

Painted decoration in Heraclea Sintica: description, technological analysis and reconstruction

Lyudmil Vagalinski, Kitan Kitanov (National Archaeological Institute with Museum, Bulgarian Academy of Sciences),
Julia Valeva (Independent researcher)

The ancient town of Heracleia Sintica is located near the village of Rupite in Petrich municipality in southwestern Bulgaria. The city was founded by Macedonian colonists. Following the conquest of the Macedonian kingdom by Rome, the city became part of the province of Macedonia. Several settlement periods have been identified in the history of Heraclea Sintica, the boundaries of which are marked by enemy attacks or earthquakes. A civil basilica has been uncovered at the northwestern end of the forum, and a series of rooms arranged along an east-west axis on its northern side.

In the 80s of the 3rd century, enemies hit Heraclea Sintica and severely damaged its economy. The civil basilica, whose ruins can be seen today, was built after the attack, along with the northern rooms. At the western end of the basilica is an apse containing a semicircular, stepped podium flanked by two rectangular rooms with semicylindrical vaulted ceilings. However, the basilica was never fully completed and did not even function as such. It was used for economic activities.

Around 388, an extremely strong earthquake caused great destructions to the city. The citizens could not rebuild the forum, the ruins were simply leveled to create a flat surface. The next earthquake in the second quarter of the 5th century caused such damage to the city that the forum was abandoned. People began to bury their dead there.

Notwithstanding its undefined function the civil basilica seems to have been entirely decorated. Small parts of the wall paintings coloured red were preserved *in situ* at the base of the north pillar near the apse (Fig. 1), and in the lower parts of the walls in the northeast corner. Fallen fragments painted green suggest that above the red plinth there was a row of large vertical panels green in colour. Some of the green fragments have graffiti on them, and when recomposed, present a clumsy image of a deer. The dating of the wall paintings in the basilica points to the end of the 3rd – beginning of the 4th century.

Fragments of interior decoration were also found in the rooms on the north side of the forum, which date back to the 4th century. In room 7 a larger fragment, coloured in red and white, has been preserved on the eastern wall. The fragment is also interesting because it shows the imprint of the string used to mark the horizontal boundary of the red zone (Fig. 2). In room 11, interpreted as a sanctuary of Nemesis, marble blocks – spolia – were found along the eastern, northern, and western walls, which probably served as seats and/or an altar. Before they were placed there, the walls were decorated with a system of panels predominantly yellow in color. The decorative system is standard: wide panels separated by narrow vertical panels.

The largest fragment of wall painting decoration *in situ* was found in room 12, which has a semicircular shape (Fig. 3). The mural is preserved at a height of about 1.30 m along the entire length of the wall. The height of the red zone at the bottom is 85 cm, above which there is a white zone with a height of 47,5 cm.



Fig. 1 Remains of the painting on the pillar of the entrance to the northern room
Fig. 2 Fragment of painting in room 7

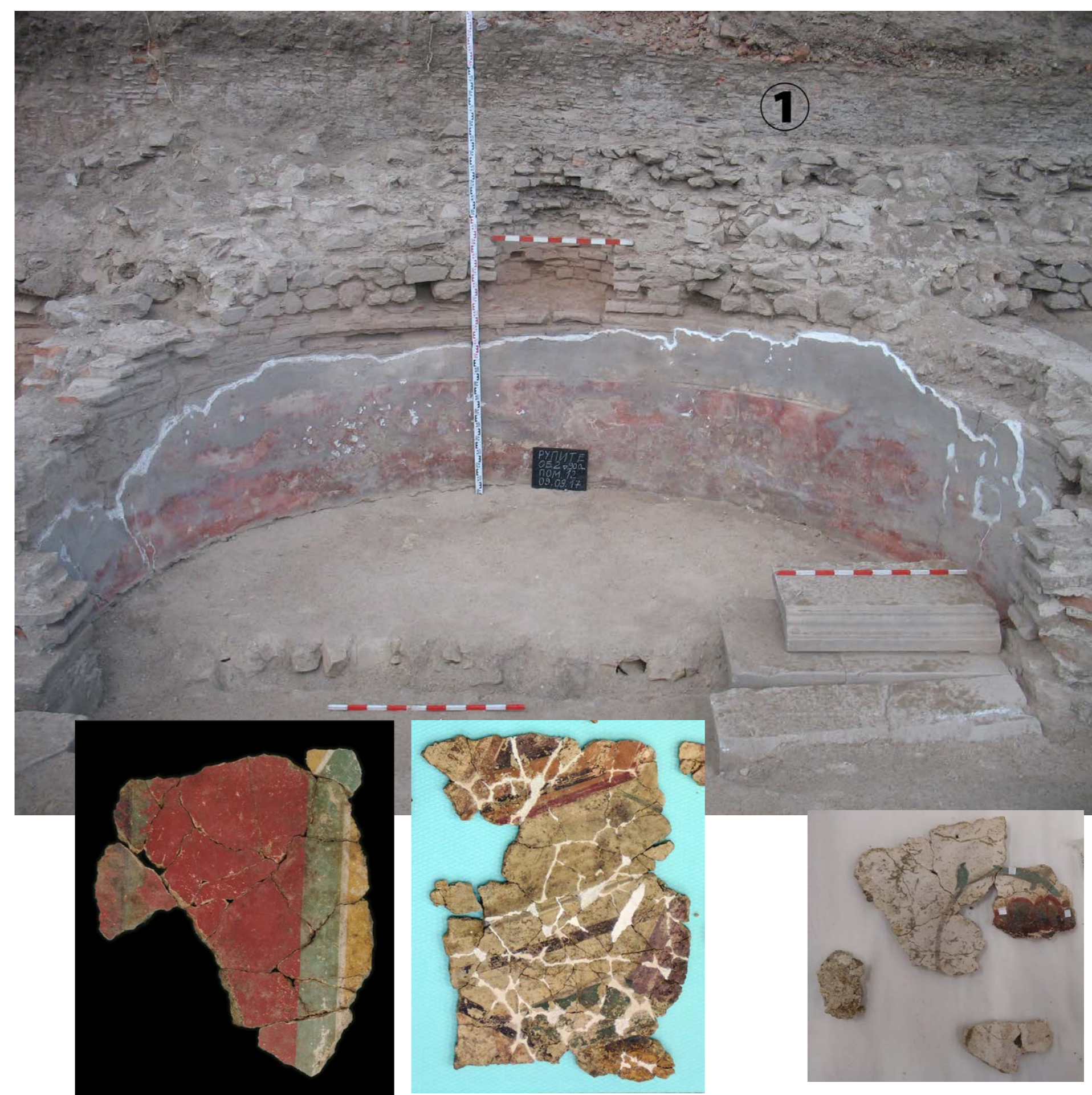


Fig. 3 View of the painting *in situ* in room 12
Fig. 4 Fragment from the find in 2018
Fig. 5 Fragments found in 2018
Fig. 6 Fragments with image of a flower (find 2019)

Wall painting fragments found outside an architectural context Fragments found in 2018

During the 2018 excavations, fragments of wall paintings were found southeast of the Greatest drain of the city. These are among the most interesting fragments discovered so far. They can be grouped according to their colours and geometric motifs. Many of the fragments show a combination of parallel stripes or lines of different colors. There are also many fragments with only white coloring, and others with red.

A recomposition of several fragments has been achieved, showing a wide red stripe decorated on one side with a row of round motifs in green (Fig. 4). On the other side, the wide red stripe is bordered by a much narrower green stripe, itself separated from the adjacent yellow field by a thin white line. Of particular interest are several recomposed large fragments on which diamond-shaped forms in purple, light brown, and green colors can be seen (Fig. 5). These are characteristic motifs for compositions on ceilings, and this is most likely how we should interpret the fragments from Heraclea.

Based on stratigraphic arguments, the fragments found in 2018 are dated to the second settlement period of Heraclea, i.e. between the middle of the 1st and the end of the 3rd century. The high quality of workmanship and the variety of colours suggest that this decoration was created during years of peace and prosperity, which we can place in the second half of the 2nd and the beginning of the 3rd century.

Fragments discovered in 2019

In 2019, another group of mural fragments was discovered in a pit containing construction waste after the debris caused by the crisis events of the mid-1st century AD were cleared away. Thus, we have a relative dating of these murals to the decades before this boundary, and by virtue of this fact, they enter the stylistic context of the Pompeian painting.

The fragments are small in size and, despite their apparent abundance, ultimately insufficient to cover the entire surface of the walls and ceiling of a room. Most of them are uncharacteristic. We group them according to colour: yellow, white, red, purple, pink, black. Some of them show lines or combinations of two colours separated by a straight line, which indicates that panels of different sizes were designed on the walls in their canonical three-part grouping in horizontal and vertical rows.

Fragments with plant motifs have also been found. The largest one shows part of a wavy green stem with red flowers emerging from it. It was possible to recompose one of these flowers from several smaller fragments (Fig. 6).

The observations presented here represent an initial phase in the study of the painted material from Heraclea Sintica. We can expect larger mural fragments, possibly including figurative images, when the rich residences in the city are archaeologically investigated.

Bibliography:

Vagalinski, Lyudmil 2022. Heraclea Sintica. History through Archaeology (Archaeologia Bulgarica, Suppl. 4.1,2). Sofia (in Bulgarian with English summary).

lfvagalinski@gmail.com; kitankitanov@abv.bg; jvaleva@yahoo.com