

NEW RECONSTRUCTION OF THE SO-CALLED 'STORK'S PAINTING' FROM THE MILITARY TOWN OF AQUINCUM

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The northern part of the Military Town of Aquincum (*canabae legionis*), which was also considered the administrative district, was home to richly decorated, larger, representative urban residential building complexes (*domi*), such as the so-called 'Hercules Villa' and 'Villa of the White Storks', along with their associated or separate bath buildings and shrines. Initially, at the beginning of the 2nd century AD, smaller residential buildings with *terrazzo* floors, heating and wall-paintings were built in this loosely built-up area of the town. At the end of the 2nd century and the beginning of the 3rd century AD, the buildings were enlarged and the existing *terrazzo* floors and wall paintings were renovated. During the 3rd century, the buildings were rebuilt several times and repainted 4-6 times, larger surfaces were covered with stucco decorations, and several rooms were covered with mosaics. (Fig. 1) During the barbarian invasion of 260 AD, the buildings were destroyed, and from the end of the 3rd century – the beginning of the 4th century, earth, brick, and stone slab burials appeared in the area.

Between 1970 and 1981, I. Wellner, Gy. Parragi and K. Szirmai, in the area bordered by today's Búvár and Folyamőr streets, a large urban residential complex (*domus*) with a separate bathhouse, which had been rebuilt and repainted several times and decorated with mosaic floors, was discovered, known as the 'Villa of the White Storks'. The 100 x 130 m² building complex has four columned courtyards, two corridors, and 16 rooms, six of which were covered with mosaics. The room (No. 20) opened from the corridor surrounding the central peristyle, covered with red and white bichrome mosaic, on the walls of which two periods of the baseboard wall-painting have been preserved in their original location on several sides. (Fig. 2) On the plinth of the wall-painting of the room with *terrazzo* flooring from the first period, had white and green sedges on alternating red and yellow backgrounds pattern depicted. With the partial removal of the early Roman wall-painting and the levelling of the building debris, the raised up ground was given new flooring. (Fig. 3)

After the excavations were completed, the plinths from periods 1 and 2, which had been preserved on the in situ side walls of room 20, were removed. Between 1981 and 1986, restorers Márta Laurentzy and Pál Fábrián built them into a support structure, which subsequently decorated the interiors of numerous exhibitions. However, additional fragments decorating the side walls that were removed during the excavation were placed in storage. Between 1999 and 2000, Alix Barbet and Florence Monier (CEPMR-CNRS-ENS) installed another plinth wall painting from the same room, which was on display at the Aquincum exhibition prepared for the 2001 AIPMA conference. In 2019, I began working on the processing and assembly of the fragments decorating the side walls found in the room, as well as the reconstruction of the side walls. The units and smaller and larger surfaces I assembled were restored by Éva Derdák and Zsófia Galántai. Subsequently, in 2024-2025, Zsófia Nagy-Emri restored another plinth fragment that had been detached at the end of the excavations and had been stored in a storeroom until then.

The plinth of the mural, depicting storks from the second period, could be more or less reconstructed based on the *in situ* units and excavation drawings. The smaller image fields, formed by brown linear frames on a white background, featured meticulously detailed, pre-drawn white storks. The white storks alternated with green and yellow draperies or "curtains" loosely draped on the linear frames, in the larger picture filelds. (Figs. 3-4)

When I the fragments from the room were assembled and put together, the narrower image field which one Roman foot wide and the figures depicted in it were the first to emerge. Then, based on the internal linear green-yellow frame decoration of the larger panels of the main field above the plinth, it was possible to connect these assembled pieces with the plinth depicting storks and draperies that had been previously detached from the wall.

Based on the fragments, the main field of the mural painting consisted of wide and narrow panels alternating rhythmically, depicting mythological scenes and genre paintings. The wide panels of the main field were surrounded by a double, yellow-green linear, simple frame pattern, within which larger servants were depicted on a white background, bringing the dishes of the *cena* on silver plates. The surviving details suggest various fish dishes. (Figs. 5-7) The depiction of the dishes served refers to the function of the room as a dining room (*triclinium*). Similar depictions to the large figures reconstructed in the larger panels of the main field are also known from Brigetio, Rome, and Ephesus. Hercules comes to life in the narrower fields separating the larger panels, preparing to shoot an arrow. Presumably, the 12 labors of Hercules are depicted, but there are also details that depict his other "rescue missions" beyond the 12 labors, such as saving Hesione from the sea monster and saving Prometheus from the eagle that feeds on his liver. (Figs. 8-9) Furthermore, there is a reclining figure (female or male) with an uncertain event, which may be a depiction of the drunken Bacchus, in whose procession or drinking bouts the drunken Hercules often appears. The bottom of the narrower fields, below Hercules, was presumably filled with plant ornamentation. Each narrow picture strip could only accommodate one scene from the myth of Hercules. The cult of Hercules spread widely in Pannonia and Aquincum during the Severan period, and his veneration was particularly widespread among the army, as he was also the protector of the army. Several archaeological finds, sculptures, inscribed altar stones, wall-paintings, and mosaics from Aquincum attest to his special local veneration. Two examples of the latter art form can be mentioned from Aquincum, as the hero appears in two mosaics in the so-called "Hercules villa." Depictions of Hercules' labors are not uncommon in other interior decorations of buildings from this period, for example, in mosaics from Llíria (Spain) and Parikia (on the island of Paros). The mosaic depicting the 12 labors of Hercules, known from Syedra (Turkey) and Kition (Citium, today Larnaca, on the island of Cyprus), once decorated a bath. Similar to the Aquincum mural, the myth of Hercules was also depicted on the mural in the house of Loreius Tiburtinus in Pompeii (II.2.2.), which once decorated a *triclinium*, as well as on the Volubilis mosaic (Morocco).

The depiction and repetition of water birds and marsh sedges on the plinth is characteristic of early Roman wall-paintings. It is also known from wall-paintings in the western provinces, e.g. from the Roman time in Cologne, Trier, Bonn, and Elst, but it also appeared on the wall-paintings of Aquincum and Baláca in Pannonia. Similar storks are known from Virunum and Poetovio which dated to the middle to the second half of the 2nd century AD. Other reasons for the appearance of storks in wall-paintings, apart from their selection from pattern books, may include the proximity of the Danube, the spread of storks in the area, or the vicinity of fish caught from the Danube/fish market. Perhaps the fish dishes served also attracted these birds to the houses. The drapery depicted on the plinth may refer to drawn curtains separating spaces.

When reconstructing the side walls, I tried to design the larger panels based on the remaining plinths and patterns on the rising walls *in situ*, while maintaining the Roman proportions. The difference in size of the larger panels *in situ* on the individual walls is due to the fact that the existing or preserved plinth section had to be taken as a basis for the reconstruction. I reconstructed the same layout on the walls opposite each other. The exact location of the door opening (window openings) is unknown, so it can only be assumed on a theoretical basis on the south wall. (Fig. 10)

To the east of the excavated building complex, towards the Danube, numerous fragments of wall-paintings were found in 2024¹, which I will assemble after cleaning and restoration. Based on preliminary observations, the painting technique and style of the fragments are similar to the decoration of the stork room discussed above, and it is highly likely that they were created in the same workshop at the same time.

¹Findspot is Budapest, District 3, Bogdáni Road – Folyamőr Street – Sorompó Street District 3, Budapest, Hungary (2024) and archaeologists are T. Milbich, T. Budai-Balogh, P. Vámos.

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Fig. 10 Theoretical reconstruction of the Stork's Painting based on *in situ* fragments and excavation drawings of the Nr. 20 room of the Búvár-Folyamőr Street building complex (Drawing: A. Kirchhof – T. Lajtos)

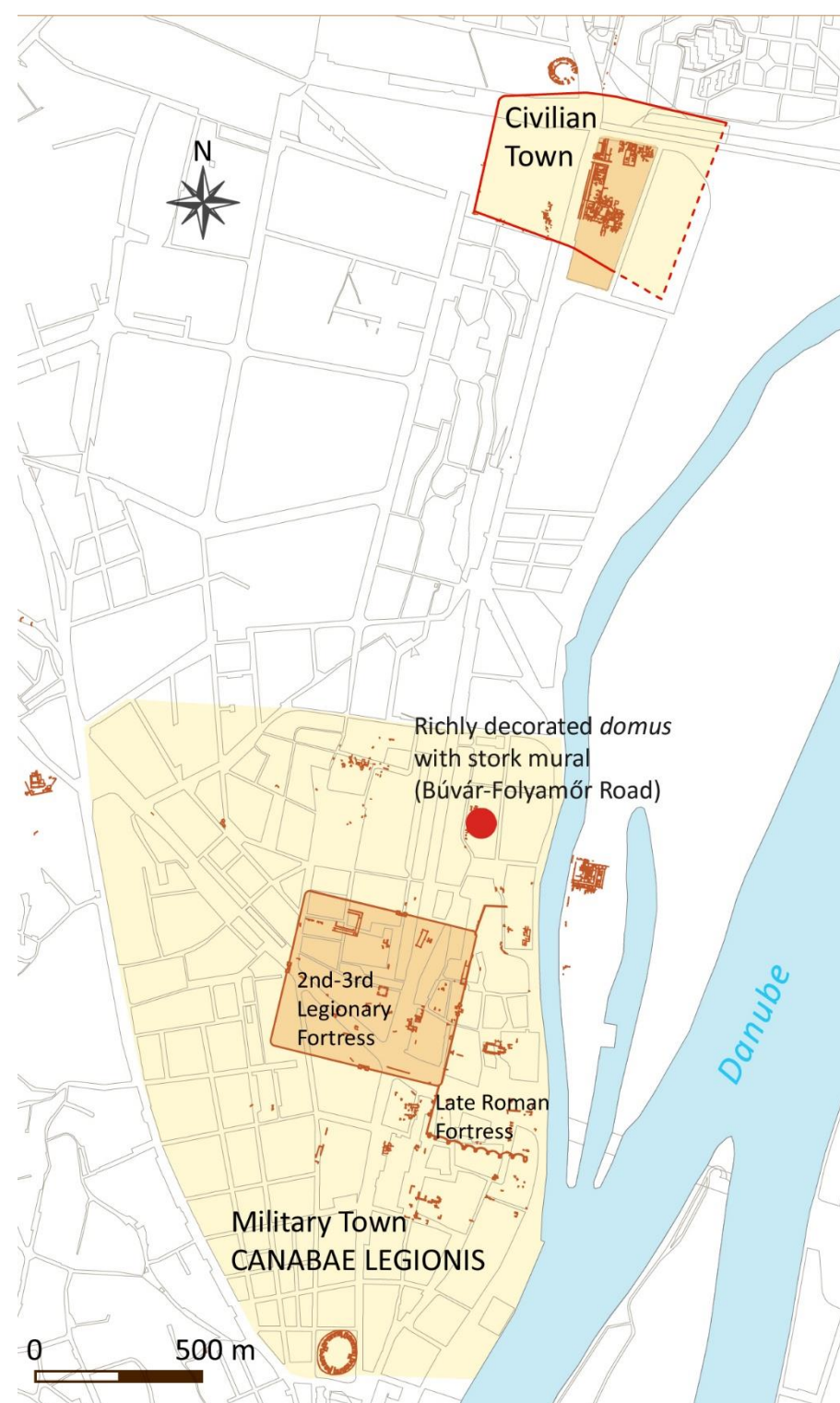
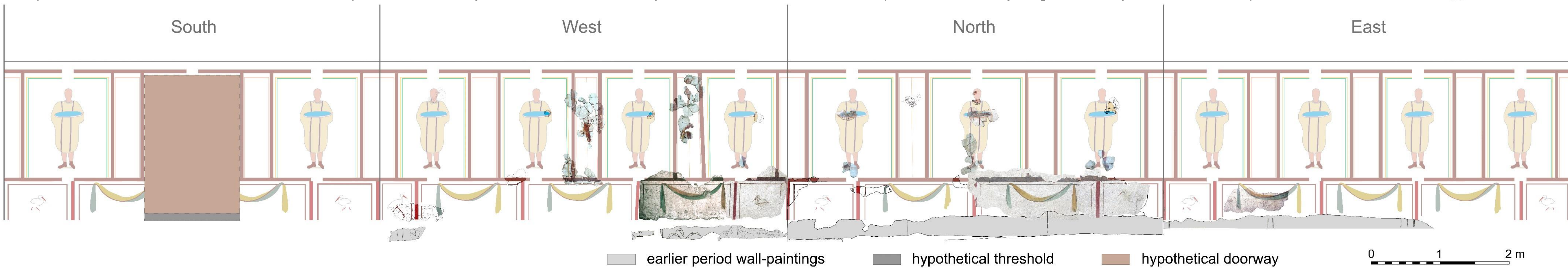


Fig. 1. The settlement structure of Aquincum with the site (Búvár-Folyamőr Road, Budapest)

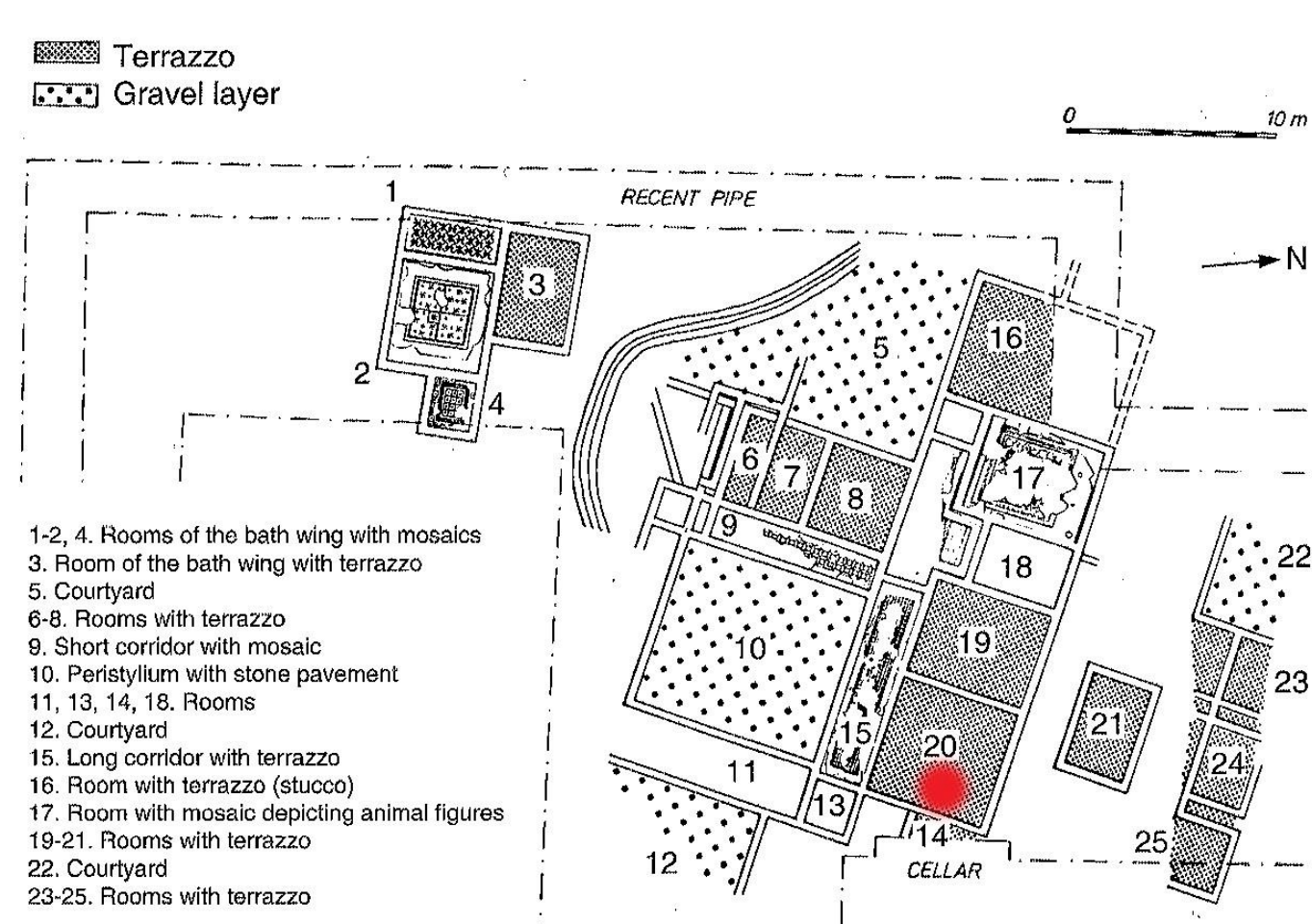


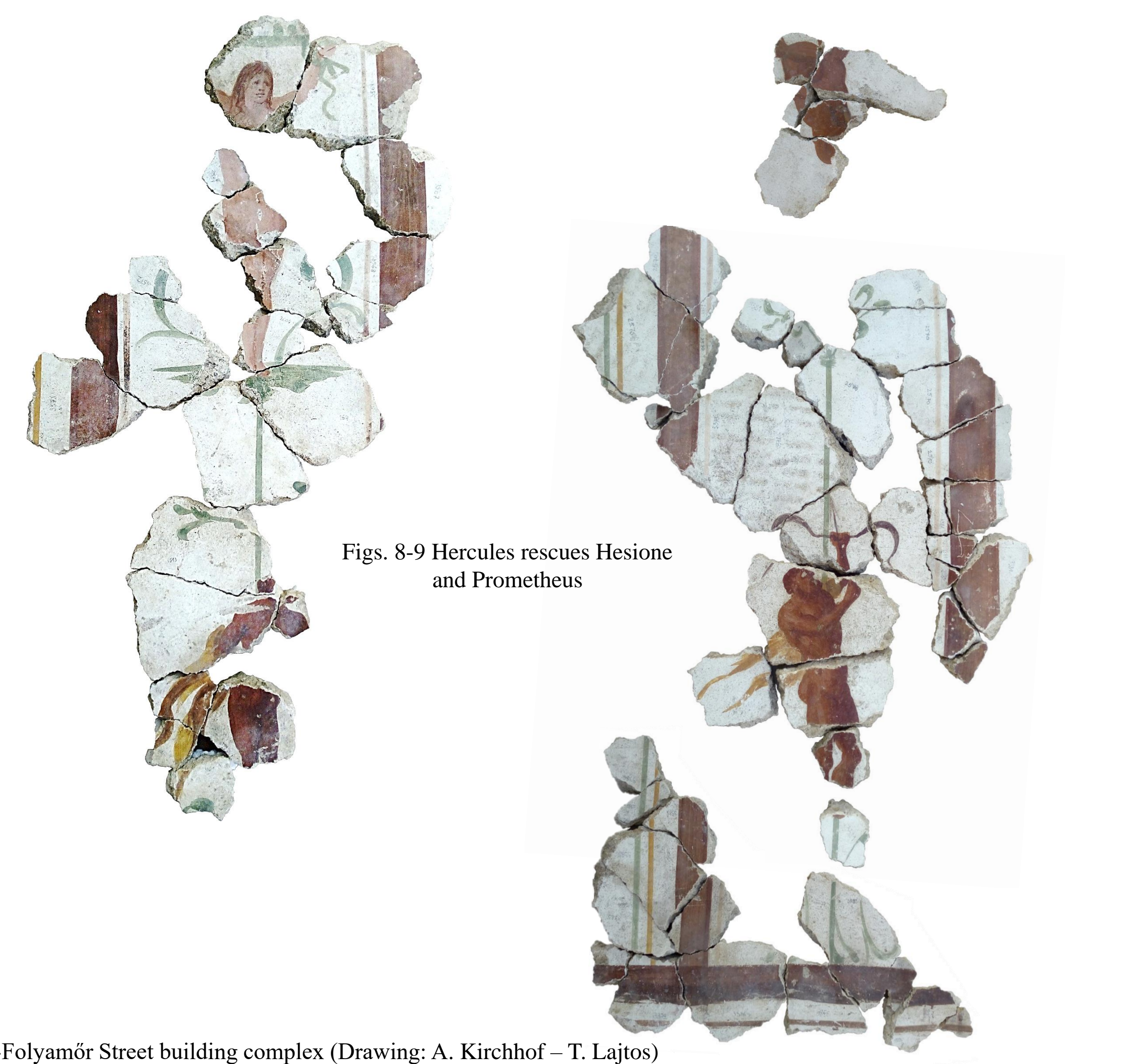
Fig. 2. Floor plan of the building complex 1973-1981.



Fig. 3-4 One of the stork depiction decorating the plinth from the wall of room 20 (in situ) and under it a part of an earlier wall-painting



Figs. 5-7. Fish dishes on silver plates, with a lower body parts of a servant



Figs. 8-9 Hercules rescues Hesione and Prometheus