

MURALS OF THE EARLY ISEUM OF SAVARIA

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A permanent exhibition presenting the relics from the Iseum of Savaria was opened as the final episode of the completion of a large-scale grant project¹ in March of this year. At the exhibition a series of archaeological artefacts are presented that the public could not have seen earlier. Of outstanding significance amongst these are the fragments of mural paintings from the last third of the 1st century that are clearly related to the cult of Isis and in all likelihood decorated the early Iseum. These were mounted on display panels along with the theoretical reconstruction of the motifs.

As a result of the authors' work in processing, stylistic research, restoration and the method of presentation the early Iseum of Savaria is the second Roman era Isis temple – besides the one in Pompeii – of which one can get at least a partial picture about the interior decoration. This essay discusses those mural fragments interpreted by reconstruction paintings – presented in the exhibition – that illustrate the very high quality decoration of the early temple.

Savaria, the town founded by Emperor *Claudius* as a deduction colony around the middle of the 1st century A.D. developed near the main trade route of *Pannonia*, the Amber Road, and became the religious centre of Upper Pannonia. The Museum – Iseum Savariense Centre of Research and Archaeological Collection – was built on the site of the former temple of *Isis* outside the walls of the Roman town, next to the section of the Amber Road leading to the south.² The temple complex erected in stone was built in the second half of the 2nd century, presumably during the time of Emperor *Hadrian*, and then was altered to a great extent in the first third of the 3rd century. A sanctuary from around the last third of the 1st century A.D., built of wood and sundried clay bricks, and dating from a period preceding the stone period of the *Iseum* was also identified on the site. It is presumably the scattered remains of this earlier *Iseum*, which was demolished around the first third of the 2nd century A.D. that came to light outside the surrounding wall of the temple district during the excavations lead by *Ottó Sosztarits* in 2007–2008.³

Considering the construction technique, motifs and stylistic characteristics it could be suspected that a significant portion of the fragments are parts of wall paintings made at the same time with the same technique, which probably belonged to the same building or building complex. The surfaces that emerged from the excavated fragments⁴ unfortunately only represent a scanty portion of the original lavish painting scheme. However, a majority of the motifs are recognizable and a large portion of them can be interpreted and constructed, although there are some that can be reconstructed in different ways. Their original location inside the building cannot be determined precisely but in some cases the connection between the different motifs or their placement on a wall or on a ceiling can be established.

¹ In the framework of the West Transdanubia Operational Programme for the New Hungary Development Plan, the city of Szombathely received support for the project entitled “Development of the Historic/Archaeological Section of Szombathely Phase II – The Reconstruction of the Iseum”.

² The building was designed by Tamás Mezős. The sanctuary was constructed according to the designs of Tamás Mezős, Zsolt Mráv and Ottó Sosztarits. The museum is an associate member of the Savaria Municipal Museum. The interior decoration design and installations for the exhibit were made by the Narmer Architecture Studio and architect Roland Lieb.

³ Sosztarits, Ottó – Anderkó, Krisztián: *Izisz istennő szentélye Szombathelyen (Sanctuary of Goddess Isis in Szombathely)*, 2010, [Sírások naplója blog](#) (Gravedigger's Journal Blog), 27 July 2010. (Visited: 29 August 2013)

⁴ The about 110 boxes of mural painting fragments that can be linked with the early temple from the site of the *Iseum* and its immediate surroundings are only a portion of the mural painting finds uncovered so far.

Two life-sized figures can be identified as the consecrated servants of Isis on the basis of their attributes and clothing. Each decorated a ca. 60 cm wide wall section most probably facing one another, such as the jambs of an open passageway that the congregation passed through for the ceremonies. One of them holds a jangling percussion instrument, a *sistrum*, in her upraised right hand, and a milk bucket, a *situla*, related to fertility hangs from her left arm. This figure, who also wears an earring, is undoubtedly a woman (*Fig. 1*). On the basis of the assembled surfaces, the gender of the second figure is not quite obvious, but based on the remaining depictions that show male priests it was reconstructed as a man (*Fig. 2*).

On both edges of the jamb the plaster folds over the sides of the wall. One begins with a white base colour the other with a red panel. It is possible that the main register of this wall was made up of upright rectangular panels with a red base colour and a decorative inner border motif (*Fig. 3*). Fragments of white



Fig. 1: Presentation of the figure of a priestess of Isis

Fig. 2: Presentation of the figure of a priest of Isis

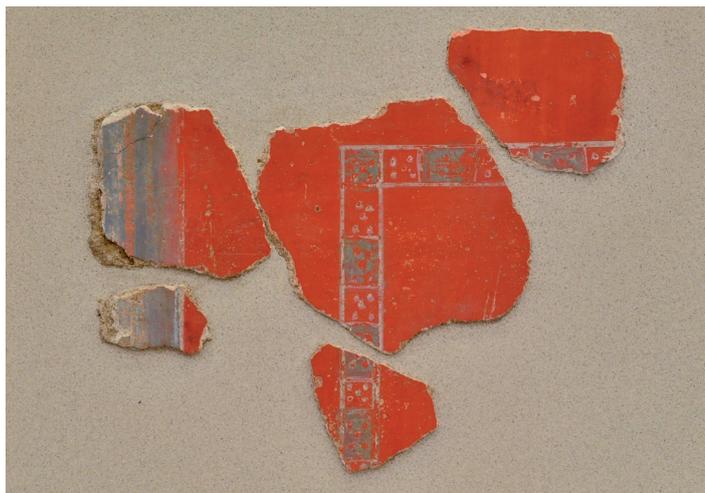


Fig. 3: Presentation of the detail of a presumably upright rectangular panel with a red base colour from the beginning of the main zone of the side wall

base colour, similar to the red ones, were also found (Fig. 4). Neither the height nor the width of the panels is known, nor whether their inner areas were decorated or not.

The reconstructed painted marble imitation dado may have decorated the surface between the white panels and the *terrazzo* floor (Fig. 5). Above the white panels at the top of the wall section ran a frieze of candelabras painted with light and dark ochre on a white base bordered with red stripes. Between the candelabras and attached to them, loosely hanging decorations can be seen painted in dark red. The curvature of these, reconstructed on the basis of the fragments, provides the distance between the candelabras (Fig. 4). The exact height of the frieze is not known without having the entire motif assembled.

Also in the upper section of a wall where it meets the ceiling an acanthus scroll motif made up of funnel flowers and acanthus leaves decorated with ribbons was painted in bright colours between red stripes (Fig. 6). A parallel motif was found among the murals from the *Iseum* erected in *Pompeii*. If indeed the acanthus scroll motif in the early *Iseum* adorned the wall of a portico such as the one in *Pompeii*, then here as well a building with a portico could have bordered the sanctuary on one or more sides, similarly to the later building complex.

The dynamically painted, richly detailed surface depicting *Pegasus*, and a painted architrave detail that presumably belongs to it and was placed above it in the exhibited panel, were prepared for a wall (Fig. 7)

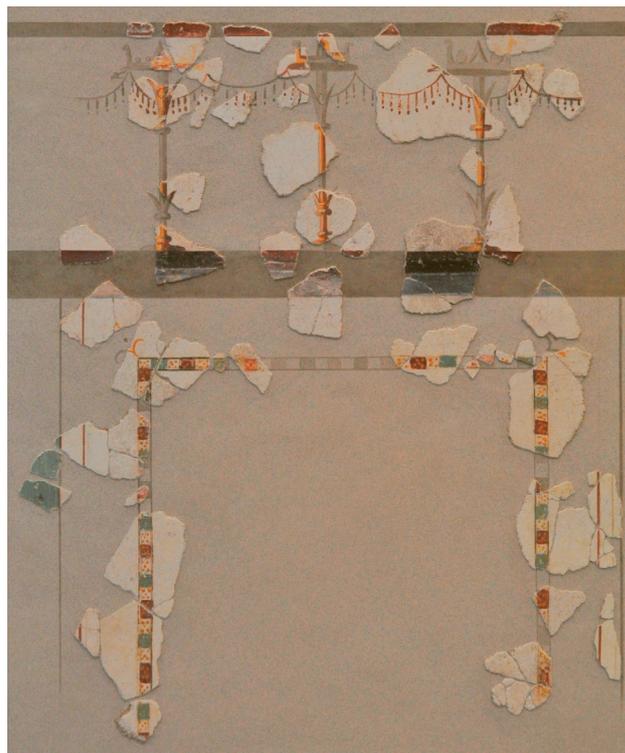


Fig. 4: Presentation of the detail of a white base colour panel from the main zone of the wall with a frieze containing candelabras above it



Fig. 5: Presentation of the detail of the marble imitation dado painting and its theoretical reconstruction (watercolour: Eszter Harsányi)



Fig. 6: Presentation of the detail of the acanthus scroll frieze running along the top of the side wall, and its theoretical reconstruction (watercolour: Eszter Harsányi)



Fig. 7: Presentation of the detail of the architrave with Pegasus, from the side wall



Fig. 8: Presentation of the detail of a dividing motif decorated with leafy branches separating the main zone panels of a side wall and its theoretical reconstruction (watercolour: Eszter Harsányi)

such as that with a minutely detailed dividing motif depicting a leafy tree (*Fig. 8*).

The dado with a polished black base colour decorated with a trelliswork motif of yellow and white horizontal, vertical and diagonal lines belonged to a door jamb and to a wall segment perpendicular to it (*Figs 9–10*).

A few fragments of a painted tympanum can be found in the wall painting finds as well. Along the two upper sides of the triangular field the black frame bordered with red is accompanied by a blue strip on the outside, linked to stucco work with an ovolo frieze. Inside this field the attributes of Goddess *Isis* were depicted, a central axis *sistrum*, a snake, and branches with green leaves (*Fig. 11*). The size of the tympanum is not known, only that of the angles. Because of its painting techniques and good condition it certainly was not an exterior frontispiece. It may have been placed in an area that was definitely sheltered, but not necessary enclosed, like above the entrance of the sanctuary opening from the pronaos.

The motifs on certain groups of fragments can be identified as flat ceiling decorations. On their reverse there are imprints of lathing from a suspended ceiling made of bundled plant stems affixed to a wooden structure. The composition of the rectangular ceiling, framed by red stripes, based on blue or green stripes on a white background. Green stucco imitation runs parallel with the sides, connecting quadrant fields in the corners with painted alcoves, *aediculae*, probably at the medians. From



Fig. 9: Presentation of the corner detail of the black dado painting



Fig. 10: Theoretical reconstruction of the corner detail of the black dado painting (watercolour: Eszter Harsányi)



Fig. 11: Fragments and theoretical reconstruction of the painted tympanum (watercolour: Zsófia Kurovszky)

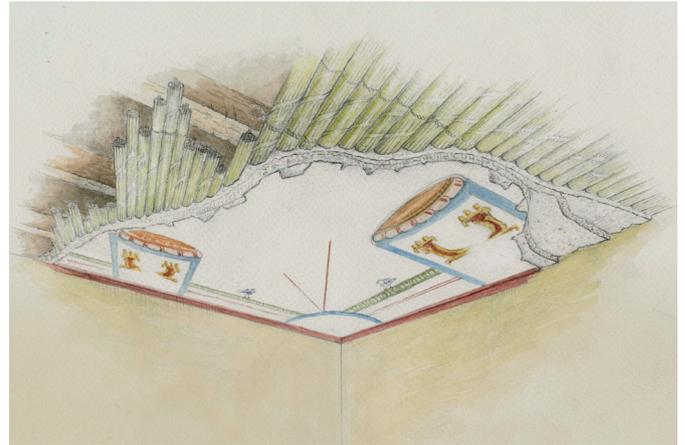


Fig. 13: Theoretical reconstruction of the corner of the flat ceiling (watercolour: Eszter Harsányi)

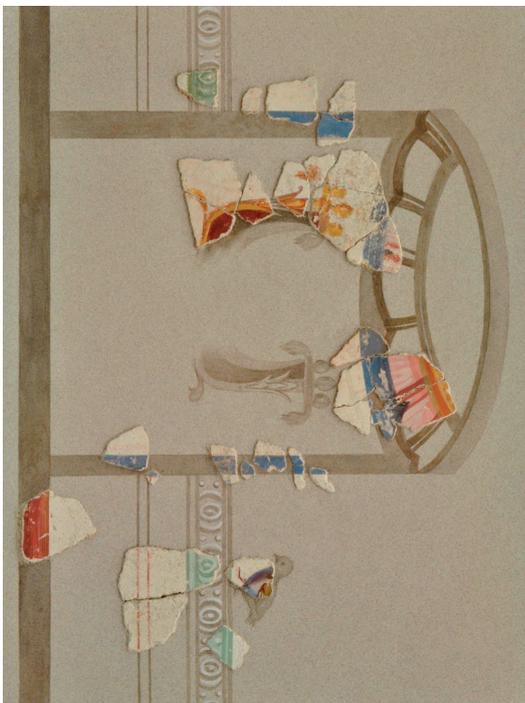


Fig. 12: Presentation of the corner of the flat ceiling

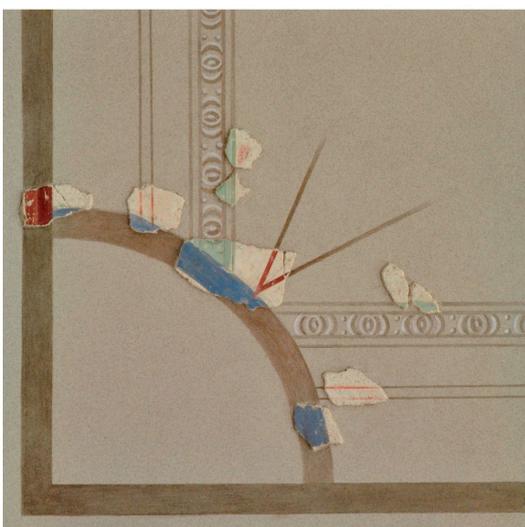




Fig. 14: Presentation of the detail of a bird of prey and garland decorating the flat ceiling



Fig. 15: Presentation of the detail of a thyrus and garland decorating the flat ceiling

the corner fields dark red bifurcate lines run toward the centre of the ceiling, probably to a central motif such as a medallion (Figs 12–13). The geometric schema based on these narrow strips was decorated with minutely elaborated small, colourful depictions such as birds (Fig. 14), leaves, flowers, garlands (Fig. 15), etc. that lent a light and airy effect to the compositions.

Based on the colour combinations and the quantity of the corner fields on the remaining fragments that have the same direction of lathing imprints on their reverse sides it is clear that there were at least three areas or rooms of similar size and with similar ceiling compositions. It is certain that they could have not belonged solely to the central sanctuary. The support structures and the size of the motifs would suggest that the ceilings could have covered areas with a relatively small floor space and headroom, presumably in a different building belonging to the sanctuary.

The results of the assembled and reconstructed surfaces show that the painting of the early *Iseum* is very similar to the painting program of the *Iseum* erected in *Pompeii*. This cannot be accidental since most probably the internal decoration of the *Isis* temples were also made in accordance with the specifications of the cult. The very high quality paintings with native Italic motifs are free of provincial stylistic characteristics. The richly decorated representative rooms suggest that the craftsmen arriving from Italy were aware of these well-defined specifications.

RECOMMENDED LITERATURE

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