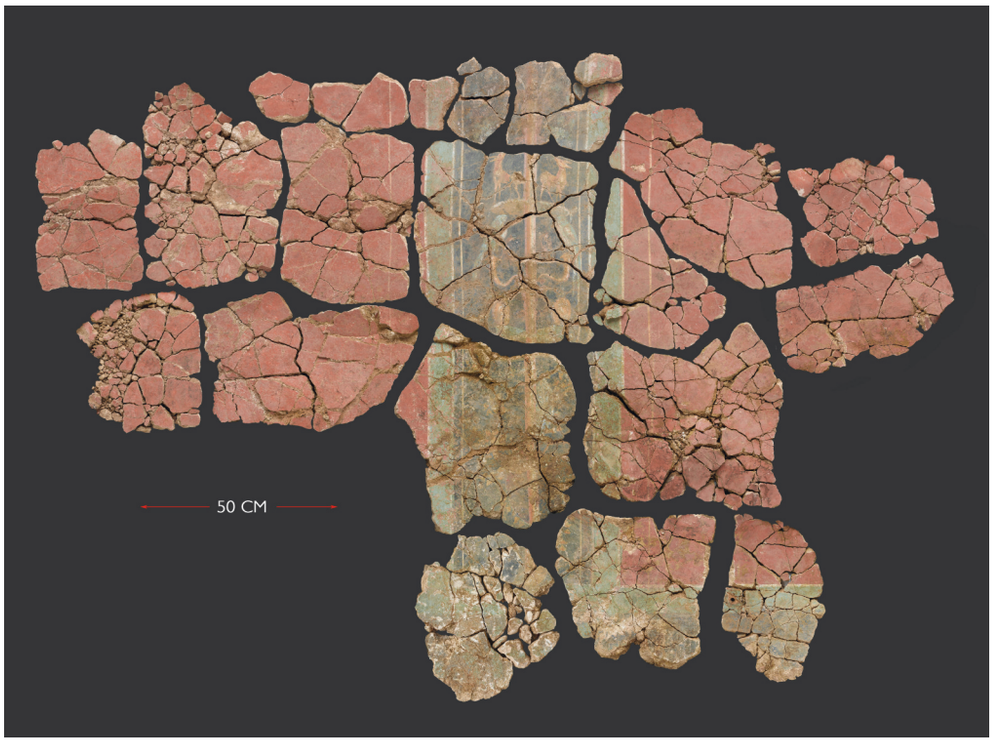
Roman refinement in Lime Street

Newly discovered Roman decorated wall plaster provides insights into the domestic setting of the early London elite after the Boudican rebellion. Ian Betts, Senior Building Materials Specialist at MOLA, reviews its context, conservation and significance.



ABOVE The Roman fresco measuring more than 2m by 1.5m is one of the most complete yet found. © MOLA

The study of wall plaster can be fascinating and frustrating in equal measure: fascinating because it provides a rare insight into the interior decoration present in private homes and official public buildings in Roman London, and frustrating because of the often fragmentary and incomplete nature of survival makes reconstructing these schemes quite challenging. This decoration can take the form of elaborate schemes with candelabra and other motifs, architectural schemes or less elaborate decoration with plain panels surrounded by horizontal and vertical borders of different colour. Other plaster is embellished with classical themes, such as motifs associated with the Roman god Bacchus, theatre masks and cherubs.

The majority of medium to large archaeological sites in Roman London produce wall plaster. Most is from panels or from the borders around panels, or parts of the dado. More elaborate decoration often comprises small areas of candelabra located between panel borders, as at Redcross Way, Southwark.[1]

Buildings with interior wall plaster were certainly constructed prior to the Boudican fire in *c.* AD 60/61,[2] but it is only in the late 1st century that wall plaster becomes common in the archaeological record.

Some of the best quality wall plaster ever found in London was recovered from 4 Crosby Square in 2005,[3] including plaster from at least one room incorporating lavish use of cinnabar (mercuric sulphide), an extremely expensive bright red pigment which was imported from Spain. Yet frustratingly the overall decorative scheme is unknown as less than a handful of plaster fragments could be fitted together.

The crucial importance of the newly excavated Lime Street plaster is that it represents the largest area of *in situ* collapse that has been found since the wall plaster lifted from the site of a large palatial masonry building fronting the river Thames in Roman Southwark (Winchester Palace, sitecode WP83),[4] on display at the Museum of London. The 21 Lime Street plaster was recognised as *in situ* collapse because the chevron shaped keying patterns on the back of the mortar backing were relatively undisturbed. This keying indicates that the plaster was attached to the keyed walls of a clay and timber building.

Often when buildings in Roman London were altered or demolished the plaster was removed and deposited elsewhere. Hence, many wall plaster assemblages are recovered from pits and dump layers. In the case of the Lime Street plaster, the whole building would seem to have been demolished very quickly, perhaps in little over a day, as the land in which it stood was required for the construction of the much enlarged second forum basilica, constructed in the first quarter of the 2nd century. It was this rapid demolition followed by the covering over of what remained of the building in preparation for redevelopment of the site that preserved the plaster.

There is always a risk when lifting blocks of *in situ* plaster. Considerable effort is involved in lifting the blocks but it is not until the sections are turned over and cleaned that the plaster's significance can be assessed. Thankfully, not only did the plaster contain a decorated border between panels but part of the dado, located below the main frieze, was also preserved.

On the 21 Lime Street scheme the main frieze consists of square or rectangular red panels framed with a cream line. Decoration is present in one red panel. This shows the legs of a figure, possibly a cherub, set in a beaded sloping oval border.

Each red panel is bordered by a white stripe followed by a green band. Between the green bands is a vertical

decorated area in black, framed at either side by vertical white lines. Some of the decorated area is discoloured, but it is possible to identify the major design elements. The incomplete upper part shows two deer standing on a horizontal circular disc and nibbling the leaves on a tree. Beneath are two birds sitting on a curved perch. They appear to be parakeets, possibly Alexandrine parakeet *(Psittacula eupatria*).

Below the birds is a second horizontal circular disc with, at each end, orange-coloured circular elements standing on what appears to be green plant material. These seem to be a type of fruit. Below the disc is a vine stem with vine leaves sprouting from either side. Part of the stem is painted in a bright red pigment, almost certainly the very expensive pigment cinnabar. The vine stem is interwoven around a vertical circular rod-like candelabrum which runs the full length of the surviving decorative scheme.

The lower area below the red panels comprised a horizontal green band above a poorly preserved black and dark grey dado. This has spots of red paint added to imitate stone veneer. The dado below the decorative middle panel border has a number of poorly preserved crudely painted diagonal green lines, again probably added to enhance the decorative marble effect, although the dado does not seem to represent an actual marble type.

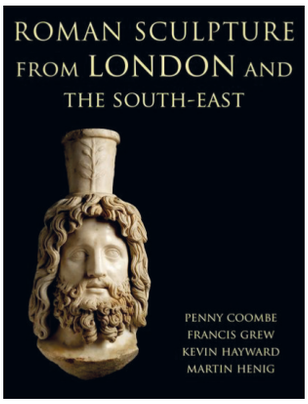
Red panels with decoration on a black background were particularly popular in the late 1st–early 2nd century.[5] Black border decoration on late-1st-century plaster from the Winchester Palace site also has central rod-like candelabra with various decorative motifs including birds, whilst red panels with green borders and black intervals were also used at Boxmoor villa, Hertfordshire. This plaster, from a late-1st-century timber building, also has a central rod-like candelabrum with horizontal discs in a vertical black panel.

There is no indication of who occupied the building on 21 Lime Street, but we can speculate that they must have been an elite member of Roman society who had sufficient wealth to employ some of the top wall painters working in London during the first century, and to pay for the use of the bright red cinnabar pigment, admittedly only on a small scale. The building's position, just 60 metres to the east of the 1st forum basilica (constructed in *c.* AD 70–75 and demolished at the end of the 1st or early 2nd century), suggests that they may have been a public official. The basilica on the north side housed the officers and courts for the administration of London and the province. The Lime Street area certainly seems to have been the area of choice for some of London's more prosperous citizens. Just 50 metres to the north east, at 8–13 Lime Street, an equally impressive decorative scheme was recovered although this dates to the mid-2nd century.[6] Again this employed red panels, but these were set in green borders edged in blue, whilst the lower dado comprised plain yellow panels set in a darker shade of red. The decoration in the vertical green borders was of two types: grapes with tasseled tambourines, and a design incorporating birds and flowers, probably primroses. Parts of at least one, possibly two theatre masks are also present. The blue colour was achieved using an artificial pigment known as Egyptian blue, which on the Bloomberg London site located at the edge of the Walbrook valley first appears on plaster in dump deposits dated AD 125/135–170.[7]

Seventy metres in the opposite direction, just south of the second forum basilica at 6–12 Fenchurch Street,[8] an equally impressive scheme was recovered from a domestic clay and timber building destroyed in the Hadrianic Fire of *c.* AD 120–125.

ABOVE Conservators removing a section of the *insitu* plaster wall, identified from keying on the upturned back. ©MOLA
RIGHT Conservator Luisa Duarte cleaning one of the 16 decorated panels in the lab. ©MOLA

Roman Sculpture from London and the South-East



Penny Combe, Francis Grew, Kevin Hayward and Martin Henig

Corpus Signorum Imperii Romani (Corpus of Sculpture of the Roman World. Great Britain) Volume I Fascicule 10
Oxford University Press / British Academy 2015

184 pp, 78 figs, index

£120

Reviewed by Mark Hassall

The *Corpus Signorum Imperii Romani* or CSIR, is an international project that was launched in 1963 with the first volume devoted to sculpture from Roman Britain. By sculpture from Roman Britain is meant either objects that were created in Britain during the Roman period, or imported into the island from other parts of the empire in Roman times. It does not include classical sculpture brought here from elsewhere from the Renaissance onwards, for which the reader is referred to a separate series of CSIR. In the case of CSIR I, ten of the eleven fascicules have now been published which together cover the whole of Britain except northern Britain south of Hadrian's Wall (fascicule 11). CSIR I when completed will be a worthy companion to the volumes of the Corpus of Romano British mosaics being compiled by David Neal and Steven Cosh. A parallel too suggests itself in the Corpus of the *Roman Inscriptions from Britain,* (RIB), the third volume of which was published in 2009. These corpora put the study of the material remains of Britain's Roman past on a really firm footing, and students of Roman Britain owe the compilers of such works an enormous debt of gratitude.

CSIR I.10 was compiled by a group of no less than four scholars, which is understandable given both the quantity and quality of the finds dealt with. The volume includes an introductory section, dealing with such matters as the different categories of find used to arrange the catalogue of material. It also includes a section on types and sources of stone by Kevin Hayward, a fascinating account reconstructing the chronological development of stone quarrying and sculptural use in south-eastern England, giving the changing sources of the stone used – including some from northern France.

The catalogue itself comprises material from London and the South East, an area which might reasonably be considered the most Romanised part of the province. This is borne out by the finds themselves which include the famous marble sculptures from the Temple of Mithras in London, and the bronze head from a statue of the emperor Hadrian found in the Thames. Following the excavation of the Temple of Mithras in 1954, one might have been forgiven for assuming that nothing so dramatic or impressive would ever again come to light. In fact the statue of the eagle devouring a serpent from the Minories was discovered in 2013, only just in time to be included in the volume. Quite apart from the London finds there are other objects of an equally high standing, such as the two marble portrait busts from the Lullingstone Roman Villa in Kent, one tentatively identified as the emperor P Helvius Pertinax and the other as his father, P Helvius Successus. If the identifications are correct, they raise interesting speculation as to why they were found at Lullingstone: was the villa the rustic retreat for Pertinax when he was governor of Britain in the days before he became emperor?

Besides figurative and portrait sculpture, the volume also includes 'Monuments', as for example the funerary monument of Classicianus, the procurator of the province, and architectural pieces from, for example, the *quadrifrons* – the great four-way arch at Richborough, as well as, from London, the arch and the screen of the gods found incorporated into the structure of the riveride wall. The study of these was undertaken by the late 'Tom' Blagg, an acknowledged expert on architectural ornament. In conclusion, this is a magnificent volume, which includes many old friends – some pictured in colour such as the sculptures from the Temple of Mithras – but also presents in exemplary fashion further discoveries such as the London arch and screen of the gods and, latest of all, the statue of the eagle and serpent.

Comprising parts of a colonnaded facade incorporating architectural elements, this has certain similarities to that found at Winchester Palace. Perhaps from a different room is part of a female figure and a head or perhaps a tragic mask.

So far there has been no systematic study of the geographical spread of wall plaster across London nor any assessment of chronological changes in wall plaster decoration. This makes the more complete wall plaster schemes in the Lime Street/Fenchurch Street area of considerable importance, as they provide a valuable snapshot of the changes in interior decorative style in at least this small area of Roman London in the 1st and 2nd centuries.

Acknowledgements

The excavations on the site and the lifting of the wall plaster were generously funded by the development team behind the 21 Lime Street redevelopment. The plaster was lifted and conserved by MOLA Senior Conservators Liz Goodman and Luisa Duarte. Identification of the birds was undertaken by MOLA Senior Zooarchaeologist Alan Pipe.

Notes

1. J. Drummond-Murray and P. Thompson with C. Cowan *Settlement in Roman Southwark* MoLAS Monogr Ser **12** (2002), 130–1.
2. R. Wroe-Brown *Roman occupation south-east of the forum* MOLA Archaeol Studies Ser **31** (2014), 18.
3. I. Betts with K. Pitt 'Roman wall plaster from Crosby Square, City of London' (in prep) *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc.*
4. R. Goffin 'Painted wall plaster' in B. Yule *A prestigious building complex on the Southwark waterfront* MoLAS Monogr Ser **23** (2005) 126, figs 84–85.
5. N. Davey and R. Ling *Wall-painting in Roman Britain* Britannia Monograph Ser No. **3** (1981), 31.
6. I. Betts and A. Telfer 'Finches, flowers and fruit: painted wall plaster from 2nd-century buildings at 8–13 Lime Street, London, EC3' (in prep) *Trans London Middlesex Archaeol Soc.*
7. I. Betts 'Building material' in J. Bryan, M. Tetreau and S. Watson, *Bloomberg London: excavations 2010–14*, MOLA Monogr Ser (in prep).
8. M. Rhodes 'Wall-painting from Fenchurch Street, City of London' *Britannia* **18** (1987), 169–172.