

BEHIND THE CURTAIN: Vela in Domestic Roman Spaces

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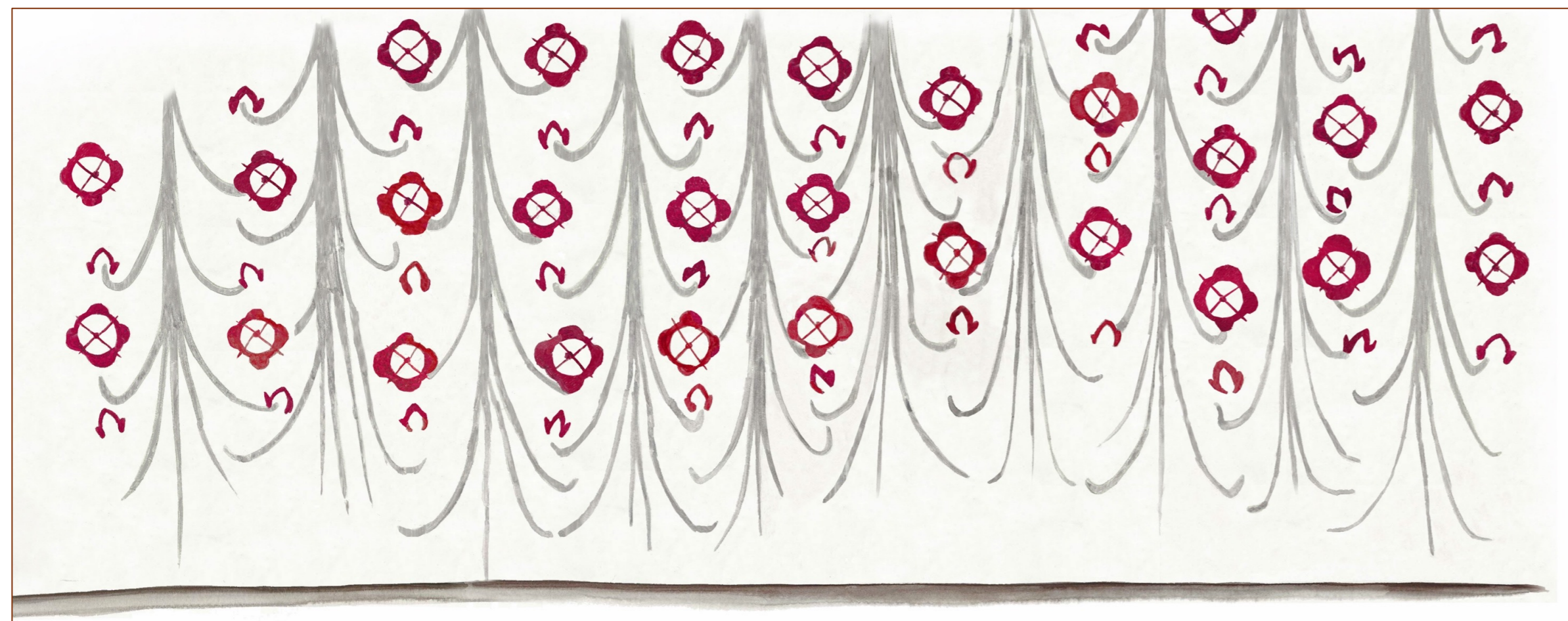


Fig. 1. Reconstruction painting of west wall, room 3 at Sardis, Turkey, 5th-6th c. CE. Watercolor by C. S. Alexander, © Archaeological Exploration of Sardis/President and fellows of Harvard College

Introduction and Research Question

The recent discovery of vela (defined here as painted drapery) in a 5th century CE house at Sardis, Turkey, is the inspiration for this project. Vela are unprecedented elsewhere at Sardis or in any other Late Antique domestic context. The closest contemporary comparanda come from religious spaces such as the Red Monastery. Our aim is to consider the potential significance of vela depicted in wall paintings within Roman domestic spaces and how, or if, their significance or symbolism may have evolved over time.

1st c. BCE-1st c CE

Most examples from the Bay of Naples show a clear connection to scaenae frons and other theatrically-inspired motifs. However, the "stanza della tavola imbandita" from Catania and the Republican temple at Brescia have a different sensibility echoing a draped (offering?) table and perhaps have a different (though not necessarily identical) significance.



Fig. 4. Republican temple, Brescia, painted c. 89-75 BCE. <http://www.turismobrescia.it/en/punto-d-interesse/republican-sanctuary>



Fig. 5. "Stanza della tavola imbandita" found beneath the Monastero dei Benedettini di Catania, Sicily, painted c. 1st c. CE. <http://www.monasterodeibenedettini.it/>

2nd-4th c, CE

By the 2nd c. CE, the closest allusion to vela or draped textiles are the "wallpaper" patterns that coincide with a shift to more two-dimensional wall decoration and the simultaneous slippage of motifs between decorative media. Details like the fringe at Amheida suggest a carpet edge, and freefield floral patterns are common in small, dark, concealed, spaces such as hypogaea, or niches, and small cubacula as at Ephesus.

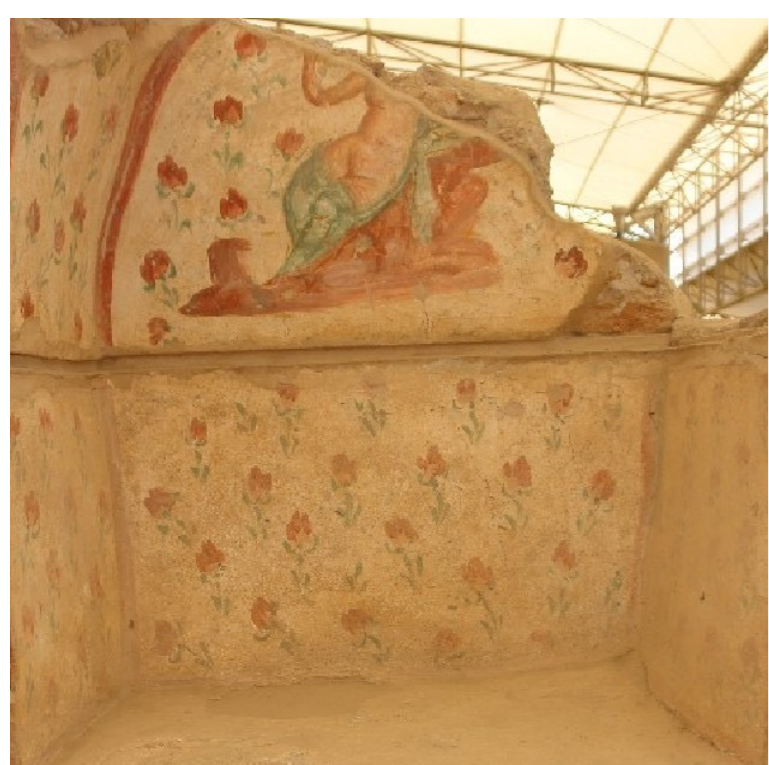


Fig. 6. Niche, H2, SR18, Ephesus, c. 250 CE. © ÖAW/IKAnt, photo N. Zimmermann.



Fig. 7. Wall painting from Room 11, B1 (The "House of Serenos"), Trimithis (Amheida), Dakhla Oasis, Egypt, c. 340-375 CE. Image courtesy of the Amheida Project, www.amheida.org.

Late 5th c. Forward

Literary, visual sources and archaeological remains document the Late Antique increase in luxury textiles in ecclesiastical, domestic and courtly use. Revelation as a central tenet of Christianity made vela both practical and appealingly multivalent, though their use may well have evolved from pre-Christian cultic practices. Moreover, Late Antique texts affirm the significance of textiles to convey status or office, and curtains were part of patronage rituals in elite homes.



Fig. 2. Eastern lobe of the triconch sanctuary, central niche, level II, Red Monastery, Egypt, late 5th-6th c. CE. © American Research Center in Egypt; Photo by Arnaldo Vesco.



Fig. 2. Excavator F. Gallart Marques in room 3 at Sardis, Turkey, 5th-6th c. CE. © Archaeological Exploration of Sardis/President and fellows of Harvard College

Vela: Significance and Use

Textiles were prestige items that could shade or warm a room, separate or demarcate space and enhance interior decor. While infinitely practical, household textiles could also set boundaries or express social hierarchy by denoting status and creating drama. Conceptually, vela signify the ideas of mystery, revelation and theatricality. Of course, all decorative media shared motifs and mimicked one another, and portable textiles were ideal for transmission of designs and patterns. Wall paintings of vela remain from the 1st c. BCE to the 1st c. CE, then disappear until c. 500 CE.



Fig. 3. Fragment from a Coptic Hanging, attributed to Egypt, linen and wool, 5th c. CE. <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collecti on/search/444378>

Return to Domestic Wall Painting Sardis

Vela painted on walls are at once to be expected and unusual. Textiles were a ubiquitous part of Roman interiors and so of course appear in quotidian paintings. Vela also reflect the relationships between domestic and sacred painting (and maybe even ritual practice) and the intermediality of motifs.

But is there any special significance to painted vela, or are they purely decorative? Since Late Antique painted vela appear (almost) exclusively in Christian spaces, do they signify Christian practices? Or is this simply a problem of uneven preservation? Should the painted vela in a domestic space be interpreted as evidence of ritual space, and if so, what type?

The rest of this Sardis house is primarily decorated with incrustation-style faux marble painting, but this room was entirely swathed in painted vela. The room also preserved evidence of a curtain hung in a wall niche as well as a monopod table, so one might imagine actual textiles coordinating with the painted vela in a variety of layered media. Other finds suggest some commercial activity, but there is no evidence of domestic cult activity here. This space may have been a room where guests and/or customers encountered the dominus and both real and painted vela contributed to the stagecraft employed in revealing a local elite in the same way that a judge, emperor, or sacred object or mystery might be revealed. Given that the motif of painted vela primarily adorned churches in the 5th century, should we assign sacral connotations to this social ceremonial space? Or is this simply an instance of associative agency applied to a familiar motif? And does the interregnum between the Republican/early Imperial era and the late 5th c. inform the question? Is the 2nd-4th c. absence of vela an accident of preservation or something more significant? Are the ceremonial and theatrical connotations of vela essentially consistent between the 1st c. BCE and the 5th c. CE?

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