

# Digital Chapter 7 : The Villa

## Part 1: The wall plaster and mosaic

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*(file name : Ch7DWallplaster)*

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# Digital Chapter 7: The Holme House Villa

## Part I : The wall plaster and mosaic

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Report written 1985

### The Apsidal Suite

This material was recovered in the 1970 excavations from the areas around the two heated rooms of the Apsidal Suite. The bulk of the plaster having come from P/Q - 10/11 i.e. the area of Room 18 and a lesser quantity from P/Q/R-9 i.e. Room 17.

The fragments were so small that it was impossible to build up any definite pattern or design. The predominant colour throughout in this area was red. A high proportion of the fragments were plain red, others were over-painted with narrow white stripes of slightly differing widths.

Another group well represented were fragments of red over-painted with a band of green approximately 25mm wide, edged on both sides with narrow white stripes. Two fragments show corners of the white stripe enclosing a red panel. Two other groups also have a red base colour, but are over-painted in a free-hand design in

- (a) maroons/white and pinks;
- (b) orange/yellow pinks, edged with bands of white.

The apparent design of (a) is in some ways similar to a design found at Gorhambury, St. Albans<sup>1</sup> - although the colours differ, the application and general appearance is similar.

As well as red there are several other groups of colours :

- (c) white fragments, some plain, others with narrow stripes and bands of red and black and some with shaded bands of browns/mustard/greens;
- (d) plain black fragments;
- (9) pale green, with possibly a white design.

There is no definite evidence of a dado although there are a few fragments of red stippled with black/yellow and white, and pink fragments stippled with maroon/white and yellow - probably imitating marble, but there are very few of these pieces and they are very

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<sup>1</sup> An incomplete reference was supplied here and it has not been possible to identify the publication referred to. In the final publication of the site, Group 2 contains indeterminate freestyle painting and this may have been the intended *comparanda*. Neal *et al* 1990, 170.

small. There is one fragment of the free hand design in maroons, which appears to have a trace of the pink stipple on one edge, thus forming a possible link between two designs.

In this room a high proportion of the fragments have an earlier painted layer – up to 20mm below the surface. In some cases the plaster has split away at the early layer leaving a smooth surface, sometimes unpainted, otherwise painted in plain red, green, pink or black.

On some of thicker fragments there are marks or impressions on the backs, which suggest keying to an underlying wooden structure. Most of the impressions are fairly wide and smooth, as if of cut wooded frames, only one fragment actually has a 'wattle' type of impression.

There were several fragments of coarse plaster moulding, also painted in red or green. Some of these were curved convexly, others with sharp angles of varying degrees. These were possibly derived from door or window openings.

The surface texture of the painted fragments varied a great deal: some being smooth with no visible brush marks, and others - usually the plain red - with a stippled effect, as if applied with a cloth (or sponge ?).

The general impression is of a room divided into panels of either plain or free hand designs, outlined with red, black or white bands. Red being the predominant colour. There were also a number of fragments of pink *Opus Signinum*.

### **Bath-House (HH 69).**

Amongst this material were five exceptionally well preserved larger pieces of painted plaster and *Opus Signinum*.

(a) No.8 (H.H.69 W12 (28) fig. D7.1a).

A right-angled corner fragment. The corner area being plain red, then a 50mm white band - a narrow black stripe leading to a white area. This fragment is about 50mm thick with keying marks on the back.

(b) No. 9 (fig. D7.2)

Two large pieces of a slightly angled fragment. The area around the angle is painted black, then a narrow white stripe leads to a design of three narrow horizontal panels. Two of the panels are yellow overpainted with diagonal wide cream bands then on top of the cream are narrower red bands. In between the yellow panels is one of green edged with narrow white stripes.

(c) No. 7. (fig. D7.1b)

A large fragment of *Opus Signinum*, painted half red and half yellow divided by a narrow black stripe.

(d) No.20 (H.H.69 W11 (4) ).

A large fragment of Opus Signinum painted a mottled red.

(e) No.18 (H.H. W11 (4) – fig. D7.3)).

Large fragment of tessellated floor. Half in red tesserae, the other half in greenish grey tesserae each about 17mm square<sup>2</sup>.

Among the rest of the Bath-house material was a large group of *Opus Signinum* fragments, some unpainted, but many painted in a mottled red. These are similar to No. 20. The fragments which are quite large, are 40 - 50mm thick.

Several of the red *Opus Signinum* fragments were curved corner mouldings. There were also several plaster corner mouldings with varying degrees of angle, also painted red. Most of the fragments from this area are small crumbling pieces, painted in red/black and white.

The more readily identifiable small fragments, are similar to several of the larger pieces already described. There are several fragments matching No. 9 in red/yellow/black/green. One larger fragment of *Opus Signinum* in red/black stripe/yellow, matches No. 7. One larger fragment of red/white with a narrow black stripe matches No. 8. Several larger fragments are of plain white or white with a black stripe. One of the largest pieces has a black stripe swelling to an oval shape with two short horizontal lines above and below.

Two other large pieces have a very rough pitted surface. One is possibly a corner piece, slightly curved, in black and red. The other fragment is in red with a triangular area in white outlined in black. Two other adjoining fragments, very rough with deep brush marks, painted in red/white. The general impression is one of panels in stripes and geometric designs painted in bright bold colours.

### **The Villa Well Plaster (HH 80)**

A small quantity of painted plaster (approx. three dozen fragments) was found in the filling of the well of the villa when it was excavated prior to its destruction by quarrying in 1980. It is presumed to have come from the dismantling of the bath-house.

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<sup>2</sup> See now Neal and Cosh 2002, 138

Most of the fragments are plain white or white with a narrow black stripe. There is however a variety of other colours and designs:

- 1 Two pieces are white splashed with black and red.
- 2 One fragment of plain red and three larger pieces of black and red are about 50mm-75mm thick, one having wood impressions on the reverse side, possibly with some wood remaining.
- 3 There are other fragments of red which have a yellow stripe against a white area.
- 4 Two fragments are painted a pale green: one plain and the other with the remains of a design of what could be a flower with petals in red and yellow. It also has a leaf-shaped area in cream, painted over in dark red with streaks of pink.
5. The largest piece found has a chequered pattern in black and white, edged by an area of red. The cheques are approximately 40 x 50mm. (fig. D7.4)
6. There are also a few fragments with a very coarse surface, painted in plain yellows, pink and greens.

None of this material has any obvious link with the other plaster found in Holme House.

#### **Plaster from the stores of the Fulling Mill Museum.**

This group of plaster was excavated from the bath-house area of Holme House villa although there is no positive identification on the fragments. None of the pieces has any link with the fragments found in the Apsidal Suite of Holme House, or with those later found in the Well.

The colours are all much richer in tone and the predominant background of a large number of the fragments is a gritty light blue paint, possibly a crushed frit. This is deeply combed, or brushed with a stiff brush, around the different designs, as if applied after the main scene or design was painted. In three fragments the blue is brushed around what could be parts of a human head and also of either a hand or foot. The size of the design indicates a figure, perhaps half life size. (fig. D7.5)

The blue also occurs surrounding a tapering area of bright red, and again linked to a dark red area by a narrow white stripe. This fragment has another narrow white stripe across the blue and dark red with an area of dark green beyond. The blue is found again in a group of eleven fragments of a more vivid design and richer paint colours than previously found. These are as follows:

- (a) A fragment with the blue paint bordering an area of deep purple shading to a green and then to white.
- (b) Two fragments with small areas of blue, one an area of a deep purple/red band, shading to a deep orange and then to white. The other has a small patch of blue against a light purple overpainted with a white stripe.

- (c) The other fragments are a mixture of greens with possible petal designs, others have curved stripes and areas of white, greens, maroons, yellow and orange.

All the fragments in this group have the deep combed effect on the background colours with the stripes and the petals applied later.

The final group of fragments from this area are painted in a more delicate shade of pinky reds, pinks and beige, with a design of small human figures outlined on black and shaded in blues and beiges all on a neutral ground. Three pieces show the lower part of legs and feet of small human figures. The painted surface of this last group is much finer in texture, with a few brush marks visible (fig. D7.6)

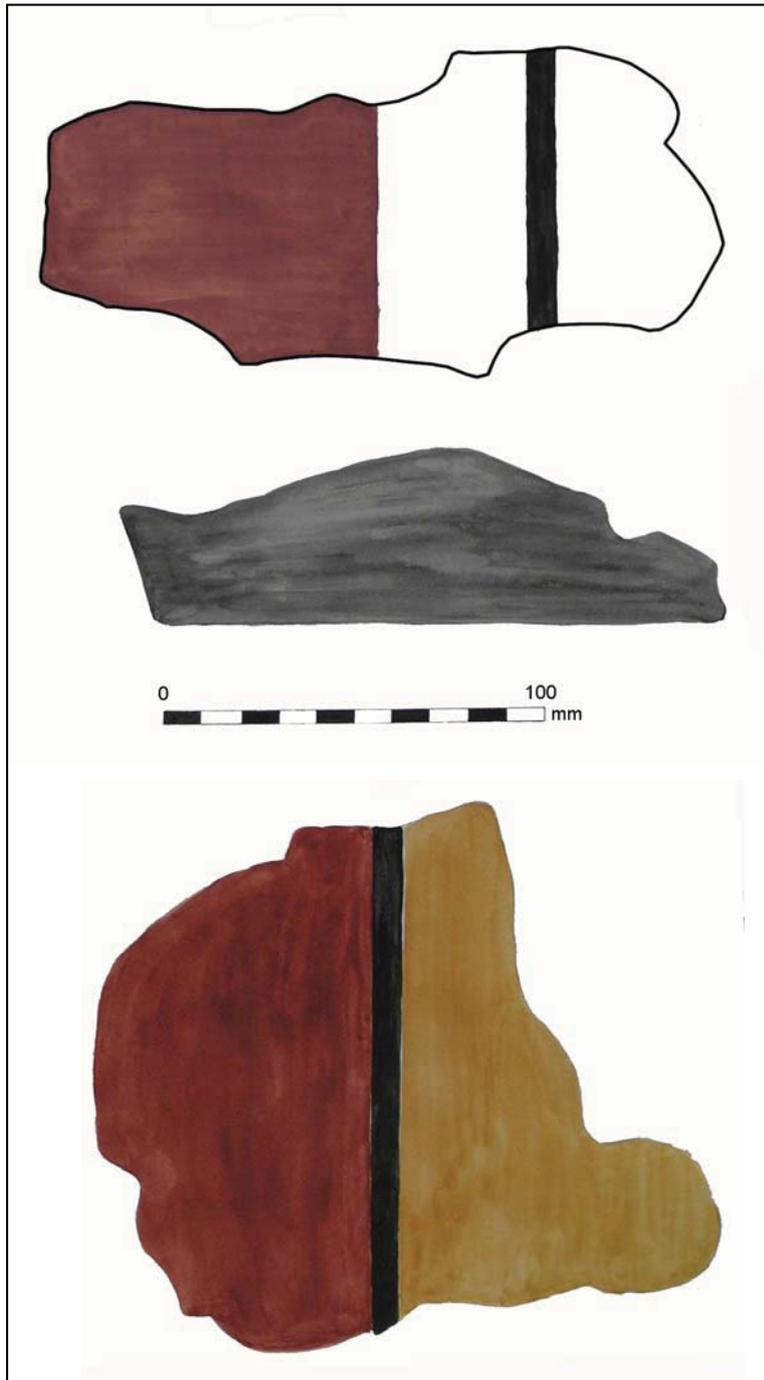


Fig. D7.1. Painted wall-plaster from the villa bath-house.

(Painted by Ann S. Biggs)



Fig. D7.2. Painted wall plaster from the villa bath-house excavated in 1969

(Painted by Ann D. Biggs)



Fig. D7.3. The fragment of mosaic from the villa bath-house.  
(Painted by Ann D. Biggs)

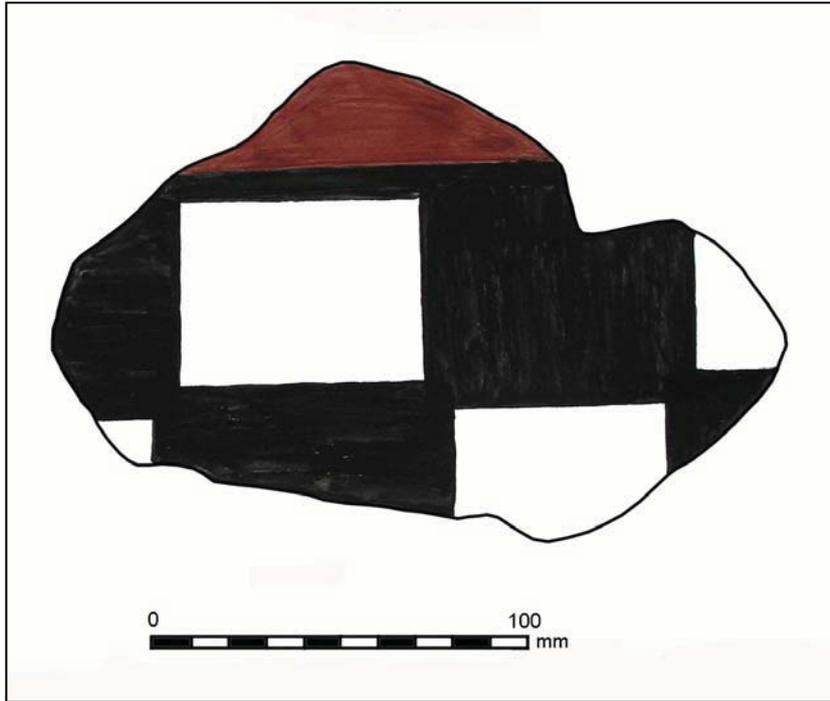


Fig. D7.4. Painted wall-plaster from the well at the villa  
(Painted by Ann S. Biggs)

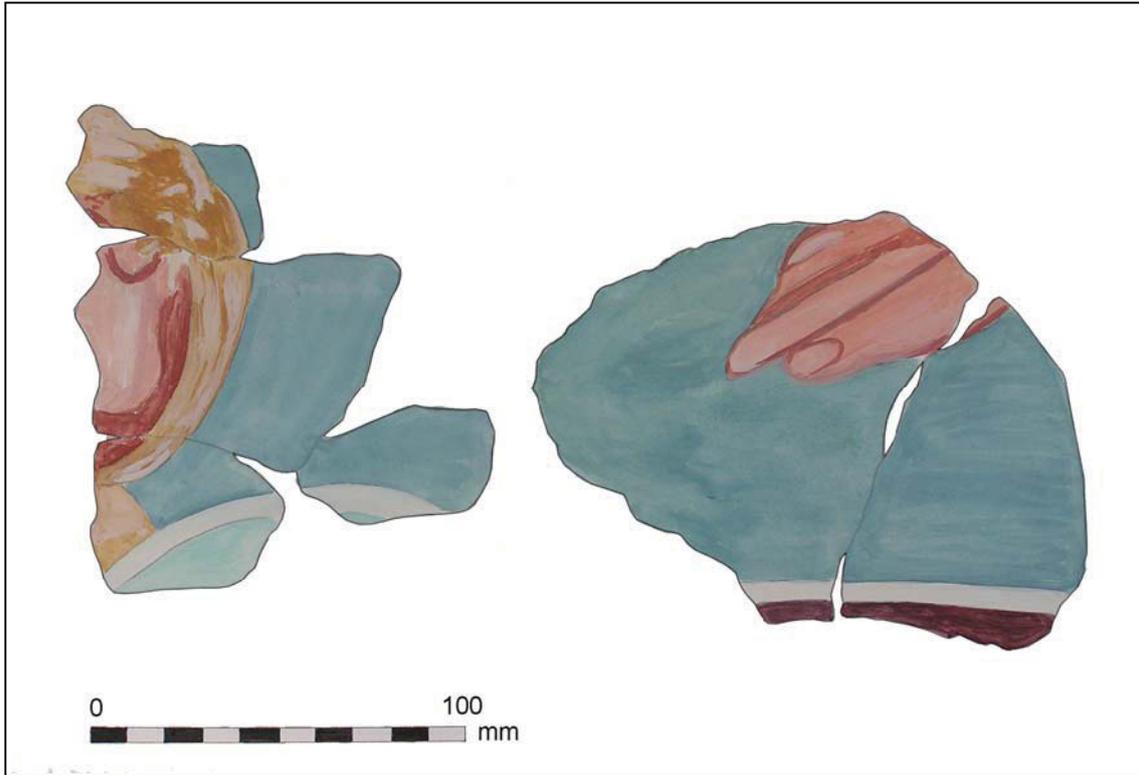


Fig. D7.5. Painted wall plaster from the villa bath-house showing elements of a half life-size figure.

(Painted by Ann S. Biggs)

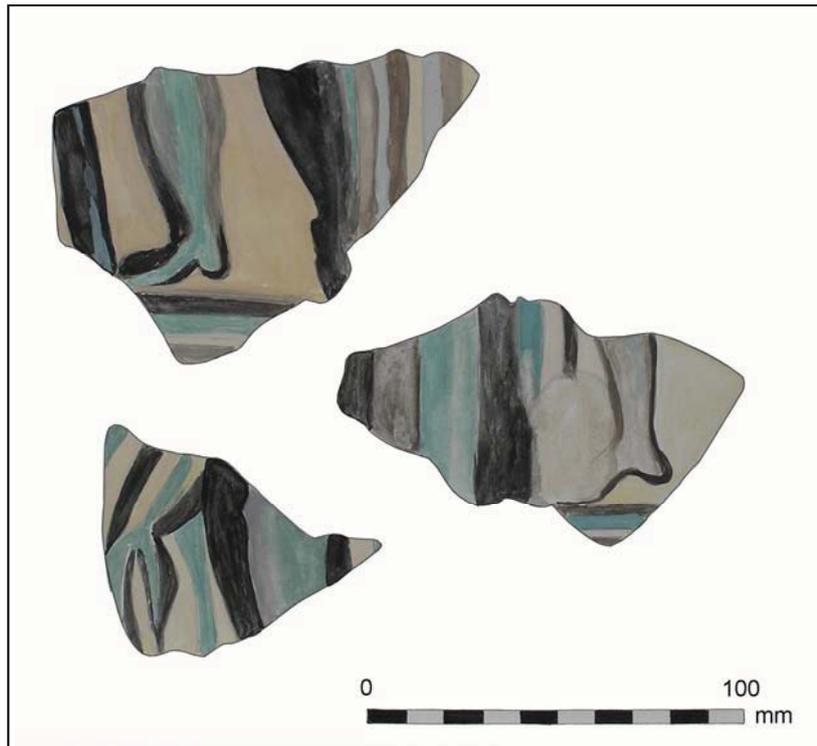


Fig. D7.6. Painted wall plaster from the villa bath-house showing the legs of small human figures

(Painted by Ann D. Biggs)